

RANDOM ACTS

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1. LITTLE RED LIGHTS

HAVE YOU SEEN A
LITTLE RED LIGHT?

If you have, you'll know it,
and if you want to share your
experience with others who
have seen and heard the same
thing then come to 225 W.
Poplar Street, Berkeley, at
8:30 PM on Friday 6/20/84.

The building at 225 W. Poplar Street is an ugly Co-Op meeting hall with brown-painted stucco walls and a flat roof that's trimmed in orange. Nervous-looking people stand on the front lawn smoking cigarettes and talking in low voices; they watch Tom, Pris and I with haunted expressions as we pull up in Tom's car. Tom looks back at them and they turn quickly away, staring at their own feet, a companion's elbow, a tree . . . anything but us. As we get out of the car and walk up the rough, rock-imbedded concrete sidewalk toward them, they move away.

Tom nudges me. "If they kick me out, I want you to stay. Say you don't know me. Okay?"

I nod slightly. We've been over this before --- they'd already told him they don't want publicity, even though they'd been putting up those weird signs all over town. A reporter from the Berkeley Barb would not be welcome.

The inside the building is dim and smells of marijuana. There are folding metal chairs set up in rows, and at the front of the room there's a cheap utilitarian table and an obviously hand-built podium that's wired for sound. All throughout the room people gather in little groups, whispering, and one mustachioed man dressed in black is lighting candles and placing them on the cheap table. Everyone glances at us and at each other but they avoid direct eye contact.

I lean over and whisper into Pris's ear. "Boy, do these people know how to party."

Pris grins. This brightens my mood a bit, but only for a while; the place has a feeling of musty, suppressed dread, and I'm beginning to wonder if we've stumbled into some sort of satanic cult. Tom is quiet, taking it all in; his eyes are like camera lenses, and they affect people the same way a camera does. They're very blue, and he stares with such an intensity and clarity of focus that they put people on the defensive. He's also a big guy, with big square shoulders --- he's not really muscular, and he's not fat, he's just big. He dwarfs Pris, who stands between us, touching both of us. She watches him and then watches what he's watching, as if trying to fathom how he sees things. Occasionally she glances at me and flashes her brilliant little Pris-smile, which always sends a little thrill through my nerves. I watch her, and see she's breathing fast and shaking. It makes me want to hold her, an urge that never quite leaves me when she's around.

Pris taps on Tom's arm and whispers, "Isn't that the bum that

hangs out on your front steps?"

Tom and I look over; in the back corner of the large, dim room, in the darkest part, is a thin man standing by himself. He's facing the front with a mask-like face and piercing, beady eyes. He's dressed in an old Army jacket and tattered pants, and his hair hangs in oily strings to one side of his forehead. Yes, that's our bum. He's acting strangely calm tonight --- it's odd to see him standing still, not moving a muscle, not even talking to himself. The only time I've seen our bum motionless is when he's asleep in the bushes next to the steps of our apartment building --- other than that he's always moving, always doing something . . . usually something mindless, like dragging things out of the public trash cans and playing with used straws and rubber bands.

The mustachioed man in black finishes his candle-lighting and then takes quick steps to the door. At the door, he glances at his watch for about twenty seconds then looks up, grunting. "Excuse me," he says to the people loitering outside. "Meeting's about to start." Turning from the door, he takes more large, quick steps to the table, where he takes a seat. The people around us find a seat and settle down. Tom, Pris and I take seats toward the back. Someone closes the door to the room and the only thing that breaks the sudden silence is a few low whispers.

The man in black clears his throat then introduces himself as Bob Thorn, then he introduces the two dumpy-looking women who have positioned themselves next to him as Virginia Beach and Lori Angstrom. Pris and I share a glance and a stifled laugh at "Virginia Beach." Jokes would come from that later. Virginia stands up and positions herself behind the podium, clearing her throat into the microphone. "I assume everyone here has seen the little red light?"

There is a general nodding of heads, and a few muttered admissions.

"I see a member of the press has shown up," Virginia says, looking straight at Tom. "Is that because you've seen the light, or are you here to do a story?"

"I'm here to find out what this is about," Tom says. "I'm just curious. I mean, your signs are all over the place."

"I'll tell you what it's about," Virginia Beach says with hostility. "For the past five weeks there has been a freak occurrence in this area where a tiny, bright light appears out of nowhere in someone's house or office. It lasts anywhere from a minute to three hours, and is often accompanied by disembodied voices." She pauses, glaring at him. "This meeting is to give those of us who have experienced this phenomenon an opportunity to share our experience with others, and hopefully ease our anxieties and neutralize our trauma."

"Trauma?"

"Yes, trauma. For some of us it's been a very intense, unpleasant experience, a breakdown of reality. But it's hard to explain this to someone who hasn't experienced it. Your presence here may intimidate some of us from openly expressing ourselves. We are not seeking attention. One of your articles in the Barb would certainly bring about public ridicule, and at this stage that is something we are not ready to deal with."

"You're speaking for everybody." Tom looks around.

"I'm anticipating their best interests."

"Then you're asking me to leave?"

The woman's expression closes down like a mask. "No. This is a public meeting. I'm just hoping you'll understand the situation."

Tom stands up and addresses the whole room. "I don't know if

I'll end up writing about this or not, but I promise that if I do I won't use anyone's name unless I have your permission. If you feel you have to hide this . . . experience you've had, that suggests to me you're ashamed of it. If you really did have such an experience, why be ashamed?"

"You don't understand," Virginia nearly shouts at him. "This is the first meeting, a big step for everyone here, and you could ruin it. As a matter of fact, I am going to ask you to leave. You can come back after we're used to being public about our experiences."

Tom nods. He turns to Pris and I and gives me a long, meaningful look with those camera lens eyes of his. He reaches down and takes Priscilla's hand; Pris stands up, and Tom keeps staring at me. I stay where I am and he and Pris head toward the door. I look wistfully after Pris, and when she and Tom are out of sight I suppress a sigh and feel lonely. The meeting continues, and one by one people stand up and nervously tell their stories.

Every one is much the same: He woke up and saw this red light on the wall; she looked up from the television and saw a red light on the wall; he and she and another were studying and they heard voices and looked up to see a red light on the wall . . . it was hardly a spectacular experience by the way they told it. Nevertheless they all seem haunted by it, and many of the people around me, young and old, glance around with wide eyes as if they expect the little red light to appear at any moment.

When it comes to the bum's turn, he quietly clears his throat and in a husky voice says, "Yeah, I saw it . . . I saw it on the surface of a building, and it said, 'Look, there he is,' and I ran. I saw it again on the same night in a different place, but didn't hear it speak." I'm impressed. I've never heard him speak so clearly. I'm sitting there pondering this when Virginia Beach clears her throat and says, "Excuse me." I turn to look at her and she nods. I stare blankly, wondering why she nodded at me, then suddenly realize it's my turn to tell everyone how and where I saw the Little Red Light. Jesus Christ! I think to myself. What do I say? Everyone is looking at me expectantly, and Virginia's eyes are narrowing, suspicious . . . she's probably figured out I'm with Tom Harrison and that I've stayed behind to spy on the meeting.

"I was in my bathtub," I tell them. "The light appeared on the ceiling and stayed there for three minutes. I didn't hear any voices, thought." I swallow, wondering if they'll buy it. I can't tell about the rest of them, but Virginia Beach is glaring at me. She doesn't say anything, but she continues to stare. I smile, shrugging, but she doesn't react, doesn't shift her gaze. Finally she turns and points to the next person and I nearly slide out of my chair in relief.

The rest of the meeting takes form as a discussion as to what this mysterious light is, what it means, what it wants . . . et cetera. Most of them think it's Aliens from Planet 14 trying to contact them, but there's all sorts of suggestions. Someone says Russian psychics are causing the phenomenon; another forms a theory attributing it to an electrical condition caused by the over-abundance of radio and television signals. I myself suggest ball lightning, but no one goes for it. The discussion winds down, and when they adjourn the meeting I am the first person out of the room.

Tom and Pris are across the street, sitting on a public lawn under a streetlight. Pris sees me and raises both hands, waving, her face bursting out in a tremendous smile. I feel my heart-rate

increase, and I smile back --- I have no choice, her smile is one of those that are so warm and natural and happy that you smile back out of reflex, whether you feel like it or not. "You made it out alive!" she exclaims in her throaty voice; it cracks a little at the peak of her emphasized "alive."

She and Tom get to their feet and we head toward the car, ignoring the stares of the people drifting out of the building --- people realizing that I was, indeed, a spy for the Barb's most notorious reporter. I tell them about what went on in the meeting as we pile into the car and Tom starts the loud, throbbing engine. Tom listens to me, but I can tell he's lost interest. There's no story here for him, unless he wants to write for the National Inquirer. The car jerks forward, leaping down the road, and in two minutes we make it to Euclid Street. Tom parks in his rented spot way up the hill from the building where Tom and I share an apartment. The building, named "The Euclid," is right across the street from the Berkeley campus, and there's never any parking anywhere near the campus. This spot way up the hill is the closest he could get. For the same reason my vehicle is even farther away --- I haven't seen it in over a week.

Pris and I help Tom put the rubberized canvas covering over his car ---it's a gleaming 1967 Camero convertible with a totally un-stock, high performance engine and transmission, not at all street legal --- and having secured that, we plod down the hill toward the Euclid. I'm right in the middle of suggesting we stop at Rodney Red's Bar, which we're passing, when Tom suddenly exclaims "Hey!" He stops and points.

"What?" Pris asks.

"The bum. Look." He's pointing at the Euclid building, which is only a half block away. The steps are clearly visible, and sitting on them is our bum.

"No, that can't be the same . . ." I start, but trail off. It is the same bum. I can tell by his jerking, uneven motions, like a wind-up toy with broken gears. Nobody else moves like that. How in the hell? I wonder. How in the hell did he get here before us?

"That must have not been our bum at the meeting," Tom says.

"It looked like him to me," I say. Then again, the bum at the meeting didn't act like our bum. We reach the steps of the Euclid and he looks up at us, grinning a grotesque, rotten-toothed grin with gaping holes, and bobs his head up and down like a lizard.

"How did you get back here so fast?" Pris asks him.

The bum stops his bobbing nod, and draws his head back in a way that makes his neck look like rubber. "Huh?" he says.

"The meeting," Tom says. "How did you get back from the meeting before us?"

The bum lowers his eyebrows, scrunching up his face. "Whaaat?"

"You weren't at the meeting?" Tom says. "You know, about the little red lights?"

The bum's face jumps forward on his rubber neck. He moves his arm up in an awkward way to rub his creased forehead; he looks as though he's dislodged it. "I wasn't at any meeting," he says.

Tom looks at me with his camera lens eyes. "That wasn't him."

"I guess not," I say.

Pris looks back and forth between us, puzzled, her lips forming a little pout. Her hair has fallen over her left eye, and she pushes it back. "Oh well," she says, then smiles.

Tom unlocks the Euclid's front door and we enter the building, plodding up the dusty steps and making a left, walking all the way down the dingy hall to the last door on the right. Tom unlocks that door and we enter behind him, passing the bathroom

and the kitchen and head straight into the living room. Tom plops down on our ratty couch and Pris gingerly steps over and sets herself down on his lap. He grins, putting his arms around her, and she leans against him intimately and sticks her tongue into his mouth. I sit across from them in a reclining chair and watch.

This hurts. Why am I punishing myself? I have a hollow feeling in my chest, as if all the organs had been relocated, and there's a unpleasant tingling in my arms. Suppressed emotions. I take a breath, stand up, and turn away. They obviously want to be alone.

I walk around the chair and into my room, turning on the light. My bed has camera equipment strewn all across it, and along my walls are shelves with terrariums full of specimens, and on my desk is an old IBM Selectric II typewriter and piles and piles of notes and dust and clutter . . . and goddamn it, I don't want to deal with the mess, not right now. I don't even want to be here --- the room is so small it gives me claustrophobia. Turning around, I go back into the living room just in time to catch a glimpse of Tom carrying Pris in his arms, heading toward his bedroom. When they get inside he lifts one leg and closes his door with his foot. I sigh and walk down the hall to the apartment door and quietly let myself out.

I am so fucking stupid sometimes. Why do I let things like this happen to me? How could I be so careless as to fall hopelessly in love with my roommate's girlfriend? I trudge down the outer hall, down the steps, and out of the Euclid, patting the shoulder of our bum as I go. The sun has set, and twilight is rapidly fading to night. I make a left and take a walk through the Berkeley campus, heading up into the hills behind, up behind the Greek Theater, up nearly to the laboratory buildings that are at the top. From the hill I can see all the way across the bay to San Francisco, the city where Pris comes from . . . it sparkles like a billion diamonds through the distant haze. The air up here is cool and fresh. I breathe deeply and tell myself that everything is okay. Everything is just fine.

#

The next morning, Saturday the 21st, I walk back from the Co-Op apartments where our friend Felix lives, where I'd spent the night on the floor with a sheet and a pillow, and just as I approach the gray brick building where I pay rent I see Pris timidly let herself out of the front door, carefully closing it behind her. Her hair is messy and the collar of her white and blue blouse is half inside-out; she looks sleepy, and there's a contented look on her face. I myself have a hangover, which reminds me of the decision I had made last night: I am going to force myself to fall out of love with Pris. This agony that I'm going through is nothing more than a few chemicals in my brain, a few synapses misfiring when they should be dormant, a few hormones mingling with my blood when they shouldn't. Well, last night Felix and I decided that the conscious mind can influence the subconscious, and the subconscious can change anything in the body that is controlled by the brain. Love can be controlled by the brain, so I will force myself to shut it off.

I don't love her, I tell myself as I hide from her. As a matter of fact, I hate her. I despise her.

She pushes her hair out of her left eye as she walks to the corner and then crosses the street, walking toward the BART train station that is about five blocks away. Her hair falls right back over that eye, so she pushes it again . . . and it falls again. It's the style of her hair, the way it is cut, that makes it do this. It's impractical, but it's beautiful. I love it when she pushes it away from her eye, and I

love it when it falls back down. Damn it! I tell myself. You don't love it, you hate it! But, damn it, I love it! I love her!

This isn't working at all.

She passes out of sight, walking downhill toward the front of the campus, and I feel sad that she's leaving. But I know why, she works on Saturdays, and so does Tom. Sunday morning is usually his deadline for whatever story he's working on, and for some reason he always waits until Saturday to write it. His stuff is very political so it's rare that I ever read any of it, but at least I know his writing habits --- he has the personality of an angry cobra until he finishes whatever he's working on. If I'm in the apartment on a Saturday morning, he snaps at me if I make the tiniest noise. This is why I'm not in a hurry to get up there.

Our bum is already awake and playing with trash on the front steps. I pause on my way up to the door to look down at what he's doing; he's making crooked cubes again, using drinking straws for building material and gum and old bandages to hold it together. The bum pauses to look up at me, jerks his head up and down in recognition, then goes back to his work. "Making more four-dimensional cubes, huh?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says with a grunt. His voice is dry, as if he'd been without water for three months.

"What do you do with them?" I ask.

"Research."

I stare at his bald head for a few seconds, thinking this over, then laughter comes bubbling up and I clamp my lips together and slap a hand across my mouth. All that emerges is a little strangled noise, easy to disguise as a cough.

"I sell 'em, too," he says, his shoulders shifting back and forth but keeping perfectly level. "You want to buy one?"

"Sure, I've always wanted a four-dimensional cube." I say this amid more strangled coughs.

"A dollar fifty," he says, not even looking at me.

"A dollar fifty!"

He stops what he's doing, turns to glance up at me with narrowed eyes. "Dollar fifty."

"How about seventy-five cents and I throw in a roll of cellophane tape?"

His face brightens. "Oh. All right."

Christ, I think to myself, what am I doing? But I feel sorry for the guy, so I cross the street to the bookstore and buy a roll of tape then head back to the Euclid's steps. I hand the bum the tape and the spare change in my pocket --- which is at least a dollar --- and tell him to do an "extra good job." I'll have a story to tell about this thing, people will see this weird little cube made of drinking straws and when they ask what it's for I'll tell them where it came from. It's interesting, and they'll be impressed that I was kind to this unfortunate travesty of a person, with snot encrusted in his mustache and holes in his pant legs and four layers of worn and dirty socks in the place of shoes. Then I think, who's "they" that I want to impress? Pris is "they." Pris is the only person on the whole planet I care about impressing. Who else? Tom wouldn't be impressed --- he wouldn't have an opinion at all.

I watch as the bum constructs the thing, using way too many straws. There's no way he's going to be able to make a cube with all those . . . but as I watch, I get a tingle down my back. A cube is taking shape, though even as I watch him put it together I can't figure out how he's doing it. I sit down next to him, staring intently as he works. Then a shadow crosses over me, and I look up to see Tom's ex-fiancee Heather, the actress, looking down at me. She's blond and green-eyed and wearing a frilly white dress. She appears puzzled --- she's probably wondering

why I'm sitting out here with a bum.

"Hi," she says. "Can I borrow your key for a second?"

Frowning, I reach into my pocket. What in the hell is she doing here? I don't feel right about lending her my keys but I do it anyway, and she opens the Euclid's front doors, then smiles and tosses them back before disappearing inside. She doesn't even say thanks. I have the feeling I was of convenient use to her, but that's all.

A few minutes later our bum finishes my cube, which looks just like a normal cube --- not a hint of the extra dimension --- and he hands it to me, an uncharacteristic look of anxiousness on his face. "You did a good job," I tell him. "Thanks." Actually it's a sloppy job, but at least it's not stuck together with little globs of dirty chewing gum.

"Do you see it, then?" he asks, the anxious look still on his face.

"See it?" I look at the cube, then back at him. "What?"

"The whole thing?"

"What? What do you --- oh." He means the forth physical dimension, of course. "To tell you the truth, no, I don't see it."

"You have to learn how to see it," he says, the anxious look replaced by one of disappointment. He thrusts his head forward on his rubber neck and tilts it to the side. "It's an acquired perception."

I think about this: "Acquired Perception." I like the ring of it. I would make a catchy title for a scientific paper. I thank our bum, more for the term he created than for the bogus four-dimensional cube, then unlock the door to the Euclid and make my way up to the apartment. When I enter, I find I've stumbled into the middle of a heated argument; Tom and Heather are shouting at each other, their voices vibrating the walls and tearing at my ears. I duck into my room before I become involved and close my door, finding myself faced with the same cluttered mess that drove me out of the apartment last night. I begin to methodically clean up, putting everything where I deem it belongs, trying not to listen to the argument but interested nonetheless in what it's about. I can't tell, however; all I hear is "Why can't you be more considerate!" and "You never listen!" and things like that. Tom and Heather have never gotten along. I can't see how they ever got engaged. Either underneath it all they really love each other, or they both simply love to argue.

Tom had been in the process of breaking up with Heather when he first moved in with me. He'd been living with Heather over in San Francisco, where she acts, and his move had been sudden and violent. In effect, she'd thrown him out, and from what I understand both of them lost half their possessions in the process. Things like, if they couldn't agree who owned a certain book, Tom would rip the book in half. The same happened to sheets, blankets, furniture, kitchen appliances, the waterbed . . . everything. What a nightmare! And for weeks after he'd moved in she would call him every night, crying, and then they'd argue on the phone. But it tapered off, and he and Felix would go out partying. Then they started taking me out with them ---which I'd never really done before --- and I started having the time of my life. We, all three of us, met Priscilla at the same time, out at a dance club on Haight Street in San Francisco. She was merely interesting to me at first, and of course she fell for Tom. His big square shoulders, wavy black hair and bright blue eyes were so overpowering I don't think she even saw Felix or me. It was only after she started coming over every week that I started falling for her, totally against my will. She was already Tom's girl. I felt it when it started, and I fought it all the way. It was relentless, though --- there was nothing I could do.

I finish cleaning up my room, then sit on my bed and think about Pris. What is so special about her? Why does she affect me this way? Maybe I'm just lonely --- which I am --- but, no, it's more than that. She's short, petite, always smiling, always joking --- she's 22 but sometimes she looks 14. And her hair always falls over her left eye, no matter how many times she pushes it back. I just love her. I just

fucking love her.

After a while the noise dies and all that's left of the argument are whispers. Burning with curiosity, I poke my head out to see what's happening. Tom and Heather are standing in the living room embracing, and tears are running down Heather's face. As I watch, horrified, I see them begin kissing, first little pecks on each other's cheeks, then lips, then a passion seems to engulf them and they're nearly dry-humping right there in the living room. Before I know what I'm doing I barge in on them, pissed off that he's kissing her, pissed off that he's cheating on the girl I love. Goddamn it --- if I can't have Pris because he's got her, then he better damn well appreciate her! They break off their kissing to turn and look at me, both wearing sheepish expressions.

"Sorry about the noise," Heather says. "We're finished yelling now, I promise."

"Oh! Well! I can see that!"

Tom looks at me with a half-smile and then rolls his eyes, as if he and I are sharing a private joke, but I have no idea what the joke is. Nothing seems particularly funny. "Want to go to a party?" he asks.

This is so unexpected it takes me a moment to react. "A party?"

"My birthday is Tuesday," Heather says. "I'm throwing a party for myself."

Oh, I'm thrilled. I don't say this, however --- neither one knows why I'm angry, they just think it's because they've been so loud. But I've calmed down to the point where I can't lambaste Tom for his sinning, and so I sigh and remind myself that I hate Pris and I don't love her, and announce that, sure, I'd love to go to Heather's party, and also that I need a drink, and they join me, and all is wonderful and nice and it's happy-time, tra-la-la, and they begin kissing again and I lock myself in my room and throw things around and kick and punch my bed and feel totally impotent.

I finally have to grit my teeth and face it: I am going insane. This situation is driving me nuts. It might be a chemical imbalance or overdose of hormones, but it's still real and I'm still feeling this pain. My mind is not controlling it, it is controlling my mind.

I watch my tree frogs and my lizards moping around in their terrariums for a few hours, trying to take notes, but I can't keep my mind on it. I end up laying on my bed holding the four-dimensional cube and staring at it. It seems like hours pass. Though I'm looking at the cube, I'm not really seeing it --- I'm thinking about Pris again, my thoughts always returning to Pris. I'm wondering if she's off work yet, and if she'd like to hear about Tom and Heather? But I can't do that, so I don't. But I'd like to talk to her anyway, I'd just love to, I just want to hear her voice and think about her petite little form and imagine holding it against me, and kissing her hair, and massaging her back, and touching her little nose with mine.

I pump up my nerve with nine gin-and-tonics then dial her number, but instead of Pris I end up talking to her fat roommate for 45 minutes about dinosaurs, which she thinks I study, and after hanging up I pass out in a drunken stupor in my bed at four in the afternoon. Sometime between then and midnight I dream that I'm making love to Pris, and she's soft and warm and velvety and our rhythm is like music, but after a while I realize it's not Pris I'm making love to, it's Heather, and she's horrified and in the weird shifting way of dreams it turns out I've been raping her, and Tom comes in with a baseball bat and smacks me over the head with it, and I roll off of Heather and it's not Heather after all, I was wrong --- it's Pris. I had been raping Pris. I wake up crying, still drunk, and hear voices that I assume are Tom and some of his friends in the living room. The room is dim, and I look to see what time it is but I can't find my clock. It's too dark. The only light is something brilliant and red, and very small, a pinpoint really, hitting

the wall just above my bed. A little red light.

I realize what I'm seeing. It's the same thing that the haunted people in the Co-Op meeting hall had seen. I hold my breath, staring.

". . . little to the left," a voice is saying. "Stop. There's something."

"A picture."

"What is it? A lizard?"

"We must be looking into one of the bio labs."

The voices sound as if they're coming through a long cardboard tube, muted and hollow. The brilliant, ruby-red speck of light moves across the wall. It comes to rest on a picture of *Anolis carolinensis*, which is a little green lizard better known as an American Chameleon. I've seen ruby-red specks of light like this before, in fact many times before. It's a laser beam. As I watch, it moves down and the voices continue.

"What's that? A certificate of some type----"

"A doctorate. A doctor of . . . of . . . can you make that out?"

"Herpetology."

"Huh? Study of Herpes?"

"I don't know."

I begin to suspect someone is playing a joke on me. Two thirds of the people I talk to think Herpetology is the study of Herpes. Well, it's not. It's the study of reptiles and amphibians, a major part of Earth's fauna.

"Move it down some," one of the disembodied voices say. Obliging, the laser's spot moves down my Doctorate and as it does I try and determine the source of the laser. I can't. My windows are closed, the curtains are pulled, and my door is shut. The only way for a laser to be shining in here is if the laser itself is in the room, or if someone has drilled a hole in the wall. But if that were true, then it would have to be a hole from my room to the hallway of our apartment. Immediately I think of Felix, who is more Tom's friend than mine . . . he is capable of this kind of stunt. I watch the light crawl smoothly down to a picture of *Hyla regilla*, a picture of mine that ended up on the front of National Geographic, and then head over to a print of Goya's *The Swing*. As silently as I can, I reach over to my night stand, slide open a drawer, pull out a butane pipe lighter and a genuine Cuban cigar that Tom brought back for me from one of his trips. Shading the light of the lighter's merry little flame, I light the cigar, puffing heavily, letting the smoke drift up and spread out. The laser beam becomes visible, but to my amazement it leads from midair to the Goya print, coming from nowhere! I blow smoke toward the spot where the beam should continue on to its source, but it reveals nothing, and a moment later one of the voices says, "Do you smell something?" The voice, I realize, is coming from the point in midair where the laser beam vanishes.

I'm still drunk, I tell myself. It's true: I still am. Something must be wrong with my logic. I must be missing something. Voices and laser beams don't come out of midair. There's a source, but my mind is too muddled to figure out where it is.

"Somebody's smoking a cigar," one of the cardboard-tube voices says.

"Nobody here is smoking."

"Then it could be there."

There's a protracted silence. Fed-up, I exclaim, "All right, what's going on?"

The laser beam jerks violently then disappears. The room is silent. I sit up, waving at the air in a half-panic. I find, however, that I shouldn't sit up so quickly because a hammer begins pounding on my head and I have this terrible feeling that I'm going to be sick in exactly twelve seconds. Lurching to my feet, I stumble across the room, fling the door open, and careen through the apartment --- making it to the

bathroom with only seconds to spare.

2. THE FOUR-DIMENSIONAL CUBE

I'm still recovering from my hangover the next morning when Tom shows up with Felix and our lawyer Aaron, our traditional Sunday morning guests. Pris is already there, sitting on my bed and looking at the terrariums with interest. I hardly notice when everyone else comes in; Pris has all my attention.

Aaron is a tall, lanky man with red hair, taller than Tom but not so broad of shoulders. He always has an amused expression on his face, or at least every time I see him. I think Tom and I amuse him . . . we've known him for years, even before Tom and I knew each other. I really like Aaron. I like Felix, too, but I never liked the way Felix looks at Pris.

Felix is a professional student at Berkeley, although Berkeley is not the only university he's attended. He's been down in UCLA, where Tom graduated, and back East at Yale, though I hear he hadn't lasted long there . . . and at other places I can't recall. He is an expert at just about everything, but he doesn't apply himself or use any of his talents to make money. He just keeps studying. Today he's being an electronics surveillance expert because that's what Tom has decided is behind all this little red light business.

Felix, like Aaron, has red hair, but that's where the similarity ends. Felix is short and skinny and freckled and boyish, and sometimes downright juvenile. He gives me a smile as he unpacks some equipment from a tattered suitcase lined with foam rubber; there's something in the smile I don't like. I think he's humoring me . . . he doesn't believe I've seen the little red light.

"Here," Felix says to Pris, handing her a black and silver device that's obviously hand-built. "Hold that button down and wave it around the room." Pris looks gleeful that she's an active part of this mysterious event, and eagerly takes the device.

"This button?"

"Uh-huh. It's a bug detector. If there's anything in this room that's transmitting, it'll tell us." He smiles at her. She smiles back, doing as he instructed.

I don't like this at all. "It was a laser beam I saw last night."

Felix frowns at my tone of voice. "We're getting to that. Don't get all huffy."

Pris laughs.

Felix pulls out an aerosol can of Christmas snow and pops off the plastic top. A little white piece of paper falls out and he snatches it up with a surprised look. "My God, that's where I put it!"

"What?" Pris asks.

"Window pane! Why didn't I remember it? It was symbolic." He looks at us to see if we're following his cryptic logic. "I spray this stuff on window panes, get it? So this is where I hid my window pane."

"What is it?" Pris asks.

"LSD. I thought I'd lost it. Who wants some?" As he says this he's unfolding the little piece of paper to reveal what looks like several small squares of thin purple plastic. Everyone declines his offer, so Felix pops one of the little squares into his mouth and puts the rest away. Then he holds the can of fake snow out, showing it to us. "This," he says dramatically, "is canned laser detector."

"You're not spraying that in here," I tell him, crossing my arms defensively.

"Only on the windows," he says. "Don't worry, it just wipes off." He steps over and draws the curtains aside, then sprays the white powdery goop all over the glass until you can't see outside. When he's finished he backs away, studying it. "If there were a laser hitting the window, you'd see a bright little dot --- even in the daylight."

"My curtains were closed," I tell him indignantly. "The laser came right out of thin air."

"Lasers don't come out of thin air."

"Lasers shouldn't have been pointed into your room no matter where it came from," says Aaron. "Tom and I think it may have been a surveillance laser that somehow came through a crack in the curtains and reflected off of something."

"Surveillance laser?"

"I told you about them," Tom says. "Any noise in a building will make the windows vibrate, so they bounce a laser off a window and translate those vibrations into noise . . . they turn the entire window into a giant microphone."

"Why in hell would anyone point one of those at my window?"

"They might have thought it was my window," Tom says.

"Huh? Oh!" I nod, catching on. Tom has a lot of enemies, and many of them are in the government. The only problem is that it doesn't explain the voices I heard. I haven't told them about that part --- I haven't had the guts.

"How long do you want me to wave this around?" Pris asks, still sweeping the bug detector in slow arcs over her head.

"A while longer. Hold it closer to the walls." Felix watches as she moves over toward my messy closet. He smiles at her perfect little butt as she bends over and unconsciously pokes it into the air. Felix then turns to Tom and rolls his eyes as if in ecstasy. Tom nods, agreeing. I find myself more interested in their reactions to her butt than I am about her butt, which is odd because usually I am very interested in her butt. I'm jealous, and I'm angry at myself for being jealous. Why should I care? I hate her, right? Isn't that what I told myself?

Felix magnanimously distracts himself from Priscilla's butt and pulls another device out of his tattered case. He plugs this one into the phone outlet; it's a device that supposedly tells us whether or not our phone line is being bugged. I turn away from Felix and find Aaron looking at me strangely, actually frowning at me. It's a puzzled, worried frown.

"Do you guys have the makings for a Bloody Mary?" he asks.

"Of course," says Tom.

"Hey," Aaron says, looking at me, "why don't you and I go make some Bloody Marys?" He's still frowning as he says this, and he finishes up with a jerk of his head indicating the way to the kitchen. I look at Pris, whose complete attention is on her appointed task, then sigh and get up from the bed, following Aaron out of the room. We get to the kitchen and he opens the liquor cabinet and pulls out the Russian vodka, which we keep at the apartment just for him, and then he opens the refrigerator and pulls out a bottle of pre-made mix. He sets these two down beside the pitcher I've pulled out of a cabinet, then says to me, "Okay, what's wrong?"

"What?"

"Why were you looking at Felix as if he were raping your sister?"

"I was?"

"Yes."

"I didn't know that."

"You were watching him watch Priscilla's ass."

"Really?"

He gives me a long, silent, knowing stare. "How long have you been coveting Tom's girlfriend?"

"Well, I never!" I tell him in a Monty Python voice, hoping to

distract him with humor. Aaron doesn't appear distracted, the nosy bastard, but as he's opening his mouth to continue Pris comes wandering in with the bug scanner. She's silent, expressionless. Has she heard any of this? Christ, I could kill Aaron! I watch closely for some sort of sign on her face, as does Aaron, but when she looks up at me she flashes her brilliant smile and says, "Can I have a Bloody Mary too?" Her "too" is an extended, girlish "oooo," her voice lapsing into music, as if she were about to break into song. She's always like this, this is very normal for her, and it's one of the 22,000-odd things I could list that are reasons I love her so goddamn much.

"Why certainly, madam," I tell her, not braking out of my fake British accent. "How bloody would you like her?"

"Oh, very bloody," she says, attempting her own accent. Aaron, to the side of us, is pouring mix into the pitcher. He adds ice, and hot sauce, and then the vodka, then stirs it all up. The tinkling of ice against glass draws everyone else into the kitchen, and when Aaron's finished stirring we all grab glasses and tromp into the front room to sit in a ragged circle and drink it. Felix, amid jokes, sprays every window in the apartment with the fake snow but reports no success in finding anything, neither with the snow nor his electronic devices. "You should leave the snow on the windows for a couple days, though," he says. "if someone hits it with a laser it'll leave a black spot, so you don't actually have to be here to see if someone's firing a laser at you."

"We don't have to keep the windows closed, do we?" I ask him. We have no cooler, and this is a particularly hot summer in Berkeley.

"It wouldn't do anyone any good to shine one of those surveillance lasers through an open window, would it?" he says, smirking.

I try to think of something really cutting to say to him, but I notice Pris is frowning at him . . . somehow this makes everything better. Meanwhile, Aaron has turned on the stereo and is playing an album by the Creedence Clearwater Revival --- his favorite group --- and the mood is becoming mellow and lazy, just the way a Sunday in Berkeley should be. In a half-hour the pitcher is dry, and there's no more mix. We take a vote: the decision is that we all go up to the corner market and buy more. In a group we stand up and do exactly that.

While at the market Felix announces with a weird laugh that his drugs have taken effect. The man at the register overhears, and smiles.

"What do you see?" Pris asks Felix.

"Everything has turned to shades of green."

"His brain is melting," Aaron says. "How many fingers do I have?" Aaron wobbles both his open hands in front of Felix's face, and without any explanation Felix begins to laugh hysterically, and nothing will stop him. His laughter is infectious, and so Pris begins to laugh, as well as Tom and Aaron, and I manage a chuckle or two even though Pris now has her left arm around Felix and is holding him protectively. Abruptly Felix stops laughing and reaches into a freezer, pulling out a bag of frozen peas. "I love these!" he exclaims.

"Those too," Tom tells the man at the register, who is already ringing up the vodka and Bloody Mary mix and stalks of celery. The man at the register is swarthy and looks Turkish, with a three-day beard and dark eyes but a willingly cheerful face. He smiles again, nodding, adding the peas to the register. "Your friend must have his veggies," he tells Tom.

"My friend is a veggie," Tom says.

Tom and Aaron and I throw money into a pile and Aaron, who threw in most of the money, collects the change. We file out of the store and onto the sidewalk with Pris and Felix trailing behind, laughing about something, and our bum is standing right there and he nods at us and shifts his shoulders on his rubber spine. "Got any spare change?" he

asks.

"Hell no," Aaron snaps at him. "Why don't you get a job?"

"Aaron, he's a friend of ours." I pull a couple loose dollars out of my pocket and hand it to the man, who takes it hesitantly and gives me a look out of his tired, dry, withered eyes that are so full of gratitude that the image burns itself permanently into my mind.

"Thank you," he says in his dry voice.

"No problem."

Aaron is very quiet, watching this. Tom is looking at me as if he were my proud father and I had just hit a ball out of the little league ball park. After we're down the hill a ways, leaving the bum behind, Aaron grunts and says something like, "You can't support him forever." I ignore the remark, as I half agree with him, but Tom goes into one of his speeches about how food belongs to all of humanity, and how we are obligated to prevent starvation, and Aaron counters this with his normal spiel about how everyone has to work for his share, and when someone doesn't work, and someone else provides for him, the person realizes he doesn't have to work so he won't. An argument starts, and I back off and walk beside Pris and Felix. Felix is describing everything he sees for her, giving her a glimpse into the world he has entered; they are still arm-in-arm but being very brotherly-sisterly about it. "The leaves are glowing," he says as we walk under a tree. He lowers his gaze and stops mid-stride, staring at the tree's trunk. "Wild," he says. "That's really wild."

"What?" Pris asks.

"The bark. It has weird patterns."

"The bark does have weird patterns," I tell him.

"I never noticed it before. On LSD you notice things that are around you all the time but you never really look at. It . . ." He breaks off, losing his train of thought. "Patterns really catch your attention. Things like gratings on, like, a heater will shimmer. They look like they move, like they wobble. Did you really see a laser beam on your wall last night?"

"Yes."

"Really? Are you telling the truth?"

I look at him, annoyed, and he shrivels back at my look as if I'm about to whip him. "Everything I said happened, happened. Even more than I'm saying, but I'm not going into that."

"I'd like to see it," he says. "I'd really like to. Let's all stay at your house tonight and we'll watch for it."

"I have to work tonight," Pris says unhappily. She has pulled away from Felix, and is now standing nearer to me.

"We can pick you up after work," I tell her.

"No. I'm scheduled for tomorrow morning, too. Early. I'd better stay home."

We continue down the hill to the Euclid, pass our bum on the steps, enter the building, and suddenly I freeze. Turning, I open the building door and look out at the steps. Yes, our bum is sitting right there. Once again, he mysteriously beat us home. He must have a twin brother or something, I think, and shrug it off. Everyone else is already up the stairs and heading for the apartment. "Check the windows!" Felix is calling, so I trot to catch up to them and enter the apartment at their heels. I check my room, looking the windows over carefully, but see nothing more than unbroken white goop.

I join Tom and Aaron who are in the kitchen, still arguing --- now about something entirely removed from their original conflict --- and they continue without a pause even as they're pulling out ice and opening bottles and measuring quantities of blood-red mix and crystal clear vodka, and peeling celery stalks. Aaron is saying, "Naturally you as a writer are against censorship, but you've got to understand that under certain circumstances the free circulation of dangerous

information can be very damaging . . ." and Tom is saying --- at the same time --- "Aaron, this is America! The very foundation of our society is based upon the freedom to voice our opinions on any topic at any time . . ." There's no venom in their voices, though, because they're just arguing for the sake of arguing, because that's what they're good at and that's what they're interested in. At least, that's what I think. As I'm standing there waiting for the drinks to be prepared, Felix's voice cries out from the living room in astonishment, and Pris is saying, "What? What?"

"He must have found something," Tom says, and we go running.

Felix and Pris are standing at opposite ends of the low, long coffee table, facing each other, both staring at the cube the bum had made for me which Felix is holding in his hands. There's a mock expression of terror on his face, and he bellows, "My god!" The terror in his voice is very realistic, as is his expression as he stares into the cube, through the cube, then with trembling hands lowers the cube and turns to stare around at everything in the room. He's not joking, I realize --- he's freaking out. "Oh my god," he's yelling. "What's happening? What is happening!" Felix lets out a cry of fear as Tom steps toward him, so Tom steps back. Felix doesn't move --- it seems he can't. He's as rigid as a statue except for his eyes.

"You're on drugs, Felix," I tell him, my voice very calm. "You're seeing hallucinations. Everything's okay. Nothing is really wrong, it's just the drugs. Okay? Felix?"

Felix looks down at his feet and lets out another startled cry.

"Felix? Can you hear me?" I edge closer.

"Oh God," he says.

"Felix, this is me, your friend. I'm going to save you. Can you hear me?" I'm almost within arm's reach of him.

"Everything's going insane," he says in a small, boyish voice, full of fear. His entire body is trembling now.

"Close your eyes," I tell him. "It's only a hallucination. You took LSD and now you're hallucinating. When you come down everything's going to be normal." I reach him, put my arms around him. He's broken out in a cold sweat.

"It's not a hallucination," he whispers.

"Yes it is. Close your eyes."

I can't tell if he's closed his eyes or not, but suddenly he's squeezing me in a bear-hug.

"It's just a bad trip," I tell him. Everyone else is talking to him in soothing tones as well, but everyone else seems afraid to come near us. "It's just a bad trip, Felix. You've had bad trips before, right? Well, this is just another one. You're going to have to be brave and ride it out."

"It's never been this bad," he whispers.

"You're just going to have to ride it out. Okay?"

"Don't leave me."

"I won't leave. I'm right here with you."

"If you let go I'll go drifting off. It's so big that I'd never find my way back."

"It's okay," I tell him. "I'll keep holding on until you come down, as long as it takes." I do --- for several hours. He moans and screams and cries the whole time, until finally he falls asleep. At one point during this vigil, just before Pris leaves to make it to work, Tom asks her what it was that set him off. "The cube," she says. "He looked at the cube and freaked out." I say nothing to this, but I think to myself: Jesus Fucking Christ.

#

Monday morning, June 23rd, it's just past 9:00 AM and I've been up

since 5:30, unable to sleep, sitting at my desk and staring at the mysterious little cube.

Now while I have never claimed to be much of a scientist, and I admit my knowledge of physics and especially quantum physics is sketchy at best, I do know that there are theories accepted today that are dependent upon the existence of an infinite number of physical dimensions. I have read a number of bizarre science papers that explore the possibilities these theories imply. One paper by a physicist named Hogan believably depicts the existence of 6 physical dimensions. Six. And that doesn't include time, which is usually referred to as the "forth" dimension.

The bum had said "a four-dimensional cube" and "you have to learn how to look at it." Felix definitely saw something unusual about the cube, and while he was under the influence of what some claim to be a "mind expanding" drug. Whether LSD expands your mind or merely scrambles it is a question that reaches into the realm of metaphysics --- which I don't feel qualified to discuss --- but it strikes me odd that Felix, a veteran LSD user who has learned to handle himself under the drug, suddenly loses control when he looks at a simple little cube made of plastic drinking straws. So, my suspicions stirred, I have spend all morning staring at the cube and find, maybe due to the lack of sleep --- or maybe not --- the cube seems to be bending light.

It is so subtle that a casual examination would not reveal it, and ---until now --- a casual examination is all it was worth. But after staring and staring and hoping and wishing for something strange to happen, it has. At only one angle, holding the cube just so, and squeezing it, light going through the cube bends and objects beyond do not match up. The line of the edge of my bedroom window is broken when I look at it thought the cube, like looking through a glass of water with a straw in it; the straw in the water does not match up with the straw emerging from the water.

Then again, it isn't that obvious. I am tired, I do want to see something weird, and it could be nothing more than an optical illusion. There is one way to tell if the cube is bending light, however: shine a laser through it.

Okay. That's exactly what I'll do.

After breakfast I make my way out of the building and start the two mile walk up hill to the lab. My car is only 5 blocks away from the Euclid, and as far as I know it still runs, but it's gotten so many parking tickets on it I'm afraid to go near it. Walking is good for me, anyway.

At the top I'm exhausted, but I feel great. The cube is in my pocket, and as I reach the low blue-and-gray building I pull it out, straighten it, and check to make sure it isn't coming apart. As I stand there, staring at it, I hear a door open. "Hey, what kind of drugs are you on?" a voice says. I look over to see one of Dr. Carbajal's lab assistants staring at me. There's two others with him on the other side of the glass doors, both of them girls dressed in white lab coats. One of them looks enough like Pris to remind me of her, and I inwardly cringe.

I open my mouth and almost, just almost, make a total fool of myself. But I catch myself, smile, and take a breath. "I'm suffering from a lack of caffeine. Is there any coffee brewing?"

"Plenty, Professor. What's that thing you're looking at?"

"A four-dimensional cube." I make it sound like a joke.

They laugh, and I brush past them as one of the girls holds the door open for me. Well, at least I didn't blab everything out like it was real. I grab a cup of coffee and head down the hall into the South Wing, and find David Carbajal in the main lab. He's a short, gray-haired man with a gray and black beard and thick glasses. He always has a pipe either in his mouth or in his hand but I have yet to see him actually

smoking it. The pipe's in his mouth as I walk in, and he glances up from what he's doing and says, "Hello there, Professor."

"Good morning, Doctor."

He scribbles something in his notebook, and without looking back up says, "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to borrow one of your lasers for a moment, if you've got one idle."

"Oh, sure. Not even using one. Help yourself." He motions to the back of the room, behind him. There's a door to the room where he's got his lasers set up. I walk toward it but then he suddenly blurts out, "What do you need a laser for?"

I turn around, facing him nervously. "Testing a theory. It's really goofy . . . I'll tell you about it if it works."

"Ohhh." He smiles. "I get those ideas too. If they don't work, don't tell anyone you actually thought seriously about it." Nodding, he turns away. I make it into the lab and set up the low-power General Electric laser he has for the beginning lab assistants, and shoot a beam through the cube at every angle . . . but there's no visible bending of the beam.

It's not bending light, I think. It's just an illusion.

I turn the room lights on and sit there, staring at it, feeling disappointed. Even if the damn thing was four-dimensional, how would it bend light? It's not a lens. It's just my over-stressed brain with not enough sleep.

Then I notice something. Catching a glimpse of the cube's shadow on the white linoleum, I notice it's fuzzy and gray --- it doesn't look right. Searching around, I find a bright lamp clamped to one of the lab benches and turn it on. Quickly I put the cube in the stream of light between it and the bench.

The thing's shadow --- why didn't I think of it before? There are at least twenty lines too many. I peer into the thing, then back down at the shadow. When I look back up at the cube I nearly drop it --- for a moment, just a split second, I see the extra straws. It hurts my eyes, and when I blink the image is gone. It's again a crooked three-dimensional object made out of trash.

I almost call out David's name, but my voice sticks in my throat and instead I stand there with my mouth open. What am I going to tell him? How am I going to prove this? David's got his reputation to think about, how could I even convince him to look?

I double check the shadow, then for a fraction of a second I see the extra straws again. It's giving me a splitting headache. I hear someone enter the room and I jump, startled. It's David.

"Any luck, Professor?"

My mouth is still open. I close it. Lick my lips. "It didn't work," I tell him.

He smiles and nods. "Better luck next time."

I nod back, then stuff the cube into my pocket. I feel like I'm shoplifting, or carrying a bomb. Turning off the light and the laser, I thank him again for humoring me, then hike back down the hill toward the campus.

#

That evening I get home after teaching my two classes and Tom and Aaron are there, drinking. Aaron calls out my name in greeting, and Tom points to the kitchen, saying, "There's a full pitcher of Margaritas in there," and to prove it shows me the glass in his hand. I go into the spotlessly clean kitchen and pull the cold glass pitcher from the refrigerator, pour the pale contents into a glass sitting ready with salt on the rim, then join my two friends.

"Have you ever heard the name Alvin Laurel?" Tom asks me.

"No."

"Never? He was a mathematics professor right here at Berkeley."

"I've never heard of him. Why?"

"He's our bum, now."

"What?"

"His name is Alvin Laurel. He taught advanced mathematics and physics and also came up with some of the ground work that Stephen Hawkins took off on in black hole research. He was fairly prominent, once."

"Where'd you find this out?"

"The manager of the book store across the street knows all about him. One day our Professor took too much LSD, or so I'm told, and he's never come down."

I stare at Tom, wondering if I should tell him. With this new information about our bum things are beginning to fall into a pattern. Who else would be able to discover how to make a four-dimensional cube than a mathematics genius wiggled out on acid? Goddamn it, though --- the whole thing is crazy! I decide that I will tell Tom, but not with Aaron around. Aaron will not believe a word of it and I'll become the butt of every joke and jibe he comes up with or the next five years.

"I wonder what it was about that cube that made Felix freak out so badly," Tom says, musing. "I mean, it's eerie."

"Why?" Aaron asks.

"Because this Professor Laurel has always claimed that these cubes he makes are actually four-dimensional objects. Felix sees one and . . . wham! Mental meltdown."

"He's okay now, isn't he?" I ask.

"As far as I know. He's awfully burnt out . . . I'm hoping it's not a permanent condition."

Aaron drains his drink and stands up. "I've taken LSD once," he says. "I'll never do it again. Felix has been damn lucky up 'till now, but he takes large doses. He abuses the drug. Sooner or later this was going to happen. It has nothing to do with that stupid cube." Abruptly he leaves the room for the kitchen to refill his glass. I lean over to break the news to Tom but Tom is already leaning toward me, and speaks first.

"I need you to do me a big favor tomorrow night," he says.

"What?"

"I want you to go for Pris."

"What?"

"I want you to go for Pris. Heather and I are getting back together."

"Me go for Pris? Why?" In my mind I'm ranting and raving, but I keep my voice calm. "How am I supposed to go for Pris?"

"I asked her a couple weeks ago if she'd date Felix if I start seeing someone else, and she said the only one of my friends she'd date was you. She really likes you."

I must be in shock; the world around me --- the dim room and the cool drink in my hand --- all seem slightly unreal, like I'm dreaming. "Priscilla said that?"

"Yes. The reason I asked her about Felix is that Felix has a big crush on her, but she said you. She likes you."

"What about you?"

"Her and I have an open relationship. No obligations."

Aaron reenters the room with his refilled drink, catching the last part of this. "You don't have to keep anything secret from me, guys. I'm your lawyer."

"I gave Pris to him," Tom says.

"That's what I thought." Aaron looks at me. "That should make you happy. You're totally in love with her."

I feel my face turn crimson. You asshole, Aaron. I turn and look at

Tom, and Tom is looking back with raised eyebrows. "You're in love with Pris?"

"I . . . well, I'm trying not to be, but . . ."

"All this time he's been coveting your girlfriend," Aaron says.

"No. Really?" Tom seems taken aback, as if he's surprised and a little disappointed in himself for not seeing it. Damn you, I think. How dare you "give" me something I want more than anything in the world. You've just jinxed any chance I may have had with her. You've made me an accessory to her heartbreak. She really loves you, and you're going to crush her. Tomorrow night she's going to be destroyed, and I'm going to be partially to blame. Thanks Tom. Thanks a lot.

3. PRISCILLA

The next afternoon, Tuesday, Heather Clarke's birthday, I'm teaching my class when Tom comes in silently and taps me on my shoulder. I swear, every girl in the room goes moon-eyed at the sight of him, as if some popular movie actor has walked in. It's sickening. "You've got to hear this," Tom says, holding up his tiny micro-cassette recorder.

I look at my students for a moment. They're watching a video tape about the reproductive system in sea turtles, so they'll have plenty to occupy them for a while. "I'll be back in a few minutes," I tell them, and Tom and I leave the classroom.

We walk out into the echoing hall and down about four doors to my tiny closet-like office, just big enough for a rinky-dink desk, three chairs, and a coat tree. "What is it?" I ask him.

"Our bum." He thinks a moment, editing himself. "Professor Laurel. He was on the steps when I left this morning, so I interviewed him."

Tom sets the tiny recorder in the middle of my desk and turns it on. For a moment there is only a hissing sound, then there's a pop and I feel myself tense up. It weird, I'm nervous, and nervous in a weird way --- much like when I was a teenager and was about to watch my first X-rated movie. I have no idea what to expect, but from the way Tom is acting I know it's something that will affect my life. I'm not sure I want to hear it, but it's too late. Our bum's halting, dry voice is already crackling out of the tiny speaker, so I brace myself and listen:

LAUREL [excited] . . . you saw it? You saw through?

TOM No, but I think a friend of mine did. He was on LSD and looked at one of your cubes and became very upset.

LAUREL Oh, that'll happen. That'll happen.

TOM So you know what I'm talking about.

LAUREL Yes. Oh, yes. I know.

TOM My problem is that I don't know if I really understand

what is going on. I was hoping you could explain it to me.

LAUREL [after long pause] What happened is your friend, he experienced the larger world. We all exist in it, we all travel through it every day, but we're not aware of it. Your friend saw a seed, a man-made four-dimensional object. It drew his attention into the forth dimension, an area the human brain is not designed to perceive, and he got a glimpse of the bigger world.

TOM Now what do you mean by the "bigger world."

LAUREL The infinite-dimensional reality.

TOM You say we travel though this every day?

LAUREL Exactly! But we are not aware of it. One way to understand it is to think of us as two-dimensional creatures, shadows on the ground. Like this. You see the shadow moving over the bumps and cracks on the surface? That's two dimensions traveling over a three-dimensional surface. And see, the shadow jumps up the steps? Those are big three-dimensional jumps for a two-dimensional object, and it doesn't even notice.

TOM We're like the shadow of your hand, then.

LAUREL Yes. When you make a big jump like going up the steps, you are actually going into a new plane of the universe, only slightly different than the last, but different anyway. Do you know quantum physics?

TOM Not much, but some.

LAUREL Every time you make a choice, every time you choose between one thing and another, you split the plane into two different planes. One plane the choice went one way, and on the other it went the other way. This happens on even the sub-atomic level. So there are an infinite amount of planes to the universe, or as some look at it, an infinite amount of universes. These are like the bumps on the ground; the smaller the bump, or step, the smaller the difference; the bigger the bump, or step, the bigger the difference. And the shadow just glides over them, rising and falling where the surface rises and falls.

TOM This is the way the universe is?

LAUREL Yes. Yes, but in infinite dimensions.

TOM We glide through it? What about the changes between planes of the universe --- we never notice the changes?

LAUREL Oh yes. We notice, but we don't know why. If you put your keys down on a table and then turn around and they're not there, but you find them in your pocket . . . and you swear you put them on the table, then, you see, you've gone over a big bump in the plane. The bump levels back down to the surface you were on before, so nothing else is different. If you go up the steps it's a different thing altogether. A radical set of millions of choices . . . and you only travel in one direction, see. My hand going this way, my shadow, that's your progress through time----

TOM Time?

LAUREL Yes. See the shadow moving forward, it's moving forward in time. You can't go back, you can only go forward. You'd have to know the future to know you've gone on to a radically different plane. Every time you're involved in a choice that involves large consequences you are choosing between two distinctly different planes that will differ from that point on----

TOM I think you've lost me. But, go on. Is there any way to determine that you've changed planes once you're on a different one?

LAUREL No, not normally. No. But if you're like me, yes. Since my perception has expanded beyond the three-dimensional limit, I can consciously move myself across multiple dimensions, end up on planes that diverged from my original one in the far distant past. You can also call them different time lines, but not really, since in an infinite-dimensional sense they're all the same time line----

Tom reaches over and pushes the pause button on the recorder. "This is where he goes totally off the wall. He really had me going up until this point, but then he totally lost me."

"Play the rest," I tell him.

"Oh, it's just nonsense----

"No, play the rest, I want to hear it."

"You're following this stuff?"

"I think so. Let's hear it."

Tom takes the little recorder off pause, and again Alvin Laurel's dry voice is scratching out of the little speaker.

LAUREL I go back and forth between them at will, though I'm still not sure if I'm traveling physically, or if it's just my flow of consciousness shifting from one version of myself to the next. Sometimes it seems like one, sometimes the other. Who knows, maybe it's both.

TOM What are the differences between these planes?

LAUREL Like I said, it could be as minor as a proton going one way in one, and a proton going another way in the other. As far as major differences, there are some so vast they're beyond your comprehension.

TOM I think we've already done that.

LAUREL There's an vast array of possibilities, and every one of them are real. I've seen hundreds of different societies right here in what we call America. Not all of them were free. In fact, most of them were much more fascist than you'd believe.

TOM Ever see an America where Berkeley was the nation's capital?

LAUREL . . . no.

TOM How about an America where all the men dressed in drag?

LAUREL No, haven't seen those. Have you?

TOM Do you use any kind of drug to help you get from one plane to the next? Like LSD?

LAUREL Oh hell . . . I used to. I don't need it anymore, though.

TOM I'll bet. [SNAP! POP!]

"That's it," Tom says, reaching over and turning the recorder off. "He's brain damaged from too much LSD. But there's a connection here: for some reason, a cube made out of straws or sticks seems to have a strange effect on someone high on hallucinogenics. Laurel described almost exactly what Felix described. Felix told me the universe was a lot bigger than he'd thought it was, and that everything stretched into infinite different levels."

I sit for a moment in silence, trying to remain calm. If I had the cube here with me, I'd show him its shadow and tell him what I'd

discovered ---since I don't have it, however, I'm not about to open my big mouth and make him think I'm a fool with a head full of nonsense. I'll wait, and show him tonight at the apartment.

No, I realize, not tonight. We're going to be at Heather's birthday party. Tom is going to be busy dumping Pris and I'm going to be busy "going for her."

"So what do you think?" Tom asks, prompting me out of my silence.

"What do I think?" Okay, damn it, you asked. "I think there may be a lot of truth to what our bum was talking about. That cube is a four-dimensional cube.

Tom stares at me with his camera-lens eyes. "What do you mean?"

"It's a four-dimensional cube. It really has four physical dimensions."

Tom continues staring at me in silence for perhaps ten seconds, then suddenly grins, then starts laughing. He thinks I'm joking. And as he laughs I find myself smiling, and then he's laughing harder, so I start to laugh. Okay, I think, let him think it's a joke.

Why not? Maybe it is a joke.

#

In San Francisco Tom slows for traffic. We follow the freeways out to the panhandle then exit, twist and turn through the streets and pull up in front of Priscilla's small apartment house. She's at her window, watching for us; she waves, smiling her beautiful Pris-smile. Still smiling, she disappears from view only to reappear a few seconds later at the front door. She bounces down the steps, skips across the street and up to the car. Goddamn it! I am so in love with her that I can't stand it. I can't stand the thought of her being hurt! I turn and look at Tom but of course Pris is there and I can't say a damn thing. She climbs in, gives Tom a kiss, then sits on my lap --- there is nowhere else for her to sit, the car has no back seat because Tom removed it when he was modifying everything.

"Hi!" she says in her throaty voice. She leans over and gives Tom another kiss then settles back against me, half turning and giving me a kiss too. I put my arms around her waist and give her a squeeze, and she rests her arms on mine, holding my wrists and keeping my arms around her. Her head rests against my shoulder as Tom sends the car flying forward, up the hill and to the left, heading back across town to Heather's house.

Heather lives in the North Beach district, sharing a house with five other women who in various ways are "into" the theater. Cable car tracks run right in front of the place. There are so many tourists in this area there is nowhere to park, so we find a place about six blocks away and walk back. Like most San Francisco houses, this one is squeezed in between two others, with no side yards whatsoever, nothing more than an inch of space between the houses. Steps lead up to the front door; the driveway leads down, the garage being under the house. Six cars are jammed into a driveway built to accommodate only two.

We walk up the steps to the open door; music is blasting inside and there is a drone of yapping voices. We enter and Heather is right there in the front room, surrounded by people. Aaron is already there and looks relieved when we show up --- he hates Heather but he loves parties. Heather sees Tom and breaks off her conversation, rushing forward, throwing her arms around him with a squeal and hugging him. "Oh, god, I'm so glad you could come!" she says, as if there were any doubt.

As Heather is molesting Tom, Aaron makes his way across the crowded room to where Pris and I still stand, and says, "The beer's in the 'fridge, kids!" He leans over and gives Pris a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Pris buries herself into his hug, smiling, then steps back with

sparkling eyes. What is this? Is she in love with Aaron, now? No, she's just happy. Tom and Heather are still embracing but Pris is enduring it like a champ, confident that Tom belongs to her and Heather is getting attention only because it's her birthday.

Heather breaks away from Tom with a final kiss and turns to us, saying hello and, for some reason, giving me a hug and a kiss on the lips. She hugs Pris, too, then turns around and hugs Tom again. Then she says something to Tom and the two of them walk away.

Just like that, I think. Now what happens? Am I officially in charge of Pris? No, Pris is following right after Tom and Heather, trailing along like a puppy. I watch her back as she walks away and can tell by the lack of bounce in her stride that she is already worried. Tom blatantly left her behind.

I start to follow but Aaron grabs my shoulder. "As your lawyer, I advise you to stay out of this."

"Oh Christ, Aaron. This is terrible."

"Come on, let's get some beer."

Beer? Jesus, what a one-track mind! But no, Aaron is right; I follow him to the kitchen and get my first beer of the evening. I suddenly feel the intense need for alcohol in my bloodstream.

The kitchen is like a pedestrian's freeway; people are constantly bringing in freshly bought beer and putting it in the refrigerator, and everybody else is constantly removing it. Aaron and I grab some imported German beer someone has just put in there and then escape to the back porch, where a man with long blond hair and black horn-rimmed glasses is cooking chicken on a barbecue. The sun is just setting, and fog is rolling in, but we both have jackets and the air is still quite comfortable.

"Aaron, what am I going to do?"

"Avoid Priscilla until Tom breaks the news to her." He swigs his beer. "Otherwise, you see, she'll associate you with what's going on."

"She won't if I wait until after he tells her?"

"Then you'll be the one to comfort her. Also, make sure you have some chocolate to give her. Women who suffer a romantic loss crave a certain chemical that just happens to be in chocolate --- it mimics a hormone. If you're the one that provides it she will subconsciously associate you with the chocolate. Hence, she will crave you."

"Are you sure of all this?"

"Never fails. Trust your lawyer, son."

Nobody pays this man enough, I think to myself. What a godsend! "I've got to go find some chocolate."

"Relax. There's a mini-market two blocks away . . . you've got plenty of time."

"Okay." I take a deep breath, let it out. I notice my hands are shaking. Drink, I tell myself. Drink and calm your nerves, gain control over yourself. Remain calm. I raise my bottle to my lips and begin pouring the dark, rich beer down my throat.

"Ever see any more little red lights?" Aaron asks.

I lower the bottle from my lips and shake my head. "No," I tell him. "And nothing ever showed up on Felix's goddamn snow, either. It took me almost three hours to scrape that shit off the windows."

"We'll probably never find out what was going on," Aaron says. He seems like he truly believes I saw a laser light in my room. Would he believe the rest of the story, then? And what about the cube --- what would he say if I showed it to him under a bright light?

Thinking about the cube and the laser beam at the same time gives me a chilly thought. If Alvin Laurel can build a four-dimensional cube out of plastic drinking straws, what would keep someone on some other plane from building a four-dimensional prism? Wouldn't a four-dimensional prism have the ability to reflect light, particularly a laser beam, from one plane of the universe to another? I don't know,

probably not --- I lose the train of thought completely as I see Pris. She wanders out onto the back porch, alone and looking upset.

"Have you seen Tom? Has he come out here?"

"No," I tell her.

She looks at me for a long time, silently, then looks at the man who's watching over the cooking chicken. Without another word she turns and walks back into the house. I feel one of my legs moving forward, planting my foot on the ground, propelling me toward the door. I swear to god it's moving with a will of its own, and I'm following Pris again, but Aaron grabs my arm and says, "Stay." I force myself back against the porch railing and take another swig of beer.

An hour later I'm in the living room talking to a thin, graceful lesbian woman about The Church when Pris comes walking through the room, closely followed by Felix, who I guess has just shown up. I'm immediately burning with jealousy but I hide it, not even letting myself look at them. Pris makes her way through the other party guests and to my side, grabbing my upper arm with both her hands. "I need to talk to you," she says, interrupting the lesbian.

"Okay." I excuse myself, and let her lead me out to the front steps. Felix of course is following. "Is Tom dropping me?" she asks as soon as we're outside.

"I don't know."

"He and Heather disappeared and I can't find them anywhere. Are they getting back together?"

I shake my head helplessly.

"I wish he could have warned me. I can take it. I just wish he'd said something about it."

I give her a painful half-smile and shrug. I can't tell her the truth. I'd be admitting that I knew about it all along, and that would make me an accessory. I look at Felix, who is standing behind and to the side of Pris; he's silently staring at her shoulders. He's not telling her anything either --- for the same reasons. Bastard.

Pris and Felix wander off.

I step back inside the house and stand for a moment in the living room, surrounded by people but being totally ignored. I feel doom hanging over my head. Felix is a friend of mine, a good friend, but now he's an enemy. I want Pris because I am in love with her; he wants her because she's fair game. Nothing more.

Why is this? And why is it that he's getting her?

Because of my mood the people around me seem suddenly cruel, like hungry predators, like snakes stalking prey. One woman in front of me is flirting dangerously with two guys at the same time. One of those guys, I've heard, is a bisexual; he's flirting back with both the girl and the other guy. The other guy is snapping at the bisexual and cooing at the girl. To the side of me, two women are talking about "bastards" and something about "those little fuckers;" I have a feeling they're referring to men, men in general, as opposed to themselves: lesbians. But the venom in their voices has nothing to do with men --- they're trying to seduce each other.

I have a feeling that I'm not in a room with people. I'm in a room with egos. Transparent, ghost-like egos that control the body as if it were sitting in a cockpit. They glare and stare and scan for other egos who are weaker than themselves, and once found they grab hold of the weaker victim, manipulating and controlling and eventually devouring it, using it to grow and gain more power.

I drift to an area where people have actually found a couch and chairs to sit in, and they're all facing each other and carrying on a myriad of conversations all of which have no basis in reality; talking about plays and theater and stories and acting parts, doing television commercials; the subject of "tofu" comes out of nowhere, and they all

express opinions on it. I'm amazed and shocked by the pure rhetoric of it all; when a mass of minds come together and nothing constructive is produced from it --- on the contrary, most of the dialogue is destructive, much of it subliminally telling each other "I'm better than you" or "I'm smarter than you." Again I get the illusion of transparent little gas clouds that have taken roost in these bodies, controlling them, trying to knock some other ego out of its body and onto the floor where it can be stepped on. None of them, thank god, have noticed me. I'm not one of these mindless egos. Pris isn't either.

Felix is one, however; I'm convinced of that.

I look over at the front door, hesitate only a moment, then turn and walk out of it.

It's dark outside and wisps of thin fog float around the streetlights. Like Aaron had said there is a mini-market two blocks away, so I walk down to it and inside, feeling suddenly comfortable in the bright florescent light and the racks of candy and soda. I buy a large chocolate bar and then head back to the party, dreading going back inside but hoping to find Pris so I can give her the chocolate.

At the party I make a thorough search of the entire house, excluding only a few locked bedroom doors, and find Pris is missing. I go back and forth, asking if anyone's seen her, but the answer's the same: "No, not for the last half hour." She's either left the party or she's in one of the locked bedrooms.

What's worse, Felix is missing as well.

Tom and Heather are out on the back porch with Aaron, so I join them, grabbing four beers on my way through the kitchen. I am suppressing a violent urge to begin crying. I feel like I'm fifteen and the girl next door who I have a crush on has snubbed me and has begun seeing the boy across the street. I really feel like a hurt teenager, but I'll be damned if I'm going to let myself act like one. I hand Tom, Aaron and Heather each a beer --- whether they need it or not --- and open my own, putting it to my lips and gulping it down.

"Where's Pris?" Aaron asks me.

I shrug, putting on an air of indifference. I notice Heather is looking at me with a disturbing intensity, her eyes glassy with alcohol. She says nothing, but she has a slight smile. What is she doing? Mocking me? Tom must have told her what was going on --- she seems to think it's funny. I stare back at her and she looks away, but as she does I get the illusion again of a gas-like ego roosting in her head, controlling her with levers and knobs. Her glassy eyes take in everything without blinking, processing information about everything around her and calculating how it will affect her and how she can gain control over it.

I look at Tom, and unlike Heather his eyes are sympathetic. They've lost their camera lens affect. Jesus Christ, I think, those two do not belong together! "Did you tell her yet?" I ask him.

"Who, what?" he says.

"Priscilla, you know what."

Tom shakes his head. "No, not yet."

"He has an open relationship with her," Heather butts in. "He shouldn't have to tell her anything."

"Pris is in love with him."

"I heard someone is in love with Pris." Heather smiles, strangely, her expression almost innocent.

"Who?"

"You."

"Yeah, well, so is Felix." My voice is so bitter that it surprises even me.

Heather's smile falls. "Oh. That's true. Where are they?"

"I can't find either one."

"Uh-oh."

"They're probably just talking," Aaron says. "Did you buy

chocolate?"

"Yes."

"Chocolate?" Heather says.

Tom glances at Aaron, then laughs. "You didn't!"

"Yes, I did," Aaron says. At Tom's expression, Aaron exclaims, "Hey, it's true. It works."

"Aaron."

"What is this about chocolate?" Heather asks.

"It does work," Aaron continues, "I've read at least a half-dozen articles about it in psychology magazines."

"What?" Heather moves in between Aaron and Tom, facing Tom. She pokes at him with her finger. "What is this about chocolate?"

"Some BS theory Aaron has," Tom says.

"I tell you, it's not bullshit."

Heather turns to Aaron, hands on her hips, waiting for an explanation. Aaron quickly runs through it. Afterwards, Heather looks thoughtful. "The logic is sound," she says.

Tom is shaking his head. He takes a step in my direction and leans up against me, his beer breath in my face. "Just be yourself. Pris likes you the way you are. Don't go pulling any pseudo-psychological stunts on her . . . you might as well try casting a voodoo spell, same fucking difference. If it happens, it happens. Don't try controlling something that can't be controlled."

"It might give him an edge," Heather says.

"He doesn't need an edge," Tom tells her. "Pris doesn't like Felix."

"Then why did she disappear with him?"

"To talk."

"I think it's more likely she'll make it with Felix just to show you she doesn't need you."

"Why would she choose Felix?"

"She wouldn't want to use someone she actually likes."

"Pris doesn't use people," I blurt at her.

"Everybody uses everybody," she says to me in a scathing voice.

Aaron jumps to my defense. "Just because you use people every waking moment of your life doesn't mean everyone else does."

"You're one to talk, Aaron. Tell me, look me in the eyes and tell me you don't use your clients."

"I defend them!"

"How much do they pay you?"

"If anyone uses anyone, they use me!"

"How much do they pay you?"

"That has nothing to do with it."

"I've heard you're one of the highest paid lawyers on that side of the bay. How much do you charge just to defend someone for a drunken driving charge? A simple D.U.I.? How much."

"Now look, tens of thousands of dollars went into my education----"

"Tell me you don't use people. What about witnesses, Aaron? Look me in the eyes and tell me you don't use them."

I watch in horror as this evolves into a major argument, and without thinking I raise my beer bottle and fling it straight down at the floor. It doesn't smash like I guess I wanted it to --- the porch is made from pine, which is soft, and the bottle is hard Mexican glass. It bounces all the way back up and smacks me under the chin, and there's a sharp pain in my mouth as my teeth sink deep into the flesh of my tongue. I stumble backwards, hands to my mouth, and Aaron and Heather continue their argument without a pause. Turning, I walk quickly away, feeling stupid and impotent, pushing my way between people and skirting walls and making my way to the front door. I'm leaving.

I stand in front of the house for a few seconds, enduring the pain

and tasting blood in my mouth, then walk a little ways down to the corner and sit there, my back against a light post. A cable car should be along here any minute; I'll catch it and ride it down to Market Street, where I can catch a BART train across the bay and back to Berkeley. Fuck them, I think, fuck all those screwy people. I'm a goddamned scientist for crissakes, what am I doing at a party with actresses and dancers and playwrights?

The fog swirls around the street lights and makes a ceiling over the street. The trees seem to grow up into it. After five or ten minutes sitting on the cold cement, leaning against a damp, freezing metal lamp post I find all the warmth has drained out of me, leaving me shivering. There is no cable car in sight. Absently I pick up a scrap of newspaper that is lying in the gutter; its a section of TV listings for last week. After glancing through it I find I missed War Of The Worlds last Thursday at 9:00 PM. I didn't even know it was on. Oh, I hate TV anyway. Shit.

"Are you okay?" asks a voice. I look up to see Tom standing about two feet away, hands in his jacket pockets.

"No," I tell him. "I'm despondent."

"Would it help if I bought you a whore?"

"No." I glare at him.

"I just thought I'd ask."

I hear a bell ringing, and up the street a cable car rumbles over the top of the hill, shrouded in fog. There's hardly anyone aboard it --- no doubt it's the last one of the night.

Tom looks at it too. "Oh, come on. You're not leaving."

"Why not?"

"Don't just give up."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll never know if you had a chance."

"I don't want a chance."

"Yes you do."

"No I don't."

"Yes you do."

"No I don't."

"Come on, stop feeling sorry for yourself. Come back inside. I'll even help you find her."

I watch the cable car approach, ignoring him. As I watch it, it passes by and continues on down the street. It occurs to me only then that I had intended on riding it. "If you promise to find her and tell her that you're breaking up with her then I'll come back inside. Otherwise, see you later."

"I promise."

"You promise? You'll tell her?"

He nods.

Grunting, I fight my stiff muscles and get to my feet. "Let her down easy --- she loves you, for god sakes."

"I know. But she's a lot tougher than you think." He doesn't explain further, and within a minute we're back inside the house. The babble of all the voices is a shock after spending ten minutes out in the cold, foggy silence. Tom immediately disappears, off looking for Pris. I spot an empty chair which is relatively secluded from everybody and sit in it, rubbing my sore chin. Leaning back, I close my eyes, letting the world swirl around me. All the noise of the party, the music, the laughter, the babble . . . it ebbs and flows around my alcohol-infused head. The air around me is, at least, warm; occasionally I still give a shiver or two as my body temperature comes back up, but I finally feel comfortable. Time seems to stop for a while, and I watch the random geometrical shapes flashing around on the inside of my eyelids, feeling lulled. I hang for a while on the edge of drunken sleep, but I hear my name called and I stir. For a moment I think that

there's someone else here with the same name, and someone is calling him not me, but then I hear it again from quite close and open my eyes to see Pris standing squarely in front of me, her hair a bit messed, her eyes red, her mouth half open and her upper teeth showing. Her left hand is holding two fingers of her right hand, both hanging in front of her pelvis. The wide-necked sweater she's wearing has slid to one side, exposing a smooth, beautiful shoulder.

"I have Aaron's car keys," she says. "Let's go get some cigarettes."

"Okay." I calmly stand up. She grabs a hold of my left arm as we walk toward the door; I look at her, but she's looking straight ahead. Her grip is tight, but not limp. She's keeping very close to me.

I open the door and we walk down the steps; she pulls out Aaron's keys and points up the hill. "He says it's right on this street."

"Okay." We start up the street.

"Hey guys. Hey, wait up!"

Both of us turn around. It's Felix, coming down the steps from the house. "We're just going on a cigarette run," Pris tells him.

"I need some too."

"We'll get you some," I tell him, furious.

"Oh come on," he says, laughing. "Don't leave me behind!"

I hear Pris sigh. I'm about to tell him no, but he's on the other side of Pris and she has taken his arm. "I don't want to come back," she says. "Aaron said we can take the car and he'll pick it up tomorrow."

"Did you talk to Tom?" Felix asks her.

"Yes." Her voice is venomous.

"What did he say?"

"He . . . he said . . ." Pris stops in her tracks, sucking in a sudden breath. Tears leak out of her eyes, rolling down her face. Before I have a chance to react, Felix throws his arms around her and she stands clinging to him with one arm, crying on his shoulder. You bastard, I think to myself. Felix asked her that because he knew it'd make her start crying. He knew it would. He did it just so he could hold her. But I notice her other hand still has a hold of my left arm and it's squeezing tightly. Reflex, I wonder, or because she wants me near her, too? Damn you, Felix! Her and I would have been alone!

Pris pulls away from Felix, takes a breath, and says, "Cigarettes. Please." We continue up the road. After a block I spot Aaron's white Mercedes 250 SL, and as we reach it Pris hands me the keys. I unlock the driver's side door and open it for her. She slides in, reaching out and unlocking the other side for Felix. I pull the chocolate out of my pocket, get into the car, close the door, then put the chocolate into her hand. "This'll hold you over until we get your cigarettes," I tell her.

"No thanks," she says, handing it back. "I've had too much already."

"You did?"

"Felix had a whole pocket full."

I start the car and pull violently away from the curb before Felix has a chance to shut his door. He's in the front seat, too, right on the other side of her. I wish he had fallen out. I wish he had fallen out and a cable car had run over his head. You, I think as I glance at him, are no longer any friend of mine.

We stop at the mini-market and Felix and Pris go inside and buy their cigarettes. When they come back out to the car she's crying again, already puffing away; she stands outside a moment with Felix, Felix holding her, her smoking, smoke blowing everywhere, then she pulls away and opens the door and climbs slowly into the car. Followed by Felix. I have to act like I still like him, I realize, or Pris will wonder why I'm mad. Then she might realize I'm jealous, and then she'll probably

look at me as the same sort of emotional vulture that Felix has become. This time I pull away from the curb less violently. Pris hasn't said where she wants to go, so I drive randomly, eating the chocolate I bought for her while she and Felix smoke. Felix has left his arm "consolingly" over her shoulder. After a few minutes, Pris leans over and rests her head against him.

I sigh. What's the use? Felix got to her with the chocolate first, now she's his. "Where am I going?" I ask.

"Want to go to a bar?" Felix asks.

"No." Pris sounds like she's half asleep.

"No?" Felix says. "Why not?"

"Let's go to my house," she says.

"Okay." I bite my lower lip. "Where is your house?"

She gives me directions as I drive, and after twenty minutes or so I bring the big, heavy German car sliding to a stop. Her apartment house is dark; everyone is either asleep or not home. "Come on up," she says, looking at me.

"Are you sure you----"

"Come on," she says. "I'll fix you something to eat."

Felix is already out of the car, and I'll be damned if I'm going to leave her alone with him. I shut off the engine and climb out, locking all four doors of the car when I turn the key --- a feature that gives you a little thrill of power --- then follow Pris and Felix up the stairs and into the apartment house. Felix excuses himself, heading directly to the bathroom.

I follow Pris into her room, which used to be a living room back before the house had been converted into apartments. The house itself must be over a hundred years old. The room is large and very San Francisco-ish, with ornate molding and high doors and wide bay windows. Her closet is a pole between two stands in a corner by her large bed.

Pris turns around and looks up at me. "This has been a shitty day."

"I'll bet. Is there anything I can do?"

"Hold me." She leans forward and puts her face against my shirt. I put my arms around her, pulling her closer, and she slides her little Prs-arms around my waist and holds on, squeezing. We stand there silently hugging for about three minutes, then Felix comes wandering in.

"Hey," he says. "Where's mine?"

Pris pulls only one arm away from her grip and beckons to him. He comes forward, embracing both of us. It has become a group hug. Tottering, we lose our balance, and all three of us fall like a tree onto her bed, then lie there laughing about it. Nobody gets back up.

Eventually Felix and Prs fall asleep huddled together against me; she's in the middle, facing me, her legs wrapped around one of mine. I find it impossible to sleep with her so near . . . it's too exciting. This means she prefers me to him, doesn't it? Her facing me, with her arms and legs around me? I might as well push him off the bed. I don't, though. I just lie there awake, feel her breath against my cheek, feeling her heart beating against my arm. I'm so happy it almost hurts. There's no way I can sleep, no way at all.

#

Dawn breaks and fills the room with light. I'm still awake, but just barely. The cube, I realize, is in my shirt pocket; I pull it out and unfold it and lie there staring at it. Occasionally I'll get a glimpse of the extra dimension. I've found that if I stare at it without blinking for a long time my eyes will go out of focus, something shifts, a stabbing pain shoots through my head, and suddenly the cube is impossibly intricate and my hands seem to be melting. At this point I always have to blink and the sight goes away.

When I thought the cube was bending light I was actually starting

to see this.

My eyelids get heavy, and either the cube or the alcohol has given me a headache. It's time to close my eyes. I put the cube back into my pocket so that Felix doesn't wake up and see it, then, gently, I place my hand on Priscilla's left breast. Keep my eyes closed, pretend I'm asleep; she'll think I didn't know I'd put it there. It's so soft, so warm. My heart is beating like it's about to pop a valve, and it won't stop. I feel guilty, now, molesting her in her sleep . . . I pull my hand away, place it on her stomach, no, down further, rest it on the curve of her hip. Innocent enough. My heart rate comes slowly down along with my blood pressure. Relax, I tell myself. Relax.

She moves slightly, and makes a girlish sound. I open my eyes, look at her beautiful, peaceful face. Her eyes open for a second, stare unfocused directly into mine, then close again. She makes another sound, moves, sighs. I sigh too, feeling privileged, and grudgingly let my eyes close again. I want to keep watching, but my lids won't cooperate.

What now? Sleep? No, I won't sleep, I'll just have to stay up. I've got a class in Berkeley at 10:00 AM. Teaching 20-year-olds about lizards, snakes, frogs, and turtles. Jesus.

Why didn't I become a comedian, instead? Or a rock and roll star?
Jesus.

I sit up and look at the little red light on the wall. I don't know why I didn't notice it before --- it's very bright, and it's in the shape of a woman's lips. "I'm singing in the rain," it sings, "I'm singing in the rain! What a glorious feeling, I'm happy again. . . ." I glance out the window, and, yes, it's raining. I feel too lazy to crawl over Pris and Felix to get to the window for a better look, so I let myself sink through the bed and floor to the level below, and find --- much to my surprise --- that the room below is exactly like the one above, including the position of the bed and the people in it. So I sink down one more. Still the same thing! To the roof, then. I lie on my back, stretch my arms and legs toward the ceiling, and will myself into the air, up through the floors, the beds, the ceilings, on and on, until there's nothing but cloudy sky. Rain pelts my face and bare chest. I walk naked through a garden and carefully climb over a low iron fence to a grove of trees, and sit down in the damp grass and watch as the rain forms a rainbow. The rain is warm, like a shower, and I can feel the water running down the hill though the grass under my butt. It's a very sexy feeling, and I notice my penis is growing fully erect. I feel so free, I just let it grow----

"Oh, no. Now he's awake."

"Hello. Wake up, wake up."

Someone is shaking me gently, constantly. It's Pris. She's raised up on one elbow and Felix, behind her, is sitting up. His hair looks as if he'd just gone through electro-shock therapy.

Pris is smiling. "What do you want for breakfast?"

I blink, then am overcome by a tremendous yawn. Then I realize I have a monster erection and it's making the front of my pants look like a tent. I'm so embarrassed that I'm struck dumb, but Pris doesn't seem to have noticed it. "C-coffee," I mutter.

"That goes without saying," Felix says.

"Does corned beer hash sound okay?" Pris asks.

"Corned beer hash?" Felix erupts into silly, tired laughter.

"I said beef."

"You said beer."

"It sounds good," I tell Pris, feeling my erection fading. Thank god. "Either one, beer or beef. What time is it?"

"About seven," Felix says. "You know, you snore like a mother."

"I'm sorry."

"You're not any worse than Felix," Pris says. She moves down to get past Felix, who is not moving, and brushes up against my erection which

is still quite prominent. She stops and looks at it. "Oh, hello," she says, then giggles and continues on her way.

Felix looks at it. "Nerk," he says. "What were you dreaming about?"

"Nothing. Don't you get them in the mornings?"

"Yes." Felix stands up carefully. The front of his pants looks like a tent.

4. NERK

The arrangement, from what I understand, is that I drive Aaron's Mercedes to Berkeley and he picks it up at our apartment. So as I come up the hill to our apartment I'm looking for a parking place right in front --- a rarity, but it does happen --- and there before my eyes is a miracle. There is a parking spot up front, and for some reason the parking meter which usually curses this spot is missing. Is the city removing parking meters? I don't believe it. The world will end the day the city of Berkeley removes its cherished parking meters. This must be the work of a vandal, but that's besides the point. If there's no meter, there's no way any of the local, rabid meter maids can justify giving it a ticket. I park, feeling joyful and blessed, and as I get out and lock the car I notice that there are no parking meters along the entire block. None. And they were there yesterday! It's too good to be true --- there has to be a catch somewhere --- but I cross my fingers and, glancing furtively up and down the street, cross the side walk and jog up the empty stairs to the Euclid.

Tom's voice calls out my name as I enter the apartment. He meets me in the hallway, dripping water and wearing nothing but a bath towel wrapped around his waist. "So," he says, "where were you last night?"

"I spent the night with Pris."

"Oh yeah?"

"And Felix."

"Oh. Nerk." He looks down, shrugs, a gesture I guess means You can't win them all. "I got a call this morning," he says. "It seems that the University got some huge grant last fall for some Top Secret government project."

"Really?" I'm looking around to see any evidence of Heather. I hope to god he didn't bring her here.

"The person who called in the tip claims the project is right on the campus. You haven't heard anything about it, have you?"

"No, nothing. Not much physics news reaches the biology department. Are we alone?"

"Yes, we're alone."

"Did you and Heather survive the night?"

"Yes." Tom smiles. "It's really different this time. We've come to a new understanding."

Yeah, right, I think. Excuse me for being skeptical. "How long will this last?"

"As long as it does."

"Hey, do you know what happened to all the parking meters?"

"Parking meters?"

"You know, the parking meters."

He shrugs. "I don't know. Look, do you think you can do some snooping around on the campus about this government project? You know, find out what they're doing, what it's for, things like that. I wouldn't be at all surprised if it had something to do with the little red lights everybody's been seeing."

"Yeah?"

He nods. Water droplets fall from his hair. "Could be."

"Okay. I've got to get ready for my class. Here's the keys to Aaron's car, he's going to pick it up sometime today. Are you going to be around?"

"No. Put it on the coffee table, he'll find it."

"I'll leave a note on the front door, just in case."

"Whatever." Tom turns and walks dripping to his room.

I go to mine and begin stripping off my clothes. My bed seems to call to me, singing out, "Sleep . . . sleep . . ." but I ignore it. Naked except for a towel I head toward the bathroom and take a shower, shave my face, then comb my hair. By the time I'm out, Tom's gone.

As I'm dressing I stare at the phone, wanting to call Pris. But, no, I don't want to seem too eager. I can't believe I spent the night with her. I think about her with her arms and legs around me, sleeping softly warm next to me, I feel all buttery inside and feel this energetic euphoria sweep through me. I turn the stereo on loud and sing some Rolling Stones songs as I put on my shoes and socks, and when I'm done I go dancing over to the stereo, turn it off, and continue dancing and singing out the door. I thumbtack a note for Aaron on the outside of the apartment door, telling him where to find his car keys --- he has a key to our apartment in his wallet --- then go walking lightly, almost skipping, out of the building, down the front steps, and across the Berkeley campus.

I reach my classroom at exactly 10:00 AM, just when class is supposed to start, and to my amazement it's empty. I open the door and look back and forth . . . nobody is there. The room is dark and deserted. I turn on the light and walk down toward the front, and notice the rug is the wrong color. It's now dark red as opposed to the pale blue.

I sigh, feeling a little dizzy, and sit down at my desk. The lack of sleep is catching up to me, I can feel it. It comes on in a rush, roaring, making my ears ring. I give in to it and cross my arms on my desk, putting my head down. When I wake up my arms are sore and there's drool puddled on my desk. There's sounds in the classroom, and I look up to see eight students have shown up. A few of them are smiling at me with a knowing look.

"Party last night, eh Professor?" says one, a blond boy in a half-shirt and shorts.

"Is it obvious?"

They laugh.

I wipe my face and desk off with a paper towel, straighten my shirt, and stand up. Today I was going to lecture on reptile and amphibian metabolism, but I can't seem to find my notes. "How come everyone's late today?" I ask them as I'm rummaging around my desk.

The students look back and forth at each other. "We're early, Professor."

"Early?" I look up at the clock, which reads 10:20 AM. "This class starts at ten, kids."

"Uh, no Professor, it starts at ten-thirty."

"Ten-thirty? Since when?"

"Since the beginning of the year."

I look at the students, and they all nod. Another one comes in the door, a young American-Asian girl in a red blouse and pleated red-and-black skirt. "What time does this class start?" I ask her.

She stops abruptly, looking up at me as if she'd just discovered she was in trouble. "Ten-thirty, sir."

I sigh and shake my head. My class starts a half-hour later than I thought and the rug is the wrong color. Turning, I pick up a binder from a bookshelf and thumb through it, looking for the schedule. I find it and stare at it, confused. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday classes start at 10:30 and 3:30, both a half-hour later than I'd thought. Tuesday and

Thursdays were different, as well, both an hour earlier than I was used to.

"That must have been some party, Professor," says the blond in the half-shirt.

"No shit." I put the binder back, my fingers numb and my head spinning. "Okay, can someone tell me where we left off last time . . . ?" With their help I get back on track and from there on it runs smoothly. Despite my confusion about schedules and carpet colors, the metabolism of reptiles and amphibians hasn't changed, nor has my perception of them.

After class I walk to a deli over on Telegraph Avenue and eat lunch, and while I'm sitting there I see our bum go walking past. He's clean, his hair is combed, and he's wearing a suit. I nearly choke on my sandwich, and I yell out, "Alvin!"

He pauses and turns toward me. "Oh, hi Professor. How's the salamander and snake department?"

"What?" I'm astonished out of my mind. It's his dry voice all right, but not his tone and inflection. "You are Alvin Laurel, right?"

"Nerk. What's this, a joke?" He smiles. "I'd join you for lunch, but I'm late for an appointment." With a wave, he's gone.

Nerk? What is this "nerk?" What's our bum doing in a suit and having "appointments?" This is too much. I get up, throw away the remainder of my sandwich, and follow him.

Alvin walks to one of the staff parking lots, uses a key to unlock a brown Audi sedan, gets in, and starts it up. Is he stealing it? I wonder. He sees me trailing after him and opens his driver's side window. "Is there something wrong?" he asks me.

"I'm not sure. Where are you going?"

"Up the hill."

"I'm going there too."

"You? Why?"

I shrug. "Need some specimens."

"Oh, going lizard hunting, huh? Need a ride?"

"Yeah."

He pops open the passenger-side door. I get in feeling like I'm entering a flying saucer piloted by an alien. "Who's car is this, anyway?" I ask him.

Alvin laughs. "It's half mine, half the bank's." He looks over at me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sure." It's an automatic answer --- I am definitely not feeling okay. "I just don't remember you and this car . . ."

"It's the same one. You've been in it, what --- a half a dozen times?"

"Oh." I nod like it's all coming back to me, but it's not. "All these new cars look alike."

"Yeah, no one is using their imagination," Alvin says. "They're all just copying one that happens to sell."

The drive up the hill takes us through a gate that I've never noticed before. It's electric, with a keypad. Alvin punches in a code and it swings open, and I sit there watching it with my jaw gone slack. Beyond is the lab buildings, the ones I'd visited only a few days ago to use a laser. I'll be damned if one of the buildings isn't much bigger than before, a whole addition added to the back, extending it out. Looking at it, I feel lost, like I'm not where I thought I was. Alvin parks the car and we get out.

By now I've decided to keep my mouth shut and just look around. I don't have enough evidence to make any intelligent conclusions. I'm simply lost or befuddled.

We enter the front and it's much the same as before, but as I follow Alvin down a hallway to the back lab area, he slows to a stop and

looks at me with a very odd expression. "I'm afraid you can't come with me," he says. "It's restricted."

"Oh, I didn't know," I tell him, staring beyond him at the laboratory doors. There's a big yellow sign clearly stating that no unauthorized people are allowed past that point. The door has a small square window with wire embedded in it, and through that window a man with a guard's cap is staring back at me. "What are you guys working on in there, anyway?" I ask in a low voice.

Alvin is now really giving me the eye. He says my name, softly and apologetically, followed by, "you know I can't talk about anything that goes on here. You and I could both get into a lot of trouble."

I take a deep breath, nodding, and sigh. "Yeah. Sorry. Just curious."

"I understand."

I take a step back. "Well, I'll . . . uh, go hunt for my specimens now."

"Okay."

I turn and walk away. Outside the lab buildings there's a dirt road that leads further up the hill, and many times I've led a group of students up there on nature hikes, so I half-heartedly walk up there in the dry midday heat until I finally have to stop. My head is swimming. I still don't want to jump to any conclusions; I'm afraid where they'll lead me. There's a large rock in the shade of an oak tree, and I sit there for about fifteen minutes with my mind gone totally blank.

The sound of tires scrunching over gravel reaches me, and a green security car comes driving up the road. It stops right across from me and a short guy in a uniform steps out. He's got black hair and a bushy black mustache, and silver reflecting sunglasses. "Can I see some I.D.?" he asks.

"What?"

"Did you know this is a restricted area?"

"Restricted to whom? I'm a Professor in the biology department, I collect specimens up here."

"Can I see your I.D. please?"

I stand up, too quickly, and there's spots in front of my eyes. I feel dizzy and sick. Fumbling in my back pocket, I pull out my wallet and flip it open, handing it to him. "I don't feel so good," I tell him. "Can you give me a ride back down to the campus?"

"You know, sir, that even though you're a part of the faculty you are still not authorized to be in this area."

"No, I did not know that. Arrest me. Anything, just get me out of this sunlight." It's the lack of sleep and too much to drink, I must have some sort of brain damage. This explains everything. "Please, I don't care, just get me out of here."

"Okay." He hands me my wallet and opens one of the back doors. I climb in, he closes the door, then gets back in the driver's seat. I stare at the back of his head through a heavy-duty black metal screen. Air-conditioned air flows past him and into my face. It feels good. I don't care where he's taking me, I don't even care that there's no handles or window cranks on the doors. I close my eyes and sleep comes slithering up into my head like a snake.

Minutes later he's letting me out on the main campus grounds, warning me not to pull this again. I say yes to everything, heading for my classroom, praying for my next class to be over with quickly so I can go home and get some sleep. I've convinced myself that sleep is all I need, that everything that's gone wrong today is due to the lack of it. Sleep deprivation causes confusion in test subjects, that much I know. I also know I'm pretty damn confused.

Once again I reach the classroom and find it empty. The carpet is still the wrong color, and class is still a half hour later than I remember it. I stare at empty chairs facing me in neat rows, wondering

what is wrong with me. It has to be the lack of sleep, it has to be. By sheer determination I remain awake as the students come trickling in, and when class starts I give probably the longest and most cryptic lecture on the metabolism of cold blooded animals in the history of Herpetology. Even as I try simplifying what I've just said to the poor students, I'm making it even more complicated. I have their attention, too, I guess from the anger and frustration in my voice. I see beads of sweat forming on foreheads, and furrowed brows, and no doubt their thinking I'm going to include all this in their finals.

After class I plod on tired feet all the way across the campus grounds, across Hearst Avenue and up the steps of the Euclid. I make it to my bedroom and lie down, thinking that I should at least take off my shoes, but I'm asleep before I have the chance. My last conscious thought is me wondering at the sensation I'm feeling; a sinking, settling sensation, as if I were melting into my bed.

#

I awake to the sound of a bell and heavy footsteps pounding down the hall outside my bedroom door. The phone is ringing and Tom has just come home, and he's running to answer it. I sit up, yawning, feeling much better. I look at the time: it's 10:10 PM. God, I think to myself, what a weird dream. The dream was about schedules being mysteriously changed, and buildings changing shape, and police persecuting me.

Yawning, I make my way out of my room and to the kitchen, pulling a beer out of the refrigerator. I plod into the living room and sit down across from Tom, who is talking in a low voice on the phone. He silently waves hello. To the phone he's saying, "Uh-huh. Yeah. Yeah, really. Uh-huh." It's his "on the phone with a woman" voice, he's no doubt talking to Heather. I tune it out, and concentrate on drinking my beer.

"Yeah, he's right here," Tom says to the phone. "Okay, bye." He holds the phone out toward me.

I give him a puzzled look.

"Pris," he says. "She's calling for you."

My heart picks up it's pace and my hands are suddenly damp. I take the phone, which is still warm from Tom's hand, and say, "Hello?"

"Hi," says Priscilla's throaty voice. "Are you doing anything?"

"No, not really. I just woke up."

"I haven't slept at all."

"You must be tired."

"I am. Well, I am, and I'm not. You know? It's like I've got my second wind." Both of us are silent for a few seconds. "You want to come over?" she says suddenly.

"Oh, uh, sure."

"I've got a bottle of Portuguese wine I want to drink, but I don't like drinking alone. Do you like Lancers?"

"Uh, yeah." My throat has gone dry. If there were a little devil on one of my shoulders and a little angel on the other, the devil would be saying, "All right man! You're gonna score tonight!" and the angel would be saying, "No, don't listen to him, she just needs someone to talk to." I clear my throat and ask, "Do you want me to bring anything?"

"Just yourself," she says. She gives a little nervous laugh. The little devil on my shoulder is doing somersaults of glee.

"Okay," I tell Pris, "I'm on my way now."

"Bye," she says, and I hear her take a breath.

"Bye," I tell her.

We hang up.

Tom is sitting across from me on the couch acting like he hadn't heard a thing. As I stand up, he says, "Did you find out anything about the government project?"

"Only that it exists and that it's secret."

He nods, then lets loose a tremendous yawn. "We'll talk more about it tomorrow," he says. "It's been a long day."

Tom goes to bed, and I grab my jacket and head out the door. As I hit the street, I feel a strange calmness from the cool night air and the sounds of the rock band playing in the bar up the street. Everything is familiar. The parking places all up and down Euclid Street are filled with cars, and there's a parking meter at every space. It was a dream, I tell myself. It really was. This is an enormous relief.

I brave the walk up to my car, and find that, yes, it's still there. A green, beat-up old Toyota land cruiser. There's a thick coating of dust across the windshield and numerous parking tickets stuffed in the windshield wipers. It seems I keep forgetting to move it when it's time for the street sweeper to come by. It's a wonder it hasn't been towed. Gathering up the tickets, I unlock the door and get in. I put the key in the ignition, give it a turn, and the engine goes "click" and nothing else happens. Well, it hasn't fixed itself yet --- the starter hasn't worked for two months. Fortunately for me, it's parked on a hill.

I push down on the clutch, pump the gas pedal, and release the emergency break. There's a lurch, and I fight like mad with the steering wheel as the car and I go rolling away, gaining speed. When it's up to 25 mph I pop the clutch and the engine sputters, dies, sputters again, then backfires like a shotgun. By the time I reach Hearst Avenue the car is running, and I turn west and head toward the freeway.

The trip to San Francisco takes twenty minutes. Traffic is light, and the view from the Bay Bridge is beautiful. For once I feel in control, like tonight marks the start of a new life. As I come gliding down the bridge and into San Francisco I feel like I should be in a movie, and that a helicopter should be filming me right now, and some sort of wonderful Hollywood soundtrack should be playing. It does, in my head --- which is the closest thing since the radio doesn't work.

There's a parking space just up the hill from Priscilla's place; I maneuver into it and shut the engine off. The car is aimed downhill. I laugh, thinking that I don't really need a new starter if I can continue to park like this.

The walk down the hill to her apartment house is quiet. There's a mist in the air, and a stillness. In the distance I can hear a ambulance, probably miles away. I can hear an occasional car pass several blocks over. All the houses and apartments I pass are either dark or only have a low light coming through the windows. It gives me the impression that everyone in the neighborhood is either asleep or copulating.

When I arrive at Priscilla's I feel very calm, so much so that I'm amazed. I would think my heart would be banging away against my ribs, which is usually how Pris effects me. She answers the door and says hello in a soft voice, and she's wearing a silvery silk blouse with no brassiere and tight jeans. There's still no sudden increase in my heart rate, I just feel this high, transcendent fountain of pleasure, and I say hello back and smile at her smile. Her hair falls over her eye and she pushes it back, then steps forward, reaching up with her thin, graceful arms, and gives me a hug. I hug her back, feeling I could die right then and there, the happiest moment of my life.

The hug lasts a long time. It seems she's going to let me stand there and hug her for as long as I want. I'm afraid she's going to catch a cold in this chill air, though, so I pull back and she lets go, then leads me into the apartment. I close the door behind us.

One of her roommates, Lori, is sitting in the front room in her night gown watching television. She glances up and gives me a look through a lock of her hair, and smiles, and says, "Hi there."

"Hi," I say back, but Pris has a hold of me by my arm and she pulls me through the living room to the kitchen. In the kitchen she pulls a red bottle out of the refrigerator and hands it to me along with a

corkscrew.

"I always break the cork," she says. "It's a total nerk."

I take the bottle and the corkscrew and go to work. As I'm doing this she pulls a couple of wine glasses out of a cupboard. I get the cork out without a problem, pour the wine as she holds the glasses, then follow her into her room. She shuts the door, then hands me my glass.

"Do you have a dictionary?" I ask her.

"A dictionary?" She smiles and turns to her small bookcase, which holds mainly romance novels, and pulls out a small blue paperback. I set down the wine bottle and take the dictionary from her, and sit down on her bed, thumbing through it. She turns on her stereo and puts on a record.

"How are you doing?" I ask her.

She sips her wine and sits next to me on the bed. "Fine."

"Fine?"

"Well, no . . . not really."

"I thought the whole deal sucked."

She gives me her sweet little Pris smile, but it's much more intimate than I'm used to. "It sucked," she agrees.

I find the word "nerk" in her dictionary. The definition reads: 1) an exclamation denoting amused frustration at an ironic or just plain stupid situation or mishap; 2) an expression of disgusted despair.

"Nerk," I say out loud.

She nods. "Nerk."

I close the dictionary and hand it back to her. She tosses it carelessly across the room. "Do you want talk about it?" I ask.

"No. I can handle it. It was an open relationship anyway, no strings. I just hate the way Tom just . . . it was just so totally insensitive."

"Yes."

"He could have just told me. Instead he . . ." Pris starts tearing up.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. "We don't have to talk about it."

She nods. "I don't want to talk about it." She says that, then she continues talking about it. This goes on for a half-hour, but I don't mind, I care about this girl --- I love her. I sit there and listen, wishing I could make her happier, willing to do anything for her . . . I'm happy just sitting in her bedroom with her, having her all to myself.

From there we talk about the year she spent in Japan as an exchange student, and then I hear about her mother, father, and sisters. She's the youngest of three, and they're all very loving and supporting. Her father sounds like a very warm guy . . . as she tells me about them I find myself falling in love with them too, wanting to meet them, wanting to be part of the family.

We finish the bottle of wine, then decide that we're hungry and raid the kitchen. We have to be quiet, though, because by this time all her roommates are asleep. We munch down cheese, crackers and salami and tell jokes and listen to music until 2:00 in the morning. She's starting to look tired, and for some reason I feel like I should tuck her into bed, give her a kiss, and leave. "I've had a nice time tonight," I tell her.

"Me too," she says.

"Maybe I'd better go."

"No," she says. "Don't go." She smiles, giving me a strange look.

"Don't go," she says again. "Why don't you spend the night?"

"You mean, like last night?"

"Yes." Then she laughs. "Last night was a little crowded, though."

"Yeah." I'm smiling. I feel like I'm glowing. If she turned the light off I'm sure I'd illuminate the whole room. "I am tired. It's a

long drive back to Berkeley."

"You're probably too drunk to drive anyway."

"No. Well, maybe. Legally drunk. I can drive though."

"Well don't. We'll have a slumber party."

"Maybe we should call Felix and have him join us," I tell her.

She laughs. It seems I've made a pretty good joke, cause she giggles and laughs for a good minute. Then we turn down the bed, and sit there for an awkward moment looking at each other.

"Do you mind if I sleep in my underwear?" I ask her.

"No, go ahead."

Feeling strange, I stand up, unzip my pants and take them off as she sits there watching. I climb into her bed get under the covers. She turns off the light, then takes off her jeans. In the light from the stereo I see that she's also taken off her panties. She does it quickly, then slips into the bed and pulls the covers up. She's lying there next to me, bottomless. I think to myself, This has to be a major hint.

The glow from the stereo is about as bright as a single candle; I can see her face clearly. Her hair is covering one eye. I reach out, push it out of the way, and give her a soft little kiss and whisper, "Good night."

She gives me a soft little kiss in return.

I give her a tender little kiss on her mouth.

She returns it. It's no longer innocent, we are kissing. Her hand slides up my arm and to my hair, her fingers lightly touching. My mind shuts off, I'm in a state of nirvana. I am actually kissing her! Pris and I are kissing! An airplane could crash right into the building and I don't think I would notice. The place could be on fire --- I wouldn't care.

It proceeds quickly, no doubt because she's wearing nothing but a shirt. My hand slides down of its own accord, cupping her breast. She pulls back, and I can see her smile in the light of the stereo. "Why is it that men always go for my left breast first?"

"Huh?"

"It's probably because you're all right-handed." She resumes kissing me, her sweet little tongue tickling and teasing mine. Her left leg slides up and around my right leg, and I move my hand down to the smooth warm flesh of her thigh. I was right, there are no panties. Her kisses are getting intense, full of passion. Mine are too, probably. I continue caressing her wonderful bare thigh for a while, then move both hands to the front of her silk blouse, undoing the buttons. She sits up abruptly and pulls it off. In the light of the stereo I can see her breasts. They're perfect, just like I've always imagined they would be. I sit up next to her, and both of us are pulling at my shirt. When it's over my head she starts kissing my chest, and one hand slides down my stomach and gives my erection a squeeze through my underwear. My underwear comes off next, very quickly, and then we're naked together, feeling each other's whole naked body pressing against each other, and we're kissing again.

My kisses move down from her mouth, across her chin, down her smooth neck and to her breasts. She makes sighing sounds and cradles my head. I kiss and caress both breasts, giving each one equal time, then move down her stomach, which is softly undulating. It's a flat, smooth, beautiful tummy; I leave a trail of kisses down across her belly button and below. Then I'm kissing soft tangled hair, and she spreads her legs apart with a really loud sigh and I find her vertical lips with my tongue. I go exploring with my tongue, enjoying the way it makes her jump and squirm and cry out, then I find this little knob with the tip of my tongue and begin to methodically stimulate it. This is a kiss of pure love, I tell myself. I'm kissing her soul. She's arching her back and crying out and clutching at a pillow. I keep it up, I want to do this for her all night, I want to be the most attentive lover she's had

in her life. She starts gyrating her hips and caressing the hair on my head, breathing hard, and she says my name. I look up at her and she's looking down at me with wide eyes. "I want you inside me," she says.

I start kissing up her stomach, up to her breasts, and then I stop, and whisper, "Do we need something?"

She reaches out and frantically opens the drawer on her night stand, pulls something out. "It's one of Tom's."

"Thank to Tom," I say, grinning.

She laughs, but she wants me to hurry. I rip the package open and she takes it from me, has me roll over, but instead of putting it on me she bends forward and takes my penis into her mouth. It feels wet, and warm, and I can feel her lips and tongue and even her teeth. I watch her in a sort of awe, her head moving slowly up and down. When she's done she gives the top a kiss and turns and smiles her brilliant smile at me, soft in the glow of the stereo. "Just returning the favor," she says, then puts the condom on me. "There, now it's safe."

"Boy, it was sure dangerous before."

"Boys always make such a mess." She falls down next to me in her soft, wonderful bed, spreads her legs, and says, "Okay. I'm ready." She's giggling.

I move up and over her, and she wraps her legs around me and forces herself against me. I slide it back and forth across the top, in the soft groove, then pull it back an extra bit and then move forward. It slips inside, and Pris gives a startled cry and then a long, low moan. I love you, I think at her, I love you. I think it so loud I'm sure she has to hear it. I push at her for a few minutes but it's not good enough, so I grab her lithe body firmly in my arms and roll backwards. She's so light, I don't even think she weighs a hundred pounds. I hold her whole body and thrust the way I think she likes it the most.

"Oh," she says. "Oh, we're standing up." She likes it. I'm on my knees, upright, holding her. She's so light and I love her so much it's effortless. Encouraged, I get out of her bed and go walking around the room holding her, thrusting as I take each step. "You're walking!" she says with a sense of wonder. "Oh god, oh." She likes it, she definitely likes it. She squirms wildly and cries out again, calling for god, then holds me tight and seems to shudder. Then she goes quiet and still, and I realize she had come to a climax.

I walk back to the bed, roll us into it, and end up on top, moving gently. She's staring into my eyes, caressing my hair, a warm smile on her lips. She looks tired. I let go, closing my eyes and letting it go, and within seconds I'm coming. But it seems distant, far away, like I'm feeling the echoes of an orgasm from some guy down the hall. Maybe it's that the orgasm is so unimportant to me. I just don't care about it.

Still smiling, she says, "Was it good for you?"

I laugh. "Yes."

"Mmmm. That's good. It was very good."

"Want me to get a towel or something?"

"Nah."

I pull out, then look around at the room. "Where should I put it?"

"Wastebasket, silly." Her eyes are closed. "Unless you want to sleep with it."

I get out of bed, then carefully pull off the disgusting rubber sack. I wrap it in a tissue, toss it into a wastebasket, then climb back in bed. She turns toward me, wraps her arms around one of mine, and says "G'night." Within minutes she's sound asleep.

I watch her, feeling love flowing like the raging of a river. I just watch her. It's hours before I get to sleep.

5. ACQUIRED PERCEPTION

I wake up and Pris is already out of bed and wearing a robe. "Good morning," she says brightly.

"What time is it?"

"Eight. I've got to rush and get to work. You can go back to sleep if you want."

She has to take the Muni train to work, which is why she has to rush. "I'll give you a ride to work," I tell her.

"No, that's okay."

"Then you won't have to be in such a hurry."

"You don't have to."

"I'd like to."

"Oh, okay." She's indifferent. Little alarm bells starting ringing in my brain. I don't want her to be indifferent. "You want some breakfast?" she asks. "I've got some frozen waffles in the refrigerator."

"No, thank you. I don't eat food in the morning."

"Neither do I. The waffles were for Tom." She grabs a towel off a hook on the wall. "I wonder what Heather is feeding him." There's bitterness in her voice.

"He's in Berkeley."

"No. I called over there at seven. He's not there."

Seven? She got up at seven and called the apartment? Why? I don't ask her, however; she's already left the room, gone to take a shower. What day is this, I wonder. Thursday? I've got class at 10:00, and Tom doesn't have to show up at work at any specific time --- he's usually there until 8:30 or so on a Thursday morning.

Then I think to myself: Does my class start at 10:00 or 10:30? Or was that a dream? God, I think to myself, I hope it was a dream. It's upsetting that I'm unsure. Because if it wasn't, then that whole mixed up day wasn't. No, I think, that was the day I was tired all day. Most of it must have been a dream I had during that nap after my last class.

While Pris is in the shower I put on my clothes and make an attempt at combing my hair, which is all distorted and wild. Pris comes back in, her hair wrapped in a towel. She smiles at me, and says, "I like your hair like that."

"Messy?"

"Wild. You look like a surfer dude."

"Nerk." I look in the mirror. Actually, it's not that bad, really.

"What is nerk?" Pris asks.

"What?"

"Nothing. I didn't understand what you said."

"Nerk?"

"Nerk? What is nerk?"

"It's an expression denoting amused frustration at an ironic or . . . wait a minute, you were using it last night."

"I was?"

"Yeah, I----" I break off, searching for the blue paperback dictionary she'd thrown on the floor last night. It's not there. I look through her bookshelves, and can't find it there, either. "Where's your dictionary?"

She pulls out a red paperback from the bookshelf. I take it in numb fingers and look through the pages. I already know the word "nerk" is not going to be there. Sure enough. I hand it back.

"Is something wrong?" she says.

"No. I guess I dreamed the word up last night."

"Oh." She stands there, and it begins to get awkward.

"Do you want me to leave the room while you dress?"

"No, it's okay. I just . . ."

"What?"

"I want to ask you a favor."

"Okay."

"Don't tell Tom we fucked."

Tom knew the moment I left last night, but I don't tell her that.

"Why?"

"I don't want Tom to know."

"Okay."

I watch her dress, feeling a little sad. Her body is beautiful and perfect in the morning light, a soft white light filtering through her curtains, and I want to reach out and touch her but I can tell she doesn't want me to. There's a bit of lead in my heart, and there's lead in my footsteps fifteen minutes later as I walk with her up the hill to my car. When we reach it I stop and stare. I guess I look shocked and startled; Pris looks concerned and says, "What's wrong?"

"I swear this is not where I parked my car."

"Do you think someone moved it?"

"Either that or I'm going crazy." The car is facing uphill, not down, and it's on the other side of the street. To get it started, I'm going to have to somehow get it facing downhill. It's going to take more than just Pris and I to push it, and it's going to take so long that Pris is going to be late for work. It's too late for her to take the Muni train. It's all my fault.

I unlock the car, and just for whimsy and wishful thinking I sit in the driver's seat and try to start the car with the key. To my total dismay the starter works fine, and the engine kicks right over. Pris gets in and I pull out onto the street, not believing my luck. Ten minutes later I'm pulling over in front of the pizza parlor where she works. She leans over and gives me a kiss, which makes me feel better, then asks if it's okay if she comes to Berkeley this afternoon. This cheers me up a bit, and I tell her, "Of course it's okay!" She kisses me again and gets out of the car. We wave, and she disappears into the pizza parlor. I drive away, feeling better --- but I suspect this situation is going to make me into a bona-fide manic depressive.

#

Early that evening I arrive at the Euclid and enter the apartment to find Tom, Heather, Felix and Aaron are having a little party. I'm not happy, but I'm not displeased --- I'm just glad to be there. I have this terrible, raw-nerved feeling that I've taken some drug and I'm not coming down from it. My class was at 9:00 this morning, I was an hour late for it. There were three classes scheduled today, not two, and one of them had something to do with Ichthyology, which I hardly know anything about. It seems I've taken over a class for someone who's gone on sabbatical.

The carpet in the classroom was not the wrong color this time, the walls were. They were a light sea green and the ceiling was black. There was no carpet at all, the whole floor was covered with tile. It was so ugly it made me nauseous.

None of the students were even remotely familiar. The way they were dressed was strange, too, all in heavy patterns and lots of felt --- even in the heat! --- and everyone had a hat. I kept my mouth shut and did my best, but even so I could tell they were all thinking that something was wrong with me.

I looked everywhere for Alvin Laurel, I even looked for his car. I couldn't find him, and I desperately wanted to talk to him. When I reached the Euclid I was hoping to find him on the steps, but he was nowhere in sight.

"Hey fun boy, where's your hat?" asks Felix as I make my entrance. Only then do I notice everyone is wearing a hat, just like the students.

"Wind blew it off," I say, trying to sound causal.

Tom is wearing a wide-brimmed black Spanish cowboy hat --- he looks like Jim Morrison with it on. His black shirt is open down to his navel. Heather has a white lace hat on, and Aaron is wearing some funky Swedish looking cap with a red feather. Felix's hat is a straw wide-brimmed thing that would have looked appropriate on Huckleberry Fin.

"Get this man a hat," Aaron says. "A man without a hat is like a lamp without a shade."

Tom disappears into his room and reappears with a Texas Ten Gallon monstrosity which he plants on my head. I feel like a lamp all right, shade and all. "Tom, I need to talk to you."

"You need a beer, by the looks of you. Bad day?"

"The worst."

We step into the kitchen, and of course the refrigerator is the wrong color. Even worse, the hinges on the refrigerator door are on the wrong side. Tom (or possibly myself, for all I know) has stocked it with a whole case of a beer who's brand I've never heard of before: Tsunami, "A Premium Japanese Beer." They're big brown bottles with blazing red labels.

"Tom, please tell me you remember taping that interview with our bum."

Tom stares at me with a blank expression. It's hard to read. I can't tell if he doesn't know what I'm talking about, or if he can't fathom why I'm so desperate to talk about something he considers trivial. "Our bum?" he says.

"Alvin Laurel," I tell him, hoping to jog his memory.

"Alvin Laurel, the mathematician?"

"Yes, exactly."

"Our bum?" He looks confused.

"Forget the bum part. Did you or did you not record an interview with Alvin Laurel?"

"Are you kidding?"

"No."

"I've been trying to get him to say something for a week. You were supposed to try to persuade him to talk to me."

"About the government project?"

"Yes, the one that's going on up by the cyclotron. What's wrong, what's going on?"

"Well, I talked to him. I----"

"Hi there, guys," says a familiar, bright voice. I turn and see Pris, dressed in a long, flowing flower-print dress and a blue hat with flowers. "You didn't tell me there was a party tonight," she says to me. She walks up to me and gives me a kiss, then turns and gives Tom a look.

"I, uh, didn't know about it either," I tell her.

"It was spontaneous, like most of the best things in life," Tom says. "Lovely hat, is it new?"

"No, just one I haven't worn for a while," she says. Her voice toward him is cold. "Hey, I like yours," she says to me.

Despite everything, I'm pleased. "It's one of Tom's," I tell her. "Mine blew off in the wind today."

"Oh. Can I have a beer too?"

"Sure," says Tom. He pulls one out for her.

Heather comes into the kitchen, followed by Aaron. It's getting crowded. "Hey, we need refills," Aaron says. "Nice hat, Pris."

"Yes," Heather says. "I saw one like that a couple years ago, back when it was in style." She turns to Tom. "Beer me."

"Yo."

Beers are passed around. Tsunami Beer. I drink some of mine down and then gasp --- it's as strong as hell. "Jesus!" I exclaim. Then I notice everyone looks at me like I've made some sort of social blunder.

"Well, you've had a few already, eh?" Heather says.

"I'm standing in my own kitchen and I feel like I'm on an alien planet," I tell them.

"Maybe you'll feel better in the living room," Pris says. She smiles, thinking I was joking.

"Maybe," I tell her. I lead the way out of the kitchen.

In the living room, Felix is putting a record on an unfamiliar stereo system --- it's definitely not the one I'm used to --- and looks over at Pris and says, "It's time to Hubba Hubba!" A long, drawn out guitar chord wails painfully from the speakers, followed by a rapid drum beat.

"Is this the Streakers?" Pris asks.

"No, it's a new one by the Beatles," he tells her.

"The Beatles!?" I exclaim.

"Yeah," he says. "Came out this week." He throws me the album. The title is Brain Decay Marmalade by Pete Best and the Beatles. I sit down on the couch with Pris and read it over. I'm so absorbed and astonished that I don't even notice that Pris has her arm around me and one leg draped over mine. Even more astonishing is the music itself: It's horrible!

The others join us and sit around, listening to the music. "This is dessert," Heather says. "Isn't it just dessert?"

Aaron nods. "I like it. These guys have always been fun boys."

"They literally define Hubba Hubba," Tom says.

The music is horrible and I can't understand anything they're saying. Even Pris is alien in the odd, Elizabethan type dress. And her hairstyle, it's changed --- it no longer falls over one eye. It's longer in back, short in front. Her smile is still the same, though, and her voice. And she's letting everyone in the room know exactly who she's with tonight. Me. That, at least, is comforting. It's the only thing I have to comfort me.

Tom is staring at me with his camera lens eyes, his gaze intent. After the first few songs from the "new" Beatles album, he stands and says, "Could you help me with something."

I stand up. "Okay."

Aaron stands up, too, but Tom motions him to sit down. "We'll get it. Excuse us for a minute." Aaron looks concerned and suspicious, but nevertheless he sits down. Tom and I walk toward the front of the apartment, opening the front door and stepping outside. He shuts the door behind us and we stand in the hallway.

"What is going on?" he says. "What did Alvin tell you?"

"Tom, something really odd is happening to me."

"What? Does it have something to do with the project?"

"Indirectly, yes. Tom, I think I'm slipping between parallel worlds."

He shakes his head. "No, really," he says. "What is it. You look upset."

I don't know what to tell him. He's not going to believe me. "I'm totally disoriented. I'm forgetting things, like where I park my car and when my class is supposed to start. Words aren't making sense. Things are appearing one way and then when I look again they're different, changed."

"You think you're sick?"

"Something is wrong. I don't know if it's me or the world."

"You told me you got up to the project building. Maybe you got exposed to some radiation or something?"

"Maybe. That was yesterday, right?"

"Yes. I think we better get you to a doctor."

"No! I hate doctors, I know too much about biology. Listen, just stick by me, okay? I need help . . . I need help getting through this. It's like, you know, an LSD trip. Like the one that Felix went through."

Tom rolls his eyes. "Which one? No, really, I know what you're talking about. I'm with you fun boy, you know that. You can depend on me."

"Thanks Tom."

"Hey," he says, reaching out and grabbing my shoulders. His eyes peer into mine. "You know. I'm with you. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Good!" He gives me a slap on the shoulder and then turns and starts to open the door.

I stop him. "One more thing," I say.

"What?"

"What is 'Hubba Hubba?' Is it like a new type of Rock or something?"

"Rock?" Tom looks shocked, and concerned. "What?"

"Rock and Roll?"

"Rock and Roll?" he says.

"Rock and Roll music."

"What are you talking about?"

"Never mind."

"No, what are you talking about?"

"Nothing. Never mind. It's not important." I open the door and go inside. He follows closely. As we reach the living room, Heather is dancing with Aaron and Pris is dancing with Felix. "They're Hubba Hubba dancing, right?" I whisper to Tom.

"Yes!" he says, upset and concerned that I have to ask about it.

"But they're not Rock and Roll dancing?" I ask.

"No. I've never heard of that before."

"Okay, that's all I need to know." I walk up to Pris and she turns and starts dancing with me. She gets close, we're nose to nose. It's the same old movements, though, the same dancing. I don't have any problem with it. Felix, deprived of a partner, gives me a really sour look and sits down.

The dancing continues until the album is over, and Felix takes it off the turntable and puts it back into its jacket cover. Aaron picks out an album from Tom's collection, which of course is a group I've never heard of, and puts it on. He turns the volume down, though --- this isn't a dance album, it's background music. A kind of fast guitar music with a harmonica and saxophone. It sounds vaguely jazz.

Tom and Aaron begin discussing politics, which makes me feel better because this at least is familiar, and I drain my current beer and go into the kitchen for another. This stuff really is strong, I think to myself, because the floor is swaying and there's odd patterns in the shadows; red and blue phosphene activity making chaotic mathematical designs in the corners and across the floor. Felix follows me into the kitchen and gives me a very evil smile.

"How do you feel?" he asks.

"Drunk," I tell him.

"Is that all?"

Something's up. I stand with the refrigerator door open, forgotten, and stare at him. "What do you mean?"

"It hasn't taken effect yet? It should be taking effect by now."

"What should be taking effect?" I nearly shout.

"The LSD I put in your beer, fun boy."

"You didn't!"

"I almost didn't, since you're acting like you're on it already. But I thought since you're being such a bastard to me that I might as well return the favor." He smiles at my shocked silence. "Bon bon, fun boy. But don't worry, you'll be coming down in only forty-hours or so."

I gasp. He's serious!

"Megadose, fun boy," he says. "Have fun!" With one last hateful look he turns and walks out of the kitchen. I follow him, walking down

the unsteady hall to the front door. He opens it without looking back and steps out, and I go to the doorway and watch him leave. His body stretches out across the outer hallway, growing like a tree branch, stretching out and veering off. The hallway folds and stretches out in all directions, up, down, back and forth --- every direction I look, the hallway is stretching out. Instead of floor beneath my feet, two cones of wood stretch up from a dark infinity to meet with my legs.

A horrid monster comes up from behind me, a kind of cross between a tree branch and a worm, and the voices of 200 Tom Harrisons speak out. "Where did Felix go?" says most of them. Some of the others ask, "Where is Felix?" and still others ask, "Did Felix leave?" A part of the worm monster branches off and stretches past me and out into several directions down the cavernous hallway.

Now the voices of about 130 Tom Harrisons speak. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

When I speak, it's like a thousand of me speaking, but all in perfect unison. "He dropped LSD in my beer."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm seeing the multi-dimensional reality."

There so many different answers from so many different Toms that I can't make any of them out. It's like a huge party filled with clones having a conversation that begins abruptly and ends abruptly. It's taking all my nerve to remain rational about it. It's like balancing on a flag pole at the top of the TransAmerica Tower and remaining rational. A false move in any direction and I'll become very irrational very quickly.

"Mmmmayybe yyyou betterrrrrrrr commmmminnnn ssssssit downnnnnnnn . . ." says the multiple Tom voices, all blending and out of synch.

"No, wait. Wait."

The worm monster grows branches around me, hands with thousands of fingers, and pulls part of me back into the apartment --- just what part, I don't really understand. The rest of me stands desperately still. I now know exactly what Felix was afraid of --- losing himself. Losing himself in all this . . . space. The doorway stretches away from me in every direction, and as I reach out to touch it and a cone-shaped section of it rushes up and meets my hand. I lift one foot, and the cone-shaped section of the floor that had been supporting it falls suddenly away to infinity. Balancing precariously on one foot, I turn and take an experimental step back into the apartment. A cone of floor rises up and greets my foot. It's an optical illusion, I tell myself, a hallucination. I'm not really balancing on pinnacles above infinity, I'm standing on a perfectly safe, flat floor.

Several steps into the apartment proves me wrong. I lose my balance and tumble right off the cones. Hands slip away and are gone. All recognizable shape is gone. I'm sliding out of control on curved surfaces, suspended amid spheres and cones and blobs. Giant multi-dimensional worms branching off in all directions writhe and squirm all around me. Through it all, for one brief second, I see only one straight line. It's a ruby red laser beam, cutting diagonally across the universe, from one infinity to another. I reach out for it but it's gone, and I'm lost in a landscape of chaos.

I'm huddled in a ball for what seems like days, whimpering and crying in terror. Giant worms pick me up and move me around with random whimsy, it seems, pushing and pulling and tugging at me. I shut them out, I shut everything out. The worms don't hurt me, though I expect they're going to eat me. I don't know, I don't try to make sense of it. I just want it to end. But it doesn't, it goes on and on. I wish I would die or something and be done with it.

At some point sleep takes me, although I'm not totally certain of this, but there's normal images that are at once dreamlike and yet so

much more real than the madness I've fallen into. I see myself jumping from roof to roof, with fireworks exploding in the sky above, and some dark menacing figures chasing me. I see a view of the ocean with water falling upward in streams toward the clouds, and the sun moves laterally just above the horizon. Rainbows arch this way and that above my head, crossing each other. To my left a multi-colored group of balloons drift slowly down from the sky and sink silently into the water. I'm standing on the top of a chimney as the city around me sinks into the ocean. People thrash madly in the water, drowning. People shut up in Volkswagen bugs float past, trapped and helpless.

Then I awake into the nightmare landscape of blobs, cones and spheres again, though now everything is predominantly white, and the branched worms are tangled around me like the animated roots of a half-dozen plants. A white cone is smashed up against my face, and I blink and study it, seeing a woven surface. It's cloth. I stare at it, concentrating, even though it's only a few inches from my face. It's soft, like a pillow. Blinking rapidly, I pull my head up and away from it and I see that it is a pillow. The world around me abruptly folds back together and becomes a large white room with lights and beds. I'm lying in a bed! A bed, a real, solid, normal bed. I gasp, so relieved that tears come to my eyes. I'm afraid to blink, lest the horrible nightmare landscape should return.

There's a buzzing in my head, like a fly is trapped inside somewhere, and I relax and quietly wait to see what happens next. Nothing happens next, I just lie there. People lie in other beds all around me. Everything is white. I'm in a hospital or something, which is okay with me, and I close my eyes and let sleep return.

6. THE STATE HOSPITAL

I'm sitting up in bed, feeling dizzy and unreal, when a nurse escorts what appears to be a doctor to my bed and introduces me. His name is Dr. Wakefield, and he is here to "evaluate" my status. He's large, pear-shaped, bald, and has a heavy beard that makes him look somewhat like Fidel Castro. He's wearing the customary white smock of his trade, with a half dozen pens in his pockets. He sits next to my bed in a chair and holds a clipboard in his hands.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asks.

"How do I feel?" I have to think about this. How do I feel? "I feel like someone took my brain out of my head, dumped it into a blender and put it on puree. Then they poured it back into my head and here I sit."

"As I understand it, you involuntarily ingested a rather large dose of a hallucinogenic drug."

"Apparently so."

"You seem to have recovered. Have you?"

"I don't know."

"Are you still seeing hallucinations?"

"Are you real?"

Dr. Wakefield laughs. "Yes, I assure you I'm quite real."

"Then I think I've recovered."

"Okay, that's good. I'm going to check you over, and then we're going to keep you here for a while to see how you do."

"Sounds good, doctor."

He gives me a quick check, taking my blood pressure, my temperature, flashing a penlight in to my eyes, and finishes up by smacking me in the knee with a rubber hammer. "Your blood pressure is a bit on the high side," he tells me. "Your eye dilation is slow and your reflexes are delayed. Your blood tests show a significant concentration

of LSD, and unfortunately this drug tends to stay in your body."

I nod. "I'm a biologist, doctor. I understand."

"Ah, yes. Good. You know, then, it's going to be in your fat cells, and when you exercise and burn off that fat there is a good chance it'll be released right back into your bloodstream. Are you familiar with the term 'flashback?'"

"Yes."

"Okay. You may tend to have them from time to time. That's why we want to keep an eye on you for a while. People with this much LSD in their body often lose all track of reality. You, however, seem completely lucid. You should consider yourself lucky."

"Lucky?"

"Yes, I'm serious. This could have been much worse. You could have become a permanent resident here." The doctor writes something on his clipboard. "Your friends who originally admitted you into the county hospital claimed they didn't know who it was who slipped you the drug. I was wondering if you happened to know."

"Yes, I do."

"Who was it?"

I come very close to telling him, but for some reason I hold back. "I haven't decided if I want to turn him in or not."

"This person nearly gives you a chemical lobotomy and you don't want to turn him in?"

"As I said, I haven't decided."

"That's up to you. I'm going to warn you, though, that there will be some policemen here within the next few days, and they're going to want to know. If you don't cooperate with them, they just might decide that you took it yourself and charge you with drug abuse. So you should consider that, as well, when you make your decision. Is this person a friend of yours?"

"He used to be."

Dr. Wakefield nods. "Okay," he says. "I'm taking you off sedatives and letting you completely dry out. Please report any flashbacks or periods of disorientation to any of the staff immediately. We're here to help you, and I need you to help us do that. As a man of science, I expect you to see the logic in that."

"Of course."

"Good." With one last nod, he stands up and walks away.

#

Television takes up the rest of the day and all of the night. I sit next to mostly catatonic patients around the one color set in the wing. Several of them have drooling problems. As I find out later, I'm in the drug rehabilitation section of the Menderson Sanitarium, across the bay in San Francisco.

The television programming is totally unfamiliar. There are reruns of programs I've never even heard of, let alone seen. This isn't that disturbing, as I rarely if ever watch television anyway, but the news program comes on and I find there is a war in Panama that I'd never heard about, and a President of the United States named William Miller. I don't even remember a governor by that name. He's young, handsome, and very aggressive. The news reports that there's allegations that he's used the CIA to assassinate foreign power figures, and when asked to comment on that, he outright tells the news media that what the CIA does is secret and it's none of their damn business. To my horror, he gets a standing ovation for this remark.

The next day Tom comes and visits me. "Hey there," he says.

"Tom! Am I glad to see you!"

He smiles. "You're definitely feeling better than the last time I saw you."

"Yeah. A lot better. Where's your hat?"

"Hat?" he says.

"Never mind. How's Pris?"

"Priscilla's fine. She's worried about you."

"Tell her I'm okay."

"Sure."

"I guess I really freaked out there, huh?"

Tom's grin fades. "Yes. You were catatonic. I thought . . . I'm glad you're doing better."

"Have you heard anything from Alvin Laurel?"

He stares at me with a blank look. "Who?"

"Our bum?"

"Our . . . bum?"

"You don't know who Alvin Laurel is?"

"I know there's a Berkeley Professor named Alvin Laurel, if that's who you mean."

"Okay, so you don't know anything about the project or the four-dimensional cube. Okay." I'm talking more to myself than to him, now. "Tom, I don't really know how to explain this to you, but . . ." The look on his face stops me. It's fear. He's afraid that I've gone insane, that I've lost track of reality.

"What?" he says, prompting me to finish even though he doesn't want to hear it.

"Tom, I've had some pretty strange hallucinations, and I'm going to have to relearn what is and isn't real."

"Okay." He smiles. "I'll help."

"Am I a professor of Herpetology at the University of California, Berkeley?"

"Yes."

"Have you been trying to investigate a government-sponsored secret project on the Berkeley campus?"

"No."

"Did you and Pris recently break up?"

"Yes."

"At Heather's birthday party?"

"Yes."

"Did I spend the night with Pris night before last?"

"Yes."

"Did she say anything about this to you?"

"She said you guys talked all night and that she's glad you're her friend. She's very worried about you."

"Did Felix dump LSD into my beer?"

"I don't know. You said he did. He left right before you had your, um, breakdown." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "What happened between you two, anyway?"

"You don't know?"

"No."

"It's about Pris."

"Pris?"

"Yes. He and I have been at odds over Pris ever since you broke it off with her. Well, I won, and Felix wanted to get back at me. I think he was high when he did it, because I can't believe he would do something like this to me --- or anyone --- if he were sober."

"What do you mean, you won?"

"That night I spent with Pris, she and I . . . you know."

"You made it with her?"

I nod. "Don't tell her I told you this, she made me promise not to tell you. She didn't want you to know."

"You and her?" Tom seemed to be in shock for some reason. "Really?"

"Yes. Didn't you notice how she was hanging all over me the other night, right before the drugs took effect?"

"No." He stares at me with his camera lens eyes, his face expressing concern. Abruptly he looks at his watch, then stands up. "I only had a few minutes this morning, and I wanted you to know I'm in this with you all the way. You can count on me. If you need anything, let me know."

"Okay, Tom."

"I'll be back this evening, and I'll try to bring someone along with me. Right now I've got to rush to make an appointment."

"Okay."

We say good-bye, and he goes walking off. I have a sick feeling as I watch him go, like there are slugs crawling around in my stomach. Despite everything, he thinks I've been brain damaged by the drug. What's worse, he's started me thinking that maybe I have been brain damaged.

Felix shows up next. I can't believe he has the nerve, but there he is, dressed in denim and suede and grinning like nothing's happened. I'm sitting on a bench out on the grounds, which is like a large park --- the only difference between the hospital grounds and a park are the 30 foot walls that prevent me from leaving --- and he comes walking across the grass and sits down next to me. "I never thought I'd see you in an insane asylum."

"I never thought you'd try to kill me, either," I tell him.

He's still grinning, but now I see it's a mask hiding pain. He bends far forward, looking at the ground, and says, "I don't know where you got the idea that I drugged you. You asked for it, you specifically asked me to get you some LSD and you took it on your own."

"That is bullshit. You're trying to use my confused state to absolve yourself of what you did, but I clearly remember what you said to me in the kitchen."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You outright told me you put a megadose of LSD in my beer."

"No I didn't! I swear to you, you dreamed this up! You specifically asked me to get you some LSD so that you could take it and see the forth dimension. That's what you said to me. Hey, I should have clued in that you were nuts back then, but I went along with it. I told you that I'd gotten you a lot, that you should take just a half hit, but you took it all! It messed up your memory, and now you're blaming me, and you're making everyone hate me --- and all I did was give you the stuff you asked me to get for you!"

I stare at him and he's not afraid to meet my gaze. His voice is sincere, or at least the pain is sincere. It is possible that he's telling the truth, and that this is the way it happened here, in this universe. Or --- what I was beginning to believe more and more --- it was also possible that he was telling the truth and the LSD trip itself has created all these false memories. After all, what is more realistic? Parallel worlds, or drug-induced brain damage?

"You know," I tell him, "I have no choice but to believe you."

"Seriously?"

"Hesitantly, yes."

"Oh thank god." He looks relieved. "It's the truth, it's the honest to god truth."

"Okay, I'll accept it."

"Please, tell that to Tom. He almost threw me out a second story window because of this. I mean, he literally hung me out the window by my shirt."

"Jesus." I'm going to have to ask him about this.

Felix stands up, hands in his pockets. "I gotta go," he says.

"You're going to be okay. You're coming through this fine. Your ability to see reason is as good as it ever was, I don't think you're going to have any trouble."

"Just don't give me any more hallucinogenics," I tell him, "whether I ask for them or not."

"Are you kidding? I'm going off them permanently myself. I'll see you when you get home."

"Okay." I watch him walk off toward the main building, which is the only way in or out.

Aaron and Pris are my next two visitors. They show up just after I've finished eating, and I lead them outside, away from the crazy people. The sun is still up, but it's hanging low on the horizon. Just below it is a hazy layer of fog which is rolling in over the bay. "How are you doing?" Aaron asks.

"I'm doing fine. I just have some memory loss, that's all. The memories I do have seem to be all screwed up."

"I can't believe Felix did this," Pris says. Her voice is defensive, in fact it's almost hostile. She's defending Felix against me. "I mean, I just don't see his motive."

"I've talked to him about it," I tell her. "He----"

"He was here?" Aaron asks.

"Yes. He swears that I asked for the LSD, and that I took it of my own accord. It's kind of hard for me to believe, but it's just as hard for me to believe he'd slip it to me without me knowing. I don't know. Is it something I would have done?"

"You're asking us?" Aaron says.

"Yes. I have no idea. Would I have asked Felix for it, and would I have stupidly taken so much of it all at once?"

Neither of them answer. Apparently they don't know me well enough to make that judgment call. "I have another bone to pick with you," Pris says. "Tom told me you claim you slept with me."

I stare at her a moment, feeling embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I know I promised not to tell him."

"You and I have never slept together." Her voice is very matter of fact, and angry. "That night you came over, you were too drunk to drive home, and I let you spend the night. But I never let you . . . we have a strictly platonic relationship. If I'd known that you had that in mind, or were going to have this . . . delusion, I never would have invited you over in the first place."

My brain does not accept this. It bounces off my forehead like a sharp rock, jarring me, and I'm not accepting it. Why, I wonder, is she lying? She's using my confused mental state to erase the reality of what happened, because . . . why? Because she's mad that I told Tom? Because I broke my promise? The pain floods through me like poison. "I love you," I suddenly say to her. "I love you, and you treat me like this?"

Aaron has taken a sudden step back from us, and turns away. He's staying out of it. Pris is looking at me with a degree of astonishment. "What?" she says.

"Couldn't you tell?" My voice is pleading. "Didn't that night mean anything to you?"

"I don't know what you've dreamed up, but nothing has ever happened between you and me."

"Pris . . ." I'm choking up. The pain is unbearable. There's so much pain that when the tears start flooding down my face I don't even care. I want her to see them, I want her to see what she's doing to me.

"I don't believe this," she says, backing away from me. "I don't want to hear this, I don't want to be a part of this." She turns toward Aaron, still taking steps away from me. "Aaron, take me home now."

"Wait," he says.

"No, I want to leave now."

"Then go wait by the car," he says harshly.

She's somewhat startled by his voice, and wordlessly she reenters the building and disappears. Aaron turns toward me with dismay. "I don't know what to say," he says. "You've got to try to distinguish between

what is real, and what you want to be real."

I can't say anything. I'm crying like a baby.

"I know the way you feel about her, but she's still in love with Tom. It's not over between them yet."

"What do you mean?" I exclaim. "He dropped her."

"Even though he's seeing Heather, there's still a lot going on between him and Pris. You know that."

"Everything I know is wrong!" I shout at him. "I don't know a fucking thing!"

"I'm going to come back when you're feeling better, okay?" He turns and leaves me, unable to deal with it all.

I stand there watching him go, feeling black waves of pain. Inside he meets with Pris and puts an arm around her, and she throws a glance at me through the window as they walk away. Wild thoughts of murder and suicide fill my mind, painful thoughts swimming in the hell that my insides have become. I want to ram my head into a tree. I want someone to cut my throat. I want it to end. Just end.

It doesn't end. It goes on and on.

By the time Tom makes his return visit, accompanied by Heather, the orderlies had gotten to me and now I'm fully sedated. The pain still rages on, but now it's in a box in a corner somewhere, insulated by wads of cotton which fill me. I feel I've lost everything, and the worst was the loss of Pris. But the sense of loss is an illusion, as I'd never had her in the first place, and this is twice as painful.

"How are you feeling?" Tom asks.

"Totally insane."

"Did they drug you?"

"Yes. They had to. I was trying to kill myself."

"Why?"

"Pris doesn't love me. She doesn't even like me. She thinks I'm a worm."

"All men are worms," Heather says.

"She loves you," I tell Tom. "Everyone loves you. I even love you. Why can't I be you?"

"You're a lot more interesting than I am," Tom says.

"Especially now," Heather says. She's grinning at me like she's trying to cheer me up with the sheer force of her smile. She looks arrogant enough to think that she can actually do it. "What's it like to be insane?"

"Heather!" Tom says angrily.

"Shut up, let me talk to him." Turning back to me, she says, "I've always wanted to go completely nuts."

"Everything I know is wrong," I tell her.

"How exciting!"

"It's a pain in the ass."

"Yeah, but it's not your ordinary pain in the ass, is it? I mean anyone can moan and complain that they've wrecked their car, or that everything in their house was stolen, or that some girl dumped them. But you --- you've got them beat hands down. Everything you know is wrong!"

"Heather . . ." Tom says.

She hits him to shut him up, and continues. "So what that some dumb little girl doesn't love you, what do you need her for? You're a handsome guy. Don't tell me you never noticed me undressing you with my eyes every time I come over to visit."

"I never noticed."

"I do," she says, her voice lowering. "And sometimes I imagine what it would be like to make love to you."

"Heather!" Tom says.

She hits him again. "I can be lying though my teeth and it still sounds good, doesn't it?" Her voice gets really low, and her face is

right in mine. "I give the best blow jobs."

Despite everything, I crack a smile. She smiles back, and gives me a quick kiss. "See," she says to Tom. "I cheered him up."

I actually laugh. "She did," I tell him. I feel a tiny note of cheer above the constant wail of pain. It's the best I could hope for, and she managed it. I at least feel affable, the visit is a pleasant one. When they leave I manage a somewhat peaceful sleep.

The next morning I wake up, and everything's the same. Even the pain of Priscilla's rejection is pushed down under the weight of my relief that I have, at last, regained a rock-hard sense of reality. I am in a hospital recovering from a drug overdose. This is reality. I can accept it.

Dr. Wakefield shows up and sits beside my bed. He wants to discuss my "mood swing" last night, but I want to forget about it. Nevertheless, he prods and probes and brings all the emotions back up so he can see them, gets me crying and miserable, then notes it all down on his clipboard. Then it's more happy pills for me and he leaves.

Between breakfast and lunch the cops show up. The good doctor has told them I know who slipped me the LSD, and they want to know who it was. One officer is a handsome black man, very clean shaven with a spotless uniform, and his partner is a white guy with a mustache, five o'clock shadow, and coffee stains on his shirt. "You know," I tell them, "yesterday I thought I knew who it was, but now I'm thinking it must have been someone else."

"Who?"

"I don't know his name. It was a student who was at the party just a little while."

"What was the name of the guy you thought had done it?"

"I don't remember his name. You see, my memory is all scrambled. I can't remember anything straight to save my life."

This pretty much stops the questioning. What is the point in trying to prosecute someone when the star witness would tell the jury that his memory is scrambled? Disgruntled and looking a bit impotent, the two officers leave.

Tom shows up after lunch, alone, and I'm a bit disappointed he didn't bring Heather again. "I want out of here," I tell him.

"You look a lot better."

"I feel a lot better. But the doctor is giving me happy pills, and I don't want any drugs in my body right now."

"Pris wants me to tell you she's sorry."

"Oh." I feel hollow, isolated, and numb. The happy pills don't really make you happy, they make you feel like a robot, void of emotion. "She did?"

"Yes. She realizes that you have feelings for her, and she wants you to know she's really sorry for being so unsympathetic."

"Tell her that I appreciate her sympathy."

He nods. "How's your memory?"

"My memory is as scrambled as ever, but I'm dealing with it. The doctor says I'm going to have to relearn my relationships with everybody, and for a while I'm not going to be able to assume anything."

"You remember that you and I are best friends."

"That's one thing I never forgot."

"We're not homosexual lovers or anything, though." He says this with a smile, hoping I would think it's funny. It is, after a fashion, but I don't smile back.

"The doctor says I'm doing very well in dealing with reality. I should be out of here soon."

"That's great."

"We are roommates, aren't we?"

He laughs. "Yes, that's a correct memory."

"So I'm not going to come home and find you've sublet out my room

or anything, right?"

"Your room is your room. And I've been trying to feed your specimens every day."

"Thank god. I just want to get out of here and get on with my life."

"You'll be out," he tells me. "There's nothing wrong with you." He pats me on the shoulder, then looks at his watch. "I've got to get back to work."

"See ya."

After Tom leaves I take a short, dreamless nap, and am awakened by another visitor. When I look up and see who it is, the shock of recognition hits me like a jolt from a car battery. It's Alvin Laurel. He's dressed in jeans and a tee-shirt, both of which are very clean, and he sits down on the side of my bed and crosses his legs. "Everyone down at the University is wondering how you are," he says. "The rumor is you were drugged by a student."

"Yes." I'm certainly not going to tell him I took the LSD of my own accord, which --- if Felix is telling the truth --- is what I did.

Alvin's looking into my eyes as if he's searching for something. "You've crossed over big time."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're far from home."

"What?"

"You saw the multi-dimensional reality, didn't you?"

"I saw some drug-induced hallucinations."

"You saw reality."

Furious, I jump out of bed and confront him. "What the fuck are you trying to do, drive me crazy again?" This catches the attention of the orderlies, and they start moving in my direction.

"You're not crazy, you never have been," Alvin says. He pulls something out of his pocket and holds it out to me. It's a crystal of some sort. "Take it," he says.

"What is it?"

"A four-dimensional prism."

"Oh shit! No! No!" I knock it from his hands, send it flying. I'm about to swing again, this time for the bastard's head, but the orderlies grab me. "You sonofabitch!" I scream at him. "You're the one who started all this, aren't you? You're the one who got me to take the drugs!"

Dr. Wakefield arrives with a syringe. "I want you to leave," he tells Alvin. When Alvin hesitates, he says, "Leave or I'll have you thrown out!"

As the orderlies hold my arm still, Dr. Wakefield moves in with the needle. "No!" I cry out, pleading. "No more drugs! No more----" The needle goes into my arm, and it hurts.

I watch Alvin walking away. He turns, glancing back at me one more, and then is gone. I stare in shock as the orderlies hold me. Alvin had just disappeared! He walked right through the wall! Some of the other patients saw it, too, because there is a general murmur of excitement and a lot of pointing.

My legs give out and the orderlies put me to bed. "You talked to him," I say to Dr. Wakefield. "You told him to leave." My voice is full of drugged wonder.

"Yes. Who was he?"

"A hallucination." It's the last intelligible thing I say. The drug hits me on the head like a frying pan. My vision seems to flip upside-down and a black shadow passes over everything, and I'm gone. When I awake, it's the middle of the night. There's a light from way down a hall, and all the patients around me are asleep.

I get out of bed and make my way toward the bathroom, and with my

bare foot I kick something cold and hard. It skids across the floor and goes "clink!" against one of the metal legs of the hospital beds. I bend down and pick it up. It's the prism.

In the bathroom, I turn on the light and look at the thing. It's like a big round crystal, about the size of a golf ball, and it's extremely heavy. Holding it up to my left eye, I look through it. It takes a moment for me to realize what I'm seeing, and I gasp. The multi-dimensional landscape! I nearly drop the thing, and now my hands are shaking.

Calm down, I tell myself. Be rational. If this thing is real, which it certainly seems to be, then that means I'm not crazy at all. That means that none of my memories are false, and my mind is not scrambled. Indeed, it means I know a hell of a lot more about what's really going on than everyone else.

What started out as something frightening now turns into something very comforting. I feel waves of calmness spread over me. I finish up in the bathroom and head back to my bed, carrying the crystal in my hand. The rest of the night passes in a peaceful sleep.

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"I don't see any point in my staying longer." Dr. Wakefield doesn't look happy at my frank, flat statement, but I continue regardless. "I want you to release me today. Now."

"You know that's not possible. Your evaluation period is not over."

"I don't care. I want out."

"I can't let you simply walk out of here."

"There is nothing wrong with me."

"You are probably right. But it is my responsibility to make absolutely sure."

"Do you think I may be a danger to myself or others?"

"Possibly. You have had some very emotional outbursts within the last few days. Last night you became violent."

"Anyone would have become violent if they've gone through what I have."

"That's my point," he says. "Because of what you've gone through, I want you to remain here for the rest of your evaluation period."

"That's not acceptable."

"Look, I know you are a victim, and I know that you want to get back to your life. But you're going to have to be patient----"

"Let me out now or I sue."

"You're in no position to do that."

"I have the best lawyer in the bay area."

"You've been committed to a mental hospital for drug rehabilitation. You have no real say in the matter, I do. I have the sole responsibility for your welfare, and what I say, goes." He has a smug, satisfied smile on his face. "Making me angry at you is not going to help your position."

"Oh, yeah, you can just give me more drugs and say I'm crazy."

"I can, you're absolutely right. I can keep you here as long as I want. The rest of your life, if necessary. Or at least until your medical insurance runs out." He smiles, as if it's a joke. "But I'm only interested in making sure you're okay. I'm not your enemy."

"I understand that." I say this out of tact. If this quack is trying to convince me to trust him, he's failed. All he's done is make me hate him. I smile, deciding to go along with whatever he says. "I want out, though, and I want you to keep that in mind."

"I will. I'll let you out as soon as I feel confident you're ready."

"Then I'll cooperate and do anything I need to do to speed this up," I tell him.

"Don't be in such a hurry. Relax. That's what I want you to do."

"Okay."

"Very good." He stands up and goes on to his next patient.

The nurse hands me my little paper cup of happy pills and stands there while I take them. Satisfied, she goes on to the next patient. The pills are under my tongue, and when no one is looking, I spit them into my hand and throw them under my bed. I do it with a sense of satisfaction. Fuck you Doctor Wakefield. I'm getting out of here right now.

The main barrier between the hospital and the outside world is not the fence, but the fact that I'm wearing light-green hospital pajamas. If I was wearing real clothes, I could probably walk right out the front door without anyone noticing. I have no idea where my clothes are, or even if they're here at the hospital. If only I were in Berkeley, I think to myself. No one would look twice at a man walking down the street in green hospital pajamas.

Unnoticed by anyone but a few of the other patients, I wander outside and onto the grounds. The fence is high and there's no way to climb it. There's no trees next to it, either. It's very pleasant, and well tended, and the only way to become aware that you're in a prison is if you try to find a way out. I walk all the way around the perimeter and find one weakness: the back gate. It's wrought iron and has spikes at the top, but I remember climbing the like when I was a teenager. No problem. As I stand there, studying it, a jogger wearing shorts, a half tee-shirt and a headband goes running past. Watching him, I grin to myself. Then I look back toward the building. A few patients are watching me, but none of the staff. Then I see the video camera, and the urge to climb leaves me. No doubt I'm being watched closely, as this is the most obvious place for someone to try an escape.

I go back into the building, and bide my time until just before the shift change. Then I disappear into the bathroom, occupy one of the stalls, and take off the hospital pajamas. I rip most of the pant legs off the pants --- making them into shorts --- then rip the shirt in half at mid-chest. Next goes the sleeves just above the elbows and then the collar. What's left, I put back on. For a finishing touch, I take a strip of the cloth and tie it around my head as a headband. I emerge from the stall and toss the scraps in the trash, glance in the polished metal of the mirror, then go jogging out of the bathroom.

Ducking down, I slip past the nurses station and out into the corridors beyond. I pass right by a pair of orderlies, who just got off shift and are standing together discussing auto parts, and they don't even glance up. I make it around a corner and down a flight of stairs to the garage. I wave at the guard at the door and he absently waves back, hardly looking up from the newspaper in front of him. Dr. Wakefield is getting into his Porshe as I pass him, heading for the exit, and he doesn't even see me. He's sweeping potato chip crumbs or something off the driver's seat before sitting down.

My bare feet slap the pavement as I jog up the ramp and past the mechanical gate at the exit of the parking garage. Then I'm on the sidewalk beyond, and I turn and head downhill. Golden Gate park is only a quarter mile away. Dr. Wakefield passes me in his Porshe without a glance, speeding to where ever he goes after his shift. I'm grinning like a fool, thinking I've gotten clean away, but then right in the middle of the street his brake lights flair and his tires squeal. Damn it! I think. He spotted me in his rear view mirror! I stop and begin to turn, my instincts telling me to run for it, but Dr. Wakefield is jumping out of his car and beating at his pants. It looks as though he's dropped a cigarette in his lap, and it's burning him. He glances furtively around to see if anyone has noticed, then jumps back into the sports car and zooms off.

Grinning once again, I continue on my way.

#

As it turns out, I'm not far away from Priscilla's house. Once in the park I drop the jogging routine, as I'm not really a jogger and what jogging I've already done has exhausted me. The path winds out of a thick grove of trees, across a meadow of grass filled with lovers on blankets and groups playing football, and back into another thicket. As I'm entering the trees once again a kid on a skateboard comes out of nowhere and slams right into me, knocking me flat on my back. It's a hard blow but it doesn't really hurt, and I sit up and look over at the kid. He's already on his feet, picking up his skateboard.

As I stand up, I get this odd twisting feeling in my spine, not painful but very unpleasant, and for a moment everything goes blurry. "Uh-oh," I mutter out loud. The skateboard-riding kid has vanished. He's disappeared like a ghost.

A moment later I hear the scratching sound of skateboard wheels against the paved path and I step back, just in time. The kid on the skateboard comes streaking past, almost hitting me. He continues on his way without looking back. I stare at him, my heart racing.

I saw it happen! I was actually conscious of it. I slipped from one plane to another, from a universe where the kid collides with me to a universe where he'd been delayed 15 seconds and the collision never happened. Bubbling with excitement, I wave at the kid --- though the kid isn't looking --- and turn and hurry on my way toward Priscilla's house. If I've crossed over again, then in this universe Pris and I might still be together. Wild hope floods through me, pushing me onwards.

I emerge out of the park and walk up the hill to her apartment house. The house looks the same, it's still the same color. I ring the doorbell and hear footsteps inside. In the seconds before the door opens, I do my best to compose myself lest she thinks I'm an raving loon.

The door opens. Felix's face is revealed, his expression one of surprise. "Hey, what did you do, escape?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," I tell him, my voice neutral. What in the hell is he doing here? "Where's Pris?" I ask, pushing past him and into the apartment.

"She's at work," Felix says. "What's going on? Why the zippy clothes?"

"I was out, uh, jogging."

"You ran away from the hospital, didn't you!"

"Yeah. So, what are you doing here?"

"I live here!" He says it in an exasperated tone, as if its ridiculous I even asked. "What are you doing here?"

"You live here?"

"Yes. You know I do."

"With Pris?"

"Yes. Of course."

I stare at him and feel a surge of overwhelming disappointment. The raging pain hits me like a wall. "I'm lost, Felix. I'm so fucking lost."

"What's wrong, guy?"

"I'm lost."

"You're high, aren't you?" He peers into my eyes, checking the dilation. "You're having a flashback?"

"I need some money. I've got to get back to Berkeley."

"Maybe you should go back to the hospital."

"No, that wouldn't do any good. Can I borrow a few dollars?"

"Well, uh . . ." He shuffles off into Priscilla's room. I follow him in, and feel another wave of pain and disorientation. Most of the room is cluttered with his stuff, his furniture, his clothes strewn all over the floor. He digs through the clothes, searching pockets, until he

finds some money. He hands me three dollars, just enough to get me home.

"Thanks," I say in a totally defeated voice. "I appreciate it."

"That's a loan," he says. "I'll need it back in a few days."

"Don't worry."

"Okay."

I turn and leave. I feel like I've got lead in my feet as I trudge up the hill to catch the Muni train. I feel so lost. I have to get home --- not just home, but to the place I was before. How? Where? I have no idea. I've got to find Alvin, I've got to talk to him again. He'll know.

Maybe.

The train comes by and I hop on and hand over the money. It's standing room only, so I stand by some short woman with orange hair and a red flower-print blouse, and she moves away from me like I'm a freak. On board the train no one says a word, everyone rides in silence. It's like everyone's lost their souls.

I feel in my shirt pocket, pull out the heavy prism that Alvin Laurel brought me. Which Alvin Laurel was it? I wonder. I've slipped across again, I'm not in the same place. I've gone up or down a step. It seems not every Alvin Laurel is aware of his connection to me.

When the Muni train reaches downtown I transfer to BART and ride it through the tube to Berkeley. The Berkeley station is unfamiliar --- it's up two blocks further than it should be! --- and I have a sick feeling as I make my way up Hearst Avenue. The sidewalks are wider, newer, like they and the street have been recently rebuilt. The apartment is where it should be, but I get an unearthly chill as I read the street sign. It's no longer Euclid Avenue, it's called Escher Street. The apartment building is now called The Escher. I climb the steps and push the button to ring my apartment, and pray Tom is home. There's a buzz and I push the door open, pass through into unfamiliar black and white marble tile and a sharp, new checkered carpet. The banister is no longer wood --- it's polished stone!

When I reach my apartment I knock on the door, and Tom answers.

"Hey!" he says. "What are you doing here?"

"I was released."

"Where's your clothes?"

"I don't know."

He backs away and lets me enter, grinning. "The doctor released you?"

"I released myself."

"That's what I thought."

"Tom, you have to listen to me. I have to show you something." I hand him the prism. "Look through that and tell me what you see."

He puts it up to his eye and looks at a light. "A rainbow."

"What else?"

"About five thousand little light bulbs."

I sigh. Yet another disappointment --- Tom can't see it, he hasn't acquired the perception. "Never mind that," I tell him, and then walk into my room. Everything is rearranged, which is about what I expected, but I search around and, yes, there it is. The four-dimensional cube. When I look at it, now, I can see the extra straws and it leads my eyes into the extra dimension. I turn on a bright desk lamp and hold it underneath. The shadow is intricate and clearly shows the extra straws. "See that?" I ask him.

Tom stares down at that. "That's strange," he says, curious. He takes the cube from me and looks through it, then puts it back under the light. It puzzles him. "Why the extra shadows?"

"Tom, it's a four-dimensional cube."

"Oh no, not this again."

"Tom, listen to me. I'm not crazy. My whacked-out memory is true, I am remembering realities other than the one you're used to." I tell him the whole story, omitting romantic details, and lead up to Alvin showing

up at the hospital and giving me the prism. He listens without interrupting, all the while studying the cube, the shadow, and the cube again. When I finish he hands me the cube and sighs.

"I need a beer." Turning, he leaves my room.

A bit miffed, I follow him to the kitchen. Wordlessly he hands me a beer, which I accept without a thought, and both he and I open bottles and take a long, ritualistic swallow. "Well," Tom finally says, "the government is working on some top secret project up near the cyclotron building. They've got some of the top physicists in the country up there, not to mention a few theoretical mathematicians who're pretty well known for some exotic ideas. The least of which is your friend Alvin Laurel."

"You believe me, then?"

"I half-believe you." He shrugs. "It's the best I can do at the moment."

"That's better than nothing."

"I think the best thing to do at this point is go find Alvin Laurel. Why don't you get changed and I'll make a few phone calls."

Feeling some hope, I head back toward my room.

7. COMEDY

Later, Tom and I are walking across the Berkeley campus to meet with Alvin Laurel when Tom reaches into his pocket, pulls out a coin, and then drops it. He turns quickly around, bends down, and picks it up. He puts it back into his pocket and we resume walking.

"What was that all about?" I ask him.

"A little trick I learned," he says. "Keep walking and don't look back. Try to act natural."

"Why? What's going on?"

"At least two men are following us."

I damn near turn around and look. It's a strong impulse, but I fight it off and continue without breaking my stride. "What do we do?"

"We can't do much. Let's take a little detour around the library to make sure." Altering our course slightly, Tom and I walk around Moffitt library, and according to Tom, two guys dressed in suits walk all the way around it with us. "It seems like they want us to know we're being followed. They stick out like a white man in Zimbabwe."

I steal a glance behind us. Sure enough, two men dressed in black slacks, white shirts, black suit jackets and black ties are walking behind us wearing mirrored sunglasses. "They look like the Blues Brothers," I tell Tom.

"Who are they?"

"Never mind." We continue on through Sproul Plaza and across Bancroft Street, heading for the sub shop where we're supposed to meet Alvin. As we near the place, two more guys in black suits step out in front of us and block our way. The two who were behind us come running up from behind.

"Fascists!" Tom yells at the top of his lungs. "Fascists! Fascists!"

Some of the students milling around across the street stand up, staring out way. One points and yells out, "Fascists!" He comes running, followed by others. "Fascists!" they yell. "Fascists!"

Tom keeps them going by starting a chant as the four men surround us. Within seconds the four men are totally outnumbered, as we're surrounded by a constantly growing crowd of students chanting "Fascists! Fascists! Fascists!" I hear one of the men exclaim, "Damn kids!" as they

grab me by the arm and pull me toward a black car. The students, still chanting, grab my other arm and pull me in the opposite direction.

"Fascists! Fascists! Fascists!"

One of the bigger male students, wearing a green army jacket, his face totally hidden by long brown hair and a patchy beard, leaps on the back of the fascist who has a hold of me. The man lets go so he can swing at the kid, but Tom grabs his arm and holds it back. The kid yells "RUN!" right in my face. I turn and look back at Tom, who is bashing faces with his fists, and one of the "fascists" breaks from the students and comes after me. He trips over an outstretched leg and falls face first into the sidewalk, but I don't hang around to see if he's hurt. I take the kid's advice and run.

I run down an alley which turns to the left and leads me out onto Telegraph Avenue, with all its shops and bookstores; they pass in a blur as I pound the sidewalk and watch the street for a break in the traffic. Everything is a bit blurry as I run, and dashing across the street I suddenly feel dizzy, and I get a uncomfortable feeling in my spine, like it's making a serpentine movement. I trip over the curb on the other side and fall onto the sidewalk. Scrambling, I get back to my feet and continue down the road, feeling more and more dizzy. By the time I reach the next intersection I'm disoriented, I have no idea which way I was running. I glance back to see if I'm still being chased, but my vision is still so blurry I can barely make anything out.

I turn the corner and continue jogging down the sidewalk, stumbling lamely and blundering into pedestrians, and I cross another street and jog into a large grassy park. No, I think, this isn't a park, this is the campus. There is no park over here, not this close to Telegraph. I must be going the wrong way, so I turn left again and jog down that street. I don't recognize the area at all, and I still can't read the street signs. After another block I can see a big patch of blurry green ahead, and some large buildings. The campus! I've circled right back to it.

Ducking into an empty doorway, I peek back and forth for any obvious signs of pursuit. Seeing nothing, I crowd back close to the wall and shut my eyes, waiting for the dizziness to go away. My spine still seems to be making erratic "S" movements that cause my arms and fingers to tingle, and before it settles I realize what's going on. "Oh no," I say out loud, my voice sounding fretful and whiny even to my own ears.

After a few minutes it dies down, and my dizziness goes away. I open my eyes and look around. The images of the low, flat-roofed buildings surrounding me are in sharp focus, but they're totally unfamiliar. I know Berkeley very well, but I've never been here before. The windows are all round, and the cars passing on the street are long, low, and have big mag tires.

I step out onto the sidewalk, thinking Now what? What happens next? There's still no sign of the men in the black suits, so I turn and walk toward the campus. On the campus grounds I stop short. The buildings are all different, and to the East there's a big silvery dome. It's a wondrous sight, but it's also more than a bit upsetting. I thought I was lost before! This, I tell myself, this is lost.

There's no sign of Tom or the group of students. Feeling bleak and hopeless, I wander across the campus to see if my apartment building is still where it is supposed to be. When I reach the other side of the campus, I find neither the Euclid nor the Escher building; there is, instead, a grocery store. It looks like a 24-hour place, and the sign says "Windemello Plux!" I wander inside, wondering if the English language has changed beyond my ability to understand it.

The young man behind the register is tall, thin, and white. His neck is very long, making him look freakish. The uniform he's dressed in is white with vertical red stripes, and he has a hat that reminds me of a beanie minus the propeller. He looks at me with pale blue eyes as I

wander around the aisles, staring at the unfamiliar name brands.

There's "Amgood" canned corn, peas, soups, chili, meats --- just about everything. The labels read, "Buy Amgood, because we am good!" There's also Yummy Cola, Bay Beer, Lackfam Frozen Dinners, Laddie Bread, Mother Russia toiletries, and "Gig!" deodorant. Nothing at all is familiar. No Coca-Cola, no Budweizer --- no Rainbow Bread.

"Are you having a problem with finding things?" the man with the long neck asks.

Yes, my apartment building is gone. Of course I don't say this. "What's the best beer you carry?"

"Bay is best," he says, sounding like he's been programmed by a thousand commercials.

Feeling relieved that at least the language is familiar, I pull a bottle out of the cold section and take it up to the register. I take my wallet out, open it up, and find it stuffed with blue dollar bills. Weird. One of them buys the beer and I get change in little rectangular ingots. They're silver, with ornate engravings stamped into them.

Flipping through the wallet, I find a bizarre-looking drivers license with my picture on it, and an address in San Francisco. Swigging on the beer --- which is good, I'm amazed --- I wander back outside, wondering if I have a car. If I do, I doubt I would recognize it.

Down what used to be Hearst Avenue, where the underground BART station used to be, is an above-ground BART station. The signs don't read "BART," though, they read "WC Freerider." As I sit in the station on a bench, next to an old wino with a bruised face, clouds come in from the west and blot out the sun. I finish the beer and stand up, tossing the bottle into a wastebasket, just as train comes streaking into the station. I'm shocked to see it looks exactly like the Disneyland Monorail. As the name implies, it costs nothing to board.

Inside is the usual assortment of subway riders. I find a seat for the two minute ride to Oakland, where I have to get off and transfer to a train to San Francisco. The ride is uneventful, and all but silent. The only noise is the occasional cough and sneeze of the passengers. In the Oakland station, the walls are unusually clean --- there's no graffiti anywhere. I wander around looking for the San Francisco train, which turns out to be on an upper level. It's already in the station, doors open, and I have to run to catch it. The doors close silently and the train glides out of the station without a vibration. This one is full, so I stand holding a handrail as it accelerates toward the bay.

There is no underwater tunnel --- the train goes over the bay bridge on a level above the traffic. I watch out the window, thinking that this train is going damn fast, and there's a sudden rush of darkness as it passes through a tunnel in Treasure Island. We're on the other side within seconds, and the island is behind us.

The train decelerates as it reaches the other side of the bay, forcing me to hang on with both hands to keep from being thrown into the woman in front of me. As it is, I brush against her and she glances up at my face in annoyance. Then she does a double take, and stares at me. "I know you, right?" she says.

I have no idea --- maybe in this world she does. But I've never seen her before. "I'm sorry," I say, very formally. "You don't look familiar."

"I've seen you before," she says. "Recently."

I shrug. She's pretty, and has long brown hair. I would have remembered her for sure. "Maybe you've seen me on the train."

She shakes her head, and turns away. The train reaches the first San Francisco stop and the doors open. I head for the door, hoping I have enough of that blue money in my wallet for a cab ride.

The station is huge, multi-leveled. It takes me several minutes to find my way out. Once outside, I head for a row of parked blue-and-black

cabs ---oddly enough, they look like cabs --- but a man in a business suit intercepts me and grabs for my hand, and starts shaking it. "I really admire your work," he says. "It's such an honor to meet you."

"Oh, thank you." I look at him with what is probably a very dazed expression.

"I had the opportunity to see you two weeks ago, and it was wonderful. I had the time of my life."

"I'm very glad."

He lets go my hand, suddenly self-conscious. "I'm sorry to accost you like this. I'm just so excited."

"It's okay." I point at the cabs. "I've got to go now."

"Yes, of course. Thank you for, um . . ."

"You're welcome." I feel awkward as I turn around and walk away from him. What in the hell was that all about? Am I a big scientist here? Who knows. The taxi driver doesn't seem to recognize me, and takes the address I give him without a word, starting the meter and pulling out into the street.

San Francisco is radically different. Spacious, clean, everything constructed from wood and brick and no tall buildings. At the address on my drivers' license there's a large one-story house with a large yard. I mean a front and side yard, too, not just a cubicle of fence in the back. There's an wrought-iron fence and hedges and a manicured lawn. The whole neighborhood is like this. I'm in amazement.

I step outside, feeling like I'm stepping onto the moon, and pull my wallet out to pay the cab driver. A blue twenty-five dollar bill does the trick. He smiles, says thanks, and drives away. I turn and look back at the house, hoping this is actually where I live. I walk up to the front door and knock. I can't bring myself to simply open it up and step in.

I close my eyes, hoping Tom will be here.

The door opens, and I open my eyes. Pris is standing in the doorway, staring at me. "Why did you ring the doorbell? It wasn't locked." Before I answer, she turns and walks back into the house, leaving the door open.

My heart surges and my arms tingle. I live with Pris? Hardly daring to breathe, I follow her inside, softly closing the door behind me. This is incredible. This is wonderful! I walk down a hallway with a high ceiling, past oil paintings of sea-scapes and farms, and into a large wood-paneled bedroom with one huge brass bed in the middle. Pris has boxes all over the place, and her clothes cover the bed. I stop, watching. She's putting her things into the boxes.

"What are we doing? Moving?"

She gives me an angry glare, but says nothing. My heart starts to sink, filling with lead. I don't like this at all.

"You know, I uh, I got hit on the head today," I tell her. "Now my memory is all screwed up."

"Not funny."

"No, really. What's going on?"

"What does it look like? I'm leaving."

"Please don't."

"Huh! What do you care?"

"I care a lot."

"Yeah, right."

I get down on my knees beside her, grab one of her wonderful legs. "Pris, whatever I've done, I'm sorry. I don't want you to go. I'll do anything, anything you want. I love you. I----"

"You've made this speech before," Pris says, pulling angrily away.

I can't take it anymore. I let my head hang forward and begin to cry. I'd prefer the insane asylum to this. I'd rather be crazy.

"Look at you!" she shouts at me. "You're the one to cry! What about me?"

I'm suddenly angry. "What about you!" I yell. "What have I ever done to you? All I've done is loved you, that's it!"

"Me and half the women in San Francisco!" she shouts back. "You've got a lot of nerve! I'm sorry I've hurt you're ego, but that's just too bad."

I stare at her, unable to say a thing.

She turns away. "Go to someone else and cry," she says. "You've got plenty of others to comfort you."

"I only want you."

Something in her snaps. Pris lets out a yell and picks things up and starts throwing them at me. As the heavy base of a lamp narrowly misses my head, I decide it would be best if I run. Once outside the room, the barrage stops, but she follows with her little fists balled up and gives me a couple spiteful kicks in the shin. I yowl with pain and hop around, and she watches, satisfied.

"I'll get my stuff when you're gone," she says. She walks down the long hallway and out the front door.

Despite the pain I follow her, hobbling along and wincing. When I get outside I find she's got the garage door opened and is getting into a large black car. It looks like a cross between a Cadillac and an old Jaguar. The engine starts with a roar and before I can reach her, the tires squeal. The car shoots out of the garage and down the driveway like a missile, skidding onto the pavement and down the street. She's out of sight in seconds.

The garage is empty, no other cars within. I can't follow her. I can only wait for her to come back. I close the garage door and walk back around to the front door. Before I'm inside another car pulls up, a long white limousine, and the horn honks. A door opens, and the car sits there, waiting. I hesitate a moment, then walk over and poke my head in.

"Hello sir," the driver says. "Ready to go?"

"Go?"

"Yes sir. The show is in an hour."

"Show?"

"Yes sir."

Show? I'm going to a show? "I can't go," I tell him. "My, uh, date can't make it."

The driver laughs, but sits and waits expectantly. He thinks I'm joking.

"I'll be right back," I tell him.

He nods.

I walk back to the front door of my house and close it, then stand there, staring at it with my eyes unfocused. I don't want to leave. If Pris comes back to get her belongings, I want to be here to talk her out of it. What am I going to do? What the hell is this show? Its probably at a museum or zoo, a display of reptiles. God knows. It could be a rock concert for that matter. I go back to the limousine and get inside to talk it over with the driver, but the door shuts with an electric whine and he pulls out onto the street.

"Wait," I tell him. "Wait a minute."

He doesn't stop, but looks back at me in the rear view mirror. "Yes sir?"

"Where are we going?"

"Trust me, sir, this way is the fastest."

"No. I mean, where are we going?"

He gives me a strange look. "I'm taking you to the amphitheater, sir."

"What's there?"

"The show, sir." He's really looking perplexed, now. "Is there something wrong?"

"My girlfriend is leaving me. I mean, she's moving out. I don't

know what to do, she won't listen to me."

He doesn't comment on this.

"I don't want to go to the show. I want you to take me back home."

"Sir, you have to go to the show!"

"I do?"

"Well . . . yes, of course you do! A lot of people are paying good money to see you tonight. You can't just leave them high and dry because you've got romantic problems."

"This isn't just romantic problems, I----" I break off. "What did you say?"

"Sir?"

"What did you just say?"

"I'm sorry if I spoke harshly, I know it's not my place----"

"You said people are paying to see me?"

"Well, of course they are."

"I'm in the show?"

"You are the show!"

"What?"

The driver stares at me with deep concern, but then suddenly smiles. Now he's started laughing. "You had me going there."

"I did?"

"You're trying out new material on me, aren't you?"

"Yeah," I told him, grasping at straws. "Yeah. Sorry about that."

The driver continues to laugh.

I look at the door for a handle, but can't find one. I don't care how fast he's going, I want to jump out. There's a big metal button, and I push it, but it makes a buzzing sound and nothing else happens. Apparently the door is electric and won't open while the car is going. I'm trapped.

The driver is still laughing.

We head west on the back roads, going up and down steep hills, then at the top of one I see the ocean. It's still overcast, and it looks cold outside. There's still nothing taller than two stories in sight, except way down the road where it reaches the shore. There's a large rounded structure and a huge parking lot. Monorail skyway tracks lead right to it; there's a station adjacent to the parking lot.

As the limo reaches the amphitheater I break out into a cold sweat. I'm waiting for him to stop so I can jump out the door, but he doesn't stop. We enter the parking lot and go through a gate at the rear of the structure, and then the car is surrounded by a crowd of people. Men in red police uniforms push the people back as my door opens itself. There's cheering as I get out, people screaming my name. Girls are lifting their shirts and shaking their breasts at me. I stand there, gaping like an idiot.

Two of the men in red take me by the arms and lead me away from the car, away from the crowd, and through a rear stage door. Inside is another crowd, smaller and more self-controlled, but the women are still making kissey-faces at me and the men are shaking my numb hands. One woman, tall and broad-shouldered with short hair and a sharp nose, gives me a look of horror and says, "You can go on like that!"

"Like . . . ?" I look down at my clothes. It's brown corduroy, a rumpled pair of slacks and a sports coat. My shirt looks like a blue polo shirt. This woman leads me into what is apparently my dressing room, followed by a large, athletic-looking man with thinning red hair and a mustache.

"Tad, get him some real clothes," the woman says.

"He can wear my jacket, it would look okay with those pants."

"Well," she says, looking at me. "Yeah, yeah . . . he'd need your shirt too."

"Okay." Tad begins taking off his jacket and shirt. The woman pulls at the buttons on my sports jacket. Then she seems to come to herself

and says, "You're not a baby! Come on." She makes sure I'm taking it off, then looks around as if suddenly realizing something's wrong.

"Where's that makeup girl?" She leaves the room, searching.

"Material isn't everything," Tad says to me, holding his shirt and jacket. "You have an image to maintain."

I say nothing, my mind entirely blank.

"Gloria can be a bully sometimes," he says, "but look how far she's gotten you."

I finish removing my jacket and shirt, and start putting on Tad's. The woman, who I guess is Gloria, walks back in with the makeup girl. She's young, blond, and smiling. She's wearing black slacks and a white, frilly shirt with a thin, loose tie around her neck. She has a wooden makeup case in her hand. All three of them wait silently as I finish putting on Tad's shirt, then Tad grabs Gloria's arm and pulls her toward the door. "I'll give you the five minute warning," Gloria calls over her shoulder. The makeup girl follows them to the door and locks it when they're outside.

Walking back to me, she puts the case down and takes my chin in one of her thin, strong hands, twisting my head back and forth as she gives me a judgmental look. "Your skin is clear today."

I swallow. "Thank you."

"You're more tense than usual."

I say nothing.

She smiles and says, "You want your relaxation treatment, don't you?"

It takes me a moment to answer. "I'm definitely tense."

She undoes my pants and pulls them down, then pushes me over to a chair. For some reason I'm not at all surprised. I feel her warm breath on my penis and I stare down at her blond hair as white noise fills my mind. My thoughts are jumbled mental static. Her mouth feels hot, smooth. I close my eyes and let the sensations take over. Being lost in an alternate reality is no reason to refuse a blow job.

The relaxation treatment works very well. By the time she's done I feel like going to sleep. I sit there like a lump. When there's a knock on the door I jump, nearly flying off the chair. "Five minutes," Gloria's voice says. I stand and pull up my pants, fumbling with the button and zipper.

"You look a lot better," says the makeup girl.

"Thanks."

She walks over and opens the door. "You'd better go."

"Uh, yeah." I walk out the door and nearly collide with Tad. He takes my arm and pulls me down a hall and up some stairs.

"You look a lot better," he says.

"Thanks."

We come to a stop next to a tall black curtain, surrounded by smiling people I don't know and Gloria. "There's a lot of college kids in the audience tonight," Gloria is telling me. "I think you should open with the 'What is reality?' routine and head on into your jokes about Einstein. Finish up with----"

"Jokes about Einstein?" I'm not looking at her, I'm looking past her and out onto the huge wooden floor of the stage. From back here I can't see the audience, but I can hear them.

"Gloria, leave him alone," Tad says. "He knows his audience."

"I know, I know, I just thought----"

"You're getting him all nervous again," Tad says, this time in a hushed voice. As if I couldn't hear him.

A bald man in a tuxedo approaches, shakes my hand, and says some things that I don't remember two seconds later. My whole body is starting to buzz with panic. He gives me a comrade-to-comrade smile then steps out onto the stage. A spotlight hits him and follows him out to

the front where a microphone sits on a stand. "Ladies and gentlemen," he says, his voice amplified and reverberating across the amphitheater. "I present to you the man who defines the term 'existential humor,'..." and then he says my name. He calls it out, long and exaggerated. There's cheers and applause. I turn and try to run, but Tad and Gloria grab me, turn me back around, and shove me out onto the stage.

Another spotlight flares on and hits me in the face, blinding me. I walk out to the microphone, shake the hand of the M.C., then turn forward in a dizzy state of suspended terror. The cheers and applause from the audience are deafening, but I can't see them. I'm facing a black void, blinded by the spotlights. "Thank you," I say into the microphone. "Thank you very much." The cheers go on and on. I stand there and wait, staring into the black void, feeling some comfort in the fact that I can't see anyone.

The cheering subsides, and I clear my throat. I have no idea what to say, I don't know any jokes. Or at least, any that I might have known I just cannot remember. Not now, not here. This is absurd, but I have to say something. Anything. I open my mouth, and words magically come out. I speak a sentence, my voice huge and loud, gushing forth like a sonic tidal wave across the amphitheater. "Tonight we're here to study the mating cycle of the Pacific Leatherback turtle."

There's a silent moment between my last word and the audience's response. They respond with a wave of laughter. Encouraged, I continue. "The Pacific Leatherback is the biggest living turtle on Earth. Some have been found that are as big as a car. They're also very old. One of the oldest is over two-thousand years old, which means it was born about the same time as Christ, and has lived all this time in the ocean, ignoring man's wars and man's progress, and . . ." I trail off. I've lost them, they're completely silent. I glance over at the side of the stage, seeing Gloria staring at me in horror, as if I'd lost my mind.

"I'm sorry, this is all a big mistake," I say into the microphone. "I'm not really who you think I am." There's a small wave of laughter at this. They think I'm building up to a joke. "You see, I'm from another dimension." There's a good laugh at this. "Though I look and sound like the comedian you think I am, I'm not him. I'm an impostor. In my world, I'm a college professor that teaches about reptiles and amphibians." There's a smaller wave of laughter, a bit unsure. I glance again at Gloria, and she is frantically mouthing the words, "What is reality?"

Turning back to the audience, I say it. "What is reality, anyway?" There's a big laugh at this, and cheers. Evidently they're all familiar with this routine and want to hear it.

It's a shame I don't know the rest.

"Reality is too complicated for us to perceive, our brains are much too primitive. We only see a very small part of it at a time. You see, there are an infinite number of dimensions, and we all extend far into them, but we can only see three of these dimensions at a time."

The audience has grown silent again. Gloria has her face covered by her hands.

"We humans are a lot larger creatures than you realize. What we all see are merely segments of each other, like segments of a worm. What we don't see is that we're all huge multi-dimensional worms, stretching through countless levels of the universe."

There's some fringe laughter, but for the most part I've totally lost them and they're silent and confused. Even worse, they're starting to become disappointed.

"I told you I'm from another dimension," I say. It doesn't help. Someone from the audience yells out, "Einstein!" I peer out, beginning to see shadows of heads. I'm starting to see the audience, and it's horrible. "Does anyone know any good Einstein jokes?" I ask.

There's a couple whistles and a few claps, then silence.

Looking toward the side stage, I suddenly blurt out, "I'm sorry. I

have to go to the bathroom." There's a low rumble of chuckles as I rush off stage. I shoulder past Gloria and Tad, past dozens of people staring at me with various degrees of concern. Gloria is following after me, calling my name. I run for the back stage door, burst through it to find it almost totally deserted. I head straight for the limousine, but find it empty --- the driver must be inside, watching the show. I try to open the driver's door, but it's locked. Security guards come toward me but stop when they see who I am. I turn away from them, jogging, running away. Behind me I hear Gloria calling my name, but it fades.

8. AMERICA WORLD

Like before, I find my way home by giving the address on my driver's license to a cab driver. I hope like hell that I've shifted dimensions, but the cab takes me to the same house. Once inside I find Pris has been there and removed all her possessions while I was at the amphitheater. I missed her, and she got away. I feel like death. I feel like all I have to do is lie down and stop breathing.

There's a black dial telephone on the bed stand beside my bed, sitting on top of a black and green phone book. I look through the book for 'Priscilla Nunez' but she's not listed, so in desperation I look for Tom Harrison. To my amazement, and with a small sigh of relief, I find it. I dial the number and a woman answers.

"Hello?" she says. The voice is familiar.

"Hello, Heather?"

"Yes?"

"Is Tom there?"

"Who's this calling?"

I tell her my name. When she says, "Who?" I say it again, and then, hesitantly, add, ". . . you know, the comedian?"

"Are you serious?!" she says with excitement. My heart sinks because, obviously, she doesn't know me personally. This means Tom probably doesn't know me either.

Tom comes on the line, sounding skeptical at first. The skepticism goes away after a few seconds, as it seems he recognizes my voice. "I'm sorry, I don't remember ever having met you," he says. "I mean, I think I would have remembered. Heather and I are big fans of yours."

"We met a while ago," I tell him, feeling despondent. "Unless, of course, I have the wrong Tom Harrison."

"That must be it," Tom says. "I can't be the only Tom Harrison."

This strikes me as ironic. If he only knew! "I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"That's no problem at all!"

I open my mouth to say something, but there's no words. I can't tell him anything, he'd think I'm crazy. "Well, uh, good-bye."

"Bye."

I put the heavy black receiver on the cradle and collapse into the big bed. The pillows, I realize, smell like Pris. Hopeless tears start leaking out my eyes as I lie there staring at the ceiling.

Then I think: The hell with this! I'm not stuck here, I can go somewhere else. My subconscious must have brought me here, searching for a world where Pris and I are together; obviously there has to be another world where this is true. I lie there trying to will myself to shift dimensions, to slip somewhere off into another reality. I remember the dream I had, the dream where I rose up through the ceiling and into other rooms, other realities. Try as I might, however, nothing happens.

The phone rings, and I pick it up, hoping it's Pris. It's not, it's

Gloria, and she's screaming at me over the phone. I hang up on her, then leave it off the hook. Lying back in the bed, I listen to the faint sound of the dial tone, wondering if it would start making loud beeping noises. But it doesn't, the phone system here seems primitive and the dial tone continues uninterrupted. It starts to fade as I think about Pris, about the night we made love. It's my most cherished memory. Dimly I'm aware that someone's knocking on the front door but I ignore it, knowing the door is locked. I have no intention of answering. I'm here until I leave, so to speak. Until I shift dimensions.

The dial tone fades in and out. The knocking goes away. I fall asleep and dream that everything is the way it used to be, with Tom and I living in the Euclid, and me teaching Herpetology and Tom writing about people who see little red lights. Pris is seeing Tom and I'm lusting after her in secret, but at least she's friendly to me and I can touch her arms and talk to her. I dream of a warm, lazy Sunday afternoon with Tom, Pris, Aaron and I are listening to familiar music and drinking Bloody Marys. Then the dream turns weird, and the floor is replaced by a rope net with holes big enough to fall through, and below us another room identical to ours is fully visible, complete with its own versions of us, but in slightly different positions. Below that is another room, and below that another, on and on.

In the dream I stand there on the rope floor, wobbling and trying to keep my balance, and peer far down below to see a place where I'm with Pris. The other versions of me are doing the same, all looking down. Far below, so far that I almost need binoculars to see it, there's a version of me who is not mimicking my actions. It's a version of me who has a woman in his arms, and I think, That's it! In my excitement I forget all about caution and lose my balance. The net wobbles as I swung my arms and teeter back and forth. There's a terrible sensation of falling, and I wake up, nearly leaping out of bed.

It's a brass bed, queen sized, with a bright yellow and green flowered bedspread. The room is small but bright, with sunlight streaming through open windows. There's clothes piled everywhere, in heaps on the floor, on top of furniture, and from one of the shiny brass bedposts hangs a brassiere. The cup size of the brassiere looks large enough to hold cantaloupes.

Someone stirs in the bed next to me, and I realize that there's a bare leg draped across one of mine. I also realize that I'm naked. I look over with fascination and see bright blond hair all over a pillow. It's not Pris. The head turns and reveals a face, and my eyes bulge. It's definitely not Pris --- it's Heather! Tom's Heather.

I drop my head back onto the pillow and feign sleep as she continues to stir. One of her hands slides across my chest, and her nose nuzzles in my ear. Then I feel something soft, wet, and warm. Her tongue. She sticks it in my ear and I jump, and she giggles. "Wake up," she says.

I mumble something, not even words, just word-sounds. So she continues tonguing my ear and then kisses the side of my face, moving downward to my chest. Reaching my left nipple, she rubs her tongue across it and fingers the other one, and while doing this I feel her legs on either side of mine and she's rubbing her vagina against my thigh. After about three minutes my thigh is all slimy and my penis is hard and throbbing. There is no point in continuing to pretend I'm asleep. I stroke her hair and feel my penis pressing insistently against her stomach.

From the open windows I hear traffic passing on a street nearby, the heavy bustle sound of morning rush hour. The rattling and rumblings of motors, the occasional honk of a horn. Odd, sparkling music drifts on the breeze from a neighbor's window, swelling and receding. Heather's breath is loud, and her skin is hot. She smells like woman's sweat, sweet and musky. My mind shuts off, and hormones take over.

I take hold of her arms and pull her up. She moves to my wishes, her face rising to mine. We kiss hard, touching tongues, then she sits up on me and rocks back and forth. Her smile holds a hint of teasing. I stare into her blue eyes, seeing things there I've never seen before, then watch as she looks down to see what she's doing. I feel her hand take my penis and guide it into herself, then both of us gasp as it slides in. She sits on top and moves slowly, savoring the feeling, her eyes closed and head tilted far back. I stare at her breasts and feel overwhelmed. They're big. The nipples are big. Some ancient urge causes me to raise my head and take one into my mouth, suckling eagerly. Heather gasps and makes other noises, then begins moving. Her breasts swing back and forth, hitting me in the face. I enjoy it, I feel like I'm in a porno movie.

She moves faster, gaining some sort of rhythmic momentum, and I feel my climax building like a light bulb that's about to flash and burn out. I try to hold it back but my control is gone. I feel every muscle in my body clench and then everything stops. Time stops. It's like God reaches down with a glowing golden staff and taps me on the head. Pow. Wham. Time starts up again, and I feel like I'm buzzing with electricity. Heather is gasping and making jerking movements, crying out; apparently my orgasm triggered her's. I smile, thinking that I've achieved sex without guilt. Me with Heather Clarke, I would never have believed such a thing. And here I see her in this intimate moment, where her mouth is open and eyes are closed, looking very child-like, and I begin to see what Tom likes about her.

Heather collapses on top of me and I hold her. She feels like she's shivering, her back and arms giving occasional twitches. Perhaps her orgasm is still going. I hold tight, feeling it with her. When she's finally still, and I feel like drifting back to sleep, she pulls back, gives me a quick kiss, then crawls off the bed and disappears. I hear a shower start. A few moments later I hear her singing.

I sit up in bed and look around the room again. Where am I? The clothes piled about here and there are all definitely her's. On the floor beside the bed is one single, small pile of male clothes. They must be mine. Before I can gather the energy to get out of the bed and try them on, Heather is done with her shower and comes walking in wearing a robe and a towel wrapped around her head. "Are you going to stop by later?" she asks.

"Sure."

"You will?" She smiles, pleased.

"Yes."

She retains her smile, drying off and then dressing. Watching her dress is like watching a strip-tease in reverse. She's putting on a little show for me, throwing me glances and more smiles, enjoying my attention. Of course, she's an actress. If she didn't want the attention, she'd be something else. But as I watch her dress, I realize she is something else --- she's putting on a waitress's uniform. There's even a little gold tag with her name on it.

Strutting over to the bed, she gives me a coy look then leans over to kiss me. "Got to run," she says. "Bye Tom." Walking over to the doorway, she stops and poses, blows me a kiss, then says, "Love you." Then she's gone. I sit there and listen as she moves through the rest of the house and then out the front door. A moment after that I hear a car start up and then drive away.

I sit there in a daze for a long while. Why in the hell did she call me "Tom?" After a while I begin to doubt she'd said that, that maybe I'd misheard her.

Leaning over the edge of the bed, I reach down and pick up the pair of black jeans. There's a wallet in the back pocket, so I pull it out and open it up. It's stuffed with green bills and credit cards with

unfamiliar brand names. The names on the credit cards, and the name on the driver's license, are all "Tom Harrison." The driver's license has my picture on it, though. The address is in Pacifica.

I climb out of bed and walk naked through the house to find the bathroom. The face in the mirror, thank God, is still mine. My hair is a lot shorter than I usually keep it, though.

I take a long, hot shower, then cut my face up with one of Heather's dull razors. Then I wander once again through the small, messy house, seeing pictures of myself and her on a wall, then head back into the bedroom and dress. The jet-black shirt is badly wrinkled, and has the slippery shiny look and feel of 100% polyester. But it's not, the tag says it's silk. Either this is my best shirt, or I'm filthy rich. Or maybe it was a present from Heather.

Once dressed, I poke around in the tiny, dingy kitchen and find some leftover Chinese food that looks edible. There is no microwave oven, so I eat it cold. It seems so odd that I'd find Heather like this; the Heather I'd known would be horrified to see herself in such a state. I still couldn't believe that I'd just made love with her. She'd always looked at me like I was a bug. If only it were Pris instead of Heather. This would qualify as a bona fide Heaven if it were Pris.

Sitting at the small kitchen table and feeling heart sickness coming on, I force myself to stand up and shake it off. Of all the weird places I've found myself, this is the most intriguing. I clean the kitchen up as best I can, pull a set of keys out of my pocket, then walk outside to see what kind of car I own.

The sunshine is bright, and it makes me squint. The air has a clean, misty quality to it, with thin low clouds drifting on a gentle breeze. Heather's neighborhood is very clean, made up of small houses on very straight streets. On the horizon are familiar hills; familiar in shape and position, but not in appearance. It's still San Francisco, though another version.

The car in the driveway looks like a 1960's version of what a 1984 car should look like. Curved feminine lines; a huge, oval scoop in front; foot-high tail fins and a bubble roof. With some hesitation I try the keys in the lock, finding one that fits, then step back as the glass bubble tilts up and a door swings open. Weird. Climbing in, I shut the door and wait as the bubble closes over me. It feels like I'm in a spaceship.

There's seventeen dials in front of me on the dash, and almost as many push-buttons. It takes me a minute to find a place to put the ignition key. Inserting it and turning it makes all the buttons light up, but the engine doesn't start. Searching around again, I find one of the buttons, a red one to be exact, reads "IGNITION." I push it and there's this tremendous whine, then a low thrumming sound, then a building whir --- like a gyro coming up to speed. I experimentally press down on the accelerator pedal and the engine screams. It doesn't sound like any other car I've ever heard in my life. It sounds like a jet airplane.

I carefully release the emergency brake, and slip the automatic transmission into drive. The car rolls onto the street and up the hill with no effort at all, even though I'm not pushing on the accelerator. Tom would definitely love this car. It feels like it could explode at any moment.

Wandering aimlessly, I explore this odd version of San Francisco. There is a downtown section here with it's large skyscrapers, but they're not quite as big as I'm used too. There are freeways everywhere. There are houses everywhere, too, and most of them are as small as Heather's --- little one or two bedroom places with neat little yards and many complete with picket fence. The American Dream. Up on one of the highways I see a sign pointing the way to Pacifica, so I brave the on-ramp and actually put some pressure on the accelerator pedal. The car

smoothly rolls up onto the freeway as if it were rolling down a hill. The traffic in the other 12 lanes pass by me like I'm stuck in the mud, so I speed up, matching their pace. I pass a sign that reads "SPEED LIMIT: 90 MPH." Looking at the dash, I notice my car's speedometer goes up to 320. Jesus.

The city thins and the freeway straightens out; the speed limit goes up to 150 MPH. Holding onto the steering wheel with an abstract sense of terror, I push down on the pedal and watch as the needle goes up to the speed limit. The road passes under me like I'm in an airplane going down a runway for takeoff. Despite my velocity, there are still cars passing me like I was an old lady in a Model T Ford. One of the cars that goes past is just a blur of black and white, looking like some sort of ground-hugging missile. It's big, too, a good 25 feet long. Brilliant colors flash from the top of it, and it pulls another car over to the shoulder. I remain in the slow lane, doing a mere 150 and playing it safe.

There are five warning signs to ensure I slow down enough to make the Pacifica off-ramp. I wander around for a while until I stumble upon the road where I supposedly live; it takes me out into the country. I find a mailbox with my address in front of a yard so large it looks like a ranch. Across the street is the ocean.

The driveway is more like a private road. I keep thinking to myself, God, please, let this place actually belong to me. The front is all constructed of white brick and large angled timbers. The windows are large and made of multiple panes. Maybe, I think to myself --- maybe Pris is inside. I pull in front and park, then sit there watching for signs of life. Nothing human stirs from within, though I do notice a lizard sitting on a brick wall to the side, watching me warily and bobbing its head.

I get out of the car and walk up to the door, giving it a hard, solid knock. No one responds. I try the knob and find its locked. One of my keys fit, and it swings open. Inside I see a large free-standing fire place surrounded by a sunken living room, the two levels of floor separated by a black iron railing. "Hello?" I call out, but no one answers. I walk into the living room and look around. A large portrait of myself and Heather hangs on the wall.

I tour the house in a constant state of amazement, its so large and the rooms are so big. In a bedroom that I guess is mine, I find black cowboy boots, black dress shoes, black tennis shoes, black socks, and black dress ties. There's black silk shirts and at least three dozen pairs of black denim jeans. There's a black leather jacket for every day of the week. It seems the only articles of clothing I own that aren't black are my underwear, which are standard-looking white briefs.

The sheets on the large bed are satin, and deep red.

The furniture throughout the house is rustic and made from large pieces of heavy wood. It's all dark brown; everything is dark brown. Dark brown, deep red, or black. The walls, thank god, are white, but the ceiling is varnished wooden beams and the same general color as all the furniture.

In what looks like the study is a pile of several newspapers, all of them The San Francisco Record. The national news is vaguely disturbing, as it seems the United States encompasses a global empire, 134 states in all, including a large part of Europe and most of what should be the Soviet Union. It looks like the U.S.A. took a big advantage during World War II, continuing on even after Germany and Japan were defeated. General Patton went ahead and took Russia as well, then came back after the war to become President. Patton reigned for several terms, and now the Vice President from his last term was the head of the nation. I gasp and laugh when I read his name: Richard Millhouse Nixon.

There's a large, elaborate electric typewriter sitting on the desk, with paper still in it. The keyboard is arranged differently than I'm used to ---in order to touch-type on this machine I would have to relearn all over again. There's some envelopes on the desk made out to my name --- my real name, not Tom Harrison --- and I look them over, finding large paychecks from The San Francisco Record. It seems I'm a writer. "Tom Harrison" is my pen name. Somehow I'm not surprised.

The paper in the typewriter is something I'm writing, something half-finished, so I search around and find the other pages and sit down at the desk to see what's going on. I'm burning with curiosity, as I can't imagine what I could be writing about. Herpetology? Biology? Science in general? As I read I find it's about physics, and is a sort of exposé about a government program. The hair on the back of my neck stands up, and I get big chill through my whole body.

I have somehow penetrated a top secret government research project, a project dealing with something I've become all too familiar with: travel through physical dimensions other than the three that we perceive. Their goal is to be able to reach through a "dimensional doorway" and place troops or explosives anywhere on Earth instantaneously. ". . . the physicists and researchers," it reads, "are all under the assumption that they're sending test objects instantaneously from one place to another in the same world. The truth is, however, much more strange. The dimensional doorway is between worlds, not mere places. These worlds are actual alternate realities, other versions of Earth, the existence of which is giving the researchers a tremendous problem----"

I'm interrupted in my reading by a loud crash from somewhere in the house. Frowning, I stand up and walk to the doorway, manuscript in hand. Several men of different shapes and sizes have smashed down the front door and come barging inside, all dressed in business suits made from a odd baby-blue color, with matching hats. They have thin black ties and dark glasses. As I watch, they take their glasses off and pull large revolvers out of shoulder holsters. I back away, out of sight, and turn toward the window. I'm fumbling with the latch to get it open when two of them walk into the room and shout "FBI!" so loud I nearly piss my pants. My immediate reaction is to freeze. I guess it's because I'd seen it so many times on television.

As I remain absolutely still, one of them approaches and puts the barrel of his gun right against my head. "Going somewhere, Harrison?" he says.

"Nowhere."

"What's this?" He picks up the manuscript I'd dropped when they'd yelled out "FBI!" "This is interesting," he says, smiling. "Good piece of writing, hack."

Others crowd into the room. "What is it?" asks one.

"Exactly what we were looking for. Right in his sweaty little hands." Still holding his gun against my head, he puts his elongated, sharp-nosed face in mine, stares into my eyes with his narrow, dark-pupil squint, and says, "Treason is a serious crime."

"Who committed treason?" I ask.

He smiles, and pulls the gun away from my head. He brings it back again, hard, against my ear. The blow sends me headlong into the wall, and I crumple to the floor, reeling with the unexpected pain. I hear this click and the guy is standing there with the gun pointed at me like he's going to shoot. One of the others grabs his arm and pushes it up, and the gun goes off with a violent explosion of fire, leaving my ears ringing.

"You idiot!" shouts the man who'd saved my life. "We're supposed to take him down for questioning!"

"Oh," he says, still looking at me with the squinting eyes. "I forgot."

I manage to make it halfway to my feet. "I want to see my lawyer."

The man who saved my life punches me in the right eye, sending me back against the wall again. "You don't get a lawyer, Harrison."

"I have a right to a lawyer," I mumble, staying on the floor.

"Listen to him," one of them says, like I've said something funny. He steps forward and kicks me viciously in the stomach. I gasp for breath, curled up in a ball at his feet, and they all laugh. "There's your lawyer," the bastard says, laughing. He kicks me again. They laugh some more.

I'm barely conscious as they drag me outside and toss me into the back of a car. One hands me a rag, because I'm apparently bleeding from somewhere. I see the blood but have no idea where its coming from --- so many different places hurt. They get in and start the engine, and the others get in their other cars and start them up, and we all drive out to the freeway and accelerate to about 190 miles per hour. Despite the speed, it's a very long ride.

9. FOUR WALLS

There's an endless stretch of farmland, and the road trails up and around smooth rounded hills. I close my eyes and see negative images of the hills, all black with white shadows, and the white details of the black parts of the car. I have enough of a headache for two heads compressed into one. For a while it gets so bad I wish one of the thugs would turn around and shoot me in the forehead. Just get it over with. The long ride and the headache, however, are part of the torture. Maybe they figure that by the time we reach our destination I'll be willing to tell them anything in exchange for a Tylenol.

Our destination is a large gray building set in the hills, a big ugly place surrounded by barbed wire and electrified fences. There are lots of men with rifles, and large dogs with three inch fangs. I gaze out the car window at this place and feel like I'm going to throw up.

One of the men is looking back at me though the heavy gage screen that separates the front of the car from the back. He's smiling.

"Welcome home, Harrison," he says.

"Just shoot me and get it over with."

"I'm going to enjoy interrogating you." He calls me a fucking traitor. Such language. He sounds like an actor portraying a stereotypical Southern racist KKK-card-toting deputy sheriff. He's even chewing gum, and smacking it at that.

Guards with machine guns let us through the gates, and we pull up in front of a set of large iron doors. The FBI agents --- if that's really what they are --- pile out and surround the car. The door is opened and I'm pulled stumbling from inside. Then there's this moment where I'm standing in the midst of them, no one holding me, and all of them watching and clutching their guns. It's like they want me to run so that they can open fire. I look around to see nothing but barbed wire and rabid dogs. Where exactly do they expect me to run? If anything, I'd leap back into the car.

I stand and stare back at them. I make eye contact with one, and he screams out "Fuck you!" and spits at me. Another one makes like he's going to swing at me, and the others around him put on a big show of grabbing his arms and holding him back. The whole thing is clumsy and stupid, obviously staged.

They open the big iron doors with a loud clunk and a shriek of rusty hinges. As I'm pulled into the building they do their best to make me stumble, constantly pulling and shoving to keep me off balance. Everyone is talking and shouting back and forth. My head throbs.

There's a long concrete hallway that's so gray and dingy it could be straight out of a medieval castle. At the end is a cage door, which opens with an angry buzz, and then another cage door, and then another. All three shut behind me, and it gives me a hopeless feeling: I'm never going to see the outside world again. I'm pushed down another corridor and into a bare concrete room. There's nothing in it but a light embedded in the ceiling and a rusty iron drain in the middle of the floor.

"Take your clothes off!" says one of the uniformed men. He's got a weird, square nose and a chin that juts out a good inch and a half in front of his lips.

I back away from them, up against the far wall. "I'm not taking my clothes off."

"You take 'em off or I'm going to rip them off!"

I shake my head. No way. I have a horrible feeling that I'm about to be sodomized, and I've decided to fight them first. I don't care if they kill me. The square-nosed big-chinned bastard reaches out for my shirt and I ball up my right fist and plunge it between his eyes. My fist hits with a loud smack, sending his head back and his arms wavering around. His comrades catch him and they move forward in a mass. I shout a desperate animal howl and dive at them, fists swinging. My arms are caught and wrenched back behind me, and I'm lifted off the ground. I feel my feet dangling as I'm held helpless and fists bash my ribs and stomach. There's surprisingly little pain. The adrenaline in my blood holds it back.

My clothes are torn away and I'm thrown head first into the cement wall. This hurts more than their blows, and I lie on the ground holding my head while a last few vicious kicks are laid into my side and back. Then they withdraw and I'm left on the cold cement with my pain, and nothing else.

There's two doors to the cell. The inner door is a cage door. The outer door is a solid iron door with a peep hole. Both of them slam shut and the angry voices recede. I push myself to a sitting position and shake my head. Blood droplets spatter across the cold cement floor. I stare at them with a kind of morbid fascination.

Hours pass. The chill of the floor creeps up into my body, and I begin shivering. The walls are cold, so I stay away from them, sitting with my knees up, leaning forward, hugging myself. More hours pass.

I find my skin is discoloring in patches where I've been hit, big ugly bruises starting to form. The cold makes the pain worse, and I'm so stiff that I can hardly make it to my feet. I walk around the room under the heatless light, hugging myself, fighting hypothermia. The pain is so encompassing that I find myself starting to enjoy it, and I rub the sore spots and feel the pain and rub them some more.

The only warning I get is two seconds of muffled voices, and then there's a sharp metallic sound as a latch is wrenched open and the outer door swings on its hinges. I stop in mid-stride and look at the leering faces under the blue hats. One of them is holding an immense nozzle which drips water, and I realize it's a fire hose just a split second before he turns it on.

The water is icy cold and very hard. The stream hits me like a kick and sends me against the far wall, curled around my stomach with my hands protecting my balls. The water smashes me against the cement, hitting harder than their fists, shoving me this way and that. It blasts my feet out from under me and I fall on my back, desperately trying to keep my face turned away and still holding my most tender parts. The spray hits the wall near my head and explodes, the splash-back so hard it feels like glass shards. Water streams up my nose and down my throat and I choke on it, gagging. My body spins, and I jump, dodging, moving like a wrestler, hacking and coughing as my mindless reflexes take over and search in vain for an escape from the water. I end up in a corner,

my back to it. It pins me there, paralyzing me, then after a minute or so it stops.

I hear laughter, and water gurgling down the drain. I'm cold and shivering, and feel ultimately humiliated. I'm afraid to turn around and even look at them. I stand there, breathing against the cement wall, thinking that some defiant act is called for but --- at the same time --- I don't want to give them an excuse to turn the water on me again.

I'm more than shivering. I'm shaking uncontrollably and my body feels numb. I'm violently cold. I hear the fire hose hiss and the water bludgeons me again, smashing my head into the cement, pressing it there with the full force of someone standing on it. They move the hammering stream down my back, up and down, but I stay where I am and endure it. I hear shouting above the water, but the words are indistinct. The water stops, abruptly, and keys rattle as the inner door is unlocked. I hear wet footsteps across the floor of the cell.

I turn and see a man with a large forehead dressed in a gray suit walking toward me. "Are you all right?" he asks.

I stare at him, shivering, unwilling to trust.

He looks me up and down, his brows furrowed. Then, turning, he shouts, "Goddamn it! Get this man a towel --- and some clothes!"

There's some muttered curses at the door, but the men with the fire hose withdraw while one armed guard stands in the doorway, watching. The man in the gray suit turns back to me. "I'm Charles Cooper, Mr. Harrison. I'm with the department of Military Applications, Federal Bureau of Science."

I nod at him, shivering. I'll talk when the promised towels arrive, not before.

"My department is Internal Affairs," he continues. "The security of scientific military experimentation falls into my jurisdiction. Unfortunately, the FBI and the various State Police do all the leg work for this department, which is how you ended up in your, ah, unfortunate situation."

I nod once again, hugging myself. Shivering.

"I can help you, Mr. Harrison." He looks me in the eyes, giving me a long, searching stare. I nod once again, thinking that the whole purpose of my mistreatment is so that this man would become my savior. "If you cooperate with me, I can keep these men off your back." He waits for me to answer, but when I say nothing he clears his throat and looks away. "If you don't," he says, "then there's nothing I can do for you."

"None of this was necessary at all," I tell him, my voice shaking. "I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"That's good----"

"No, it's not. You're not going to believe me."

"I'll believe anything if it's the truth."

I doubt it, but I say nothing. Towels and jail house fatigues are carried into the room by one of the sullen guards. I grab the towel and begin vigorously drying myself off while the two men stand waiting. I'm shaking so bad that I nearly fall over, my equilibrium totally shot. My head still pounds, but the cold and the aches all across my body drown it out. When I climb into the over-sized, stiff, rough fatigues it does nothing to stop the cold. Once dressed, Cooper and two of the armed guards escort me out of the wet cell and down a corridor. On my left are a whole line of cells much like the one I just got out of, all equipped with the inner and outer doors. A few have the outer doors open, the prisoner within visible through the bars. I catch glimpses of matted, pathetic men, unshaven and unkempt, their arms and legs thin. Too thin. It's the thin of starvation and neglect. Real, hard fear settles in my gut --- this place is a death camp.

Cooper has me step into a large cell with a long table and padded benches. At the back of the cell is a doorway into another room. Beyond

I can see what looks like an electric chair, complete with straps, clamps, and a skull cap.

"Sit down," Cooper says, motioning toward the table. "Want some coffee or something?"

"Yeah." I sit down, still shivering. My legs hurt as I sit, bruises sending out shock waves of pain.

"You look cold. You want a blanket?"

"Please."

He motions to one of the guards, who wordlessly steps outside. The other remains, and I stare for a moment at the machine gun he's holding --- I have a short, stupid daydream about grabbing that thing, using it to kill as many of these bastards as I can before they get me. I have no doubt that they never intend to let me out of here. As far as the outer world goes, I've already disappeared.

The guard returns with a blanket, a thermos and two Styrofoam cups. I wrap the blanket around me and feel a tiny amount of relief. What really warms me is the hot coffee that's poured in my cup. I hold it in both hands and savor the warmth, sipping it slowly. Cooper sits across from me and sips from his own cup. He's got a folder open on the table and is glancing through some pages. I realize it's a copy of the half-finished manuscript that got me into this mess.

"Where did you get the information to write this article?" Cooper asks.

"I didn't write the article."

"You didn't write this article?" His voice is sharp. It's a "don't fuck with me" voice.

"No. It's a bit confusing, but --- I didn't write it."

"Who did?"

"Another me." He looks disgusted, so I quickly lean forward and say, "Hear me out, please. I'm telling the truth, but I told you it's going to be hard to believe. I'm not the person you think I am --- I'm from another dimension, another plane of reality. The person you know as me is not here anymore, I can only guess that he's gone into a different dimension as well."

"What is this crap?"

"Look at the subject of this article," I tell him, jabbing the paper with my finger. "The whole project is what this is about. Your scientists are shooting laser beams through four-dimensional prisms and so are the scientists from a hundred thousand other versions of your project. The dimensional doorways being opened are not between places in this set of dimensions. They're being opened between sets of dimensions. Do you understand? Your project is opening doors between parallel worlds. I am from one of these parallel worlds."

"How did you get involved in this?"

"I stumbled into it. I saw one of the laser lights being used from one of the projects."

"Who let you in on the inside information?"

"Tom Harrison."

"You're not Tom Harrison?"

"No. It's not even the name of the version of me that originates here, it's just a----"

"Okay, all right."

"It's a pseudonym----"

"That's enough!" Cooper thinks for a moment, grinding his teeth.

"I'm not here to waste my time. I'm here to keep these bastards from killing you. If you're not going to cooperate, then there's nothing I can do."

"I'm telling you the truth."

Cooper looked pained. "I'm not an idiot, Harrison."

"My name's not Harrison."

"I know what your name is!" he shouts, rising to his feet. "I know

everything about you! We've got a file on you a foot thick --- I know where you were born, where you went to school, what your grades were, what you studied, who you first kissed. I know every magazine you've sent away for, every newspaper you've subscribed to --- I even know what bookstores you go to and what books you've bought. I've got a file on every woman you've been with. I know who Heather Clarke is, too. I know where she lives, and I know that's where you woke up this morning."

"Well, it sounds like you know everything."

"I do!" He leans forward. "Everything except who your sources were on this article of yours. Who leaked top secret information to you?"

I pour myself another cup of coffee. "Well," I start, then sip the coffee. "You want to know who fed me all the top secret information."

Cooper eases himself down on the bench across from me. "Yes. I want their names, all of them."

"Hmmm." I sip the coffee again, savoring the warmth. I know they're going to take it away from me soon. "Hmmm," I say again, closing my eyes. I'm silent for a long moment, wondering how long I can stall.

"Names, Harrison," Cooper says.

"That's rather hard," I tell him.

"Hard? Hard is what it's going to be if you don't cooperate!"

"There are no names."

Cooper frowns.

"No one leaked the information to me," I tell him. "I found it out all on my own. I penetrated the security without any help, tapping phone lines, breaking into offices at night. I simply gathered the information as I found it."

Cooper sighs, leaning back. "Okay. Then tell me, who's phone lines did you tap? Who's offices did you break into? I want times and dates."

"It was over the last couple of weeks. I don't know who's lines or offices they were, because I was going in at random."

"Where was it you were doing this?"

"At the project."

"At the project," he repeats, his voice deadpan. "And how is it you were able to get anywhere near the project without anyone noticing?"

"The security isn't as good as you think."

"Really."

"There's gaping holes."

"Where?"

"Everywhere."

"Well, it just so happens that you've been under surveillance for the past two weeks, and you haven't been anywhere near the project. We have pictures of you at pay phones all around the San Francisco area, which leads us to believe you've received your information by phone. It was given to you willingly by someone at the project, someone deep within the project."

I regretfully finish the last of my coffee. "This is pointless," I tell him. "I have no idea what the version of me has been doing here for the past two weeks. I only got here this morning." I reach for the thermos but he pulls it away.

"One last chance, Harrison."

"Whatever."

"Give me the name of your source."

"Even if I did know, I probably wouldn't tell you." I stare at the thermos with sadness.

Cooper stands up, taking the thermos with him. "Your loyalty is admirable," he says. "But we're going to get it out of you no matter how strong you think you are. I'm turning you back over to the FBI, and they know all the weak spots."

"I'm sure they do."

"You're really in for it, Harrison," he says, turning away. "These men are ruthless." He gives me a look.

I stare back, feeling hopeless.

Cooper walks out the door and is gone.

The guard with the square nose and the over-large chin steps in, smiling. "You didn't cooperate," he says. He and his comrades surround me, yank me up from the bench and away from the table. The first fist smashes across my face, giving a distinct, hot pain; the rest fades together in a blur of agony.

#

I spend the night in a cold cell with the blanket but no cot. I sleep fitfully, waking every few minutes thinking they're coming in with the fire hose. The light is bright and there's no way to turn it off, and even if I lie facing away from it, it reflects bright from the concrete walls and lights up my eyelids. I keep hoping to sleep and shift realities, but for some reason I'm stuck here. Perhaps it's because I can't get into a really deep sleep? For a while I lie there and try willing myself to move. It's useless, I'm so stiff and sore I can barely move in the mere three dimensions of the cell.

There's a metallic bang and loud clunk, and the squeal of heavy doors opening. I close my eyes and pretend I'm dead --- maybe they'll leave me alone. No such luck. I get a kick right in the middle of my back, then hands take hold of my arms and lift me painfully to my feet. My legs don't work very well, and they have to hold me up as I stumble in between them. They take me to the room with the table and benches, and for a brief moment I hope for coffee and maybe even a meal --- I haven't seen even a crumb of food since they brought me here --- but no, I'm marched right past the table, right to the back of the room and through the door. In the room beyond, the room with the electric chair, they lock me into a standing position by putting my arms and legs in manacles, then they leave.

The chains holding my feet are short, close to the wall, while the chains holding my arms are a foot and a half long. The wall, I find, is not straight --- it angles forward --- which makes it impossible for me to lean against it. I have to stand under my own balance or hang by my arms, which is painful. This makes sense, because whoever designed it obviously didn't want to make it comfortable.

The torture is very subtle. Not only do I have to stand there and stare at an electric chair, but also a big electric clock on the wall. Hours pass second by second, and I get to watch them pass --- the slow, deliberate movement of the second hand becomes a horrible thing. It does no good to close my eyes, because when I open them again I can't believe how little time has passed. Five hours pass this way, and I'm to the point of passing out when I hear footsteps.

A group of guards led by the one with the square nose and big chin enter the room with a woman. The woman cries out and rushes toward me, grabbing hold of me and hugging. It's Heather. I dip my face into her hair, kissing the top of her head. The smell of perfume and female sweat is strong. I feel a small flicker of hope, thinking she's here to get me out, but this is dashed as they pry her away from me and hold her as she struggles. This is beyond sick --- they're going to force her to watch as they torture me. But no, this isn't true either. They pull her dress off, stripping her down to her brassiere and panties. Then they force her down into the electric chair and begin strapping her in.

"No!" I shout. "No! Stop this! Stop! I want to talk to Cooper! Bring Cooper in here!"

"Shut him up," says square nose.

One of the guards obligingly steps over and lays a hard punch right into my upper stomach, and I go limp, hanging from my arms and making

gasping, wheezing noises. The place I've been punched makes it hard for me to breathe. It makes it impossible to talk. I fight it, struggling to tell them to stop, but all I can do is shake my head at them and gasp. Heather is beyond crying, she is whimpering. She's terrified. There's about twenty different straps and even a gag that goes in her mouth, and then they all step back and one of them reaches for a switch on the wall. I manage to grunt out a long, agonized "NOOO!" as the switch is thrown.

Heather's eyes bulge and her body trembles. Each one of her fingers dance with a rhythm of its own. The bastard keeps the switch on for fifteen seconds, then flips it off. Heather's eyes close and her head sags forward, and her lungs let out one long sigh. Jesus, she's dead. I stare at them in horror --- how can they do this? What did she ever do to them? What's worse, they're grinning.

"Filthy fucking murdering bastards!" I gasp, barely able to talk. They only glance at me for a moment, then return their gaze at her. Her head lolls about, and square nose leans forward.

"How'd you like that, sweetheart? That was the lowest setting. Do you want to try ten volts more?"

Her eyes still closed, she shakes her head. I feel relieved that she's still alive, but this relief is short-lived. The bastard changes a setting behind the chair and throws the switch again. I close my eyes, unwilling to watch. When it's over, there's a puddle of urine under the chair. Heather is making weak sobbing sounds.

"You bastards! You fucking filth! Leave her alone!"

"You hear that?" square nose says. "Your boyfriend just told us to raise it up another ten volts!"

"No! Wait! Stop, I'll tell you my source! Stop it----!"

They jolt her again. This time I don't close my eyes. I stare, watching the electricity rape every muscle of her body, letting it burn into my memory. I promise myself that I will somehow kill each and every one of these people. No bullet through the brain, either --- but long, slow horrible deaths.

Cooper walks in on the tail end of this last jolt. His face is impassive as he stands there and waits for it to end. After this one Heather once again looks dead, so much so that Cooper reaches out and feels for a pulse in her neck. "Poor girl," he says. "Another ten volts will probably stop her heart for good."

"You treacherous bastard," I say to him. "You primeval fuck."

"Set it up another ten volts," Cooper says.

I wrench at the chains holding me, wishing that just once I could be Superman and pull them apart. The sad fact is I'm as weak as a sick dog. "No, Cooper . . . please. No. She has nothing to do with this."

Square nose sets the dial for another ten volts and steps back over to the switch. "If you've got something to tell me," Cooper says, "you'd better tell me now."

"Alvin Laurel." I blurt it out like a bubble, and like a bubble the name seems to float there in the air.

Cooper seems taken aback. "Alvin Laurel?"

"Alvin Laurel told me everything. He showed me the four-dimensional prism and the cube he made from straws. Everything I know I learned from him."

He thinks about it for a moment, then says, "No. You're lying. Shock the girl."

"No! NO!" I stare helplessly as Heather is hit harder than ever, the electricity making her eyelids flutter in such a horrible way I start sobbing, and when the current is off I call out her name. She doesn't respond, but I see her chest heaving as if she can't catch her breath. The others are watching too, curious to see if she'll survive. Eventually she raises her head and looks at me. I can't read her look, though I imagine it's full of hatred.

Cooper turns to me. "Think she'll survive it again?"

"I told you who my contact is. If you don't believe me, then check it out yourself."

"It's not Alvin Laurel. I don't believe you."

"Then kill us both, because I don't have anything else I can tell you."

Cooper walks around the room, deep in thought. He walks around behind the electric chair, examines the power setting, then continues around and peers into Heather's face. Then he turns and walks back to me. I stare at him with dead eyes.

"Should I shock her again?" asks square nose.

Cooper looks at me for a long moment, then says, "No. Cut the poor woman loose. Stick this guy in a cell. I'll check the information out." He spins on his heel and walks quickly out of the room, already intent on his mission.

The guards release Heather from the chair and bundle up her clothes. She has trouble standing. "Take her to the showers," square nose says. They lead her out, Heather shuffling her feet, her eyelids half covering her eyes.

"You're going to let her go, right?" I ask square nose.

"Let her go? With boobs like that?" He laughs and follows them out. I'm left hanging there once again, all alone with the electric chair and the clock. For some reason the clock doesn't seem so slow anymore.

Four hours pass in a daze. When they finally come for me, square nose isn't with them --- he's probably off shift by now. One of the guards wrinkles his nose as he unlocks the manacles. While hanging there I had no luxury such as a toilet.

I'm put into a cell much like the one where I was sprayed down with the fire hose --- a concrete cube with a drain in the floor, and no furniture. My only comfort is the blanket that no one had thought to take away from me. I ask the guard for water and he brings me a little paper cup full, but no more. I ask for food but no one hears me, no one comes near. Huddled by the door with the blanket, a wretched, broken prisoner, I wait.

Sleep comes, but it's a harsh, cold sleep. I have a nightmare about the electric chair, and somehow I'm both in the chair and up against the wall hanging by the manacles. It switches back and forth, depending on the whimsy of a dream's perspective. I am both a spectator and participant in the electrocution. Sometimes I am myself, sometimes I am Heather. In the end I am where I actually had been, hanging from the wall in chains. The figure in the electric chair is black and charred, with slow tendrils of smoke drifting up from the arms and head.

When I awake I'm only half-awake, moving weakly to a less-uncomfortable position, peering around at the cell which hasn't changed. Thirst and hunger has become a dull ache which feels like I'd been shot in the stomach and am slowly bleeding to death. I care less and less about the world. Hours drag by and I sleep again. I dream a short, happy dream where Tom and Aaron has come to get me out of this place, but I awake and find myself still in the same cell, with the same weakness and pain.

The light embedded in the ceiling has a funny yellow tint to it, and I squint, looking at it, wondering. If only I could move through the dimensions. If only I could remember how I did it. I've seen the multi-dimensional landscape before, how come I can't see it now?

I stare for a long time, and space around the light seems to bend back on itself and there's a rainbow effect in the light. That's it, I think to myself wearily. Either I'm seeing through, or I'm hallucinating. Either one is fine with me. I force my gaze away from the light, and look carefully around the prison cell. There's a moment of vertigo, and then there's an amazing shift in my perspective. The walls,

floor and ceiling all pull apart from each other at the corners, leaving big gaps in between. I can see around the walls, floor, and ceiling.

I stand up, walking weakly to the nearest corner. I'm smiling. It's so absurd --- here I am, a four-dimensional creature feeling trapped in a three-dimensional room. The builders of the jail did not build in four dimensions, so here are gaping holes in a prison cell. Smiling weakly to myself, I step right through.

10. GHOSTS

Stepping around walls feels like I'm playing a drunken game of hopscotch. I weave in and out, back and forth and around, keeping to the rear of the cells. Other prisoners look at me in astonishment as I appear in one corner of their cell and disappear into the other corner. At last I reach a blank wall, but then duck under it and come up from the lower corner. I emerge in the middle of a long corridor, startling the hell out of a guard. He drops his gun in his excitement, shouting at the top of his lungs, so I dive to the other side and roll under the far wall. When I come up again I'm in a deserted office, and in the corner there I find a water cooler.

Feeling dizzy and seeing spots, I stumble across the room to the rolling desk chair and use it as a walker to reach the water cooler. There I sit down and with shaking hands pull a paper cup from the dispenser and fill it with water. I drink five cups one after the other, then sit back and feel it flowing through my body. It feels like peace. I'm not going to die.

Outside the office door I hear footsteps run past and some indistinct shouting. I smile, then drink more water. My perception of the gaps between walls has not changed, and I doubt that it will. Like a holy man finding the voice of God while starving himself, I seemed to have snapped into a new mindset. I drink more water, then decide to leave the sanctuary to go in search of food.

I find the prison kitchen, which is deserted. The only food are the guard's lunch sacks in the refrigerator; they don't seem to feed any of the prisoners here. I pull out several lunch sacks and turn around just as a guard comes walking in. Without a word I drop to the ground and roll under the wall. On the other side is an unoccupied cell. I drop the food there and walk to the corner, stepping around and back into the kitchen behind the guard. He's slowly backing away from the spot where I'd disappeared. When he's within reach, I lean forward and snatch the pistol out of his holster. He spins around, is mouth open and his eyes wide, and he cries out in fear. I don't recognize him --- he's not one of the ones who'd tortured Heather, so I leave him alone, stepping around the corner again and into the cell with the food. There I sit and eat, not really tasting any of the sandwiches or enjoying the fruit, simply feeling it fill my stomach until I'm about to be sick.

Keeping to the back walls, I play hopscotch again through the cells, searching each one for Heather. Up and down all three floors I go, not finding any hint of her. I hope they let her go, but I'm also thinking they might have raped and killed her. I hold the guard's gun tightly in my right hand, not really knowing how to use it but determined to try. For the first time in my life my heart feels absolutely black with hatred.

#

The night shift goes off and the day shift begins. I spot the square-nosed, big-chinned guard as he comes in through the front door. I

follow along as best I can, dodging here and there, keeping tabs occasionally as I walk between walls. I hear him mutter in disbelief when he's told there's a ghost loose within the prison. "Fucking nonsense," he says. I follow along after him, waiting to catch him alone. He sits at a table with a few of the guards who are coming off shift and they eat donuts and drink coffee, all talking about the ghost. Most of those claiming to have seen me are lying. I lean forward, interested, but one of them chokes on his coffee and points in my direction. I pull my head back before any of the others look.

I follow square nose as he makes his rounds, never catching him alone long enough to get at him. In the late morning, just before lunch, he takes part in a torture session which brings back the blackest of my memories, and for a moment I stand on a razor's edge. Like my finger poised on the trigger of my stolen pistol, I stand at the edge of the corner ready to burst into the room and use the gun. In this universe, in this reality, I don't do it. In a multitude of other realities I'm sure I did. One puff of air, one tiny sound, one atom going one direction instead of the other would have made me jump in there and kill everyone standing. In this universe I take a few deep breaths and step back, struggling to think. There has to be a more positive approach.

Tracing the wiring through the walls, I track it back to a large circuit breaker panel in a storage room. I open the panel, and using a broom handle I pry the large fire-cracker looking fuses out of their mounts. I pick these up off the floor and take them with me, returning to the torture chamber and the electric chair. As they're fiddling with the switch and the power dial in consternation, I step into their midst and throw the fuses at them. "This cruelty comes to an end. Now." Heads and guns swing around in my direction, and I step backwards out of the room. The astonished look on the face of square nose leaves me with a warm feeling, his mouth gaping open and his eyes bulging out.

They remove the hapless prisoner and take him back to his cage. Three armed men carry the fuses back to the breaker box and plug them in. They stand around for a few moments, whispering back and forth nervously, then leave. I immediately pry the fuses out and throw them at their backs. They look down at the fuses at their feet, then up at me, and yell out in fear. They run without firing a shot.

That afternoon I finally catch square nose in a vulnerable moment. He's standing before a urinal, alone, glancing nervously around like he knows he's being watched. I step out of the corner of the wall and walk right up to him. He's so startled he can't move. I place the barrel of the gun against his penis and tense my finger on the trigger. "Where's Heather? What did you do to her?"

He struggles to talk; it takes him a moment to start, like he's stripped a few gears in his voice box. When he finally gets it in gear, it comes out in a sudden gasp. "We didn't do anything with her!"

"I don't believe you."

"I swear, it's the truth! The Man told us to let her go and he took her with him!"

"What man?"

"The Man! Charley Cooper, from the FBS . . . she went with him."

"I still don't believe you. I think you and your friends had your way with her and then murdered her. Didn't you?"

"No! No, I swear it! Ask the man yourself, he's going to be here today!"

"When?"

"Today, I swear it . . . that stuff, that thing I said, it's just part of the . . . we can't do anything to female prisoners! Never!"

"You put her in that chair."

"I was doing my job --- I had no choice! Cooper, he's the Man. He made the decision!"

"I've never bought that excuse. Doing something rotten because it's

your job and you were ordered to do it doesn't mean you weren't responsible. You can get a different job."

Square nose makes a quick move, perhaps to grab my gun arm, perhaps to grab his own gun --- maybe both. It makes me jump and my finger squeezes by reflex. There's a terrific blast of noise and the gun jumps right out of my hand, nearly taking my finger with it. Square nose bends forward and falls over on his side. I jump up and down, cursing, wringing my hand. There's blood droplets spattered all over the tile of the rest room. I stop jumping, and stand for a moment gritting my teeth and holding onto my hand, then look over at square nose who's lying on his side in a fetal position with blood pooling around his middle. I shot the man. I blew his penis clean off. I can't believe I did it.

Searching around the bathroom floor, I find my gun and pick it up. Taking one last look at square nose, I see he's found his gun and is waving it around wildly, but he can't seem to control his arm well enough to aim it at me. I step into the gap in the corner between walls and out of the room.

Square nose leaves in an ambulance just as Cooper comes driving up. I watch as Cooper opens his car door and steps out, standing and looking back at the retreating ambulance. He slams the door, still looking back, then walks with a distracted expression up to the large iron door. They swing it open for him, and as he's walking in I jump out of the building and run for his car.

The prison and the car are man-made three dimensional objects. The Earth is not. The structure of the Earth itself has as many dimensions as the universe in which it formed, with no convenient gaps for me to use to conceal myself. As I dash toward the car, I am in plain sight of anyone who might be looking. Reaching the car, I squeeze through one of the numerous gaping holes and into the rear, down on the floorboards. Huddled there, breathing dust from the dirty carpet, I listen for any signs of excitement. There are none, so I take the opportunity to move up onto the rear seat, squeeze through the gap between the seat and the backrest, and find a nice little space between it and the trunk.

Cooper's visit lasts less than fifteen minutes. I guess the tales about the menacing ghost has spooked him. He's in a hurry as he leaves, the tires kicking up rooster-tails of gravel. We hit the main road doing about seventy, and he accelerates up to the maximum of the car.

After several minutes I roll out of my hidden space and down to the floorboards once again. My stolen gun, minus one bullet, is in my sweaty right hand. With my left hand I reach up between the front seat and the backrest and snatch Cooper's wallet out of his back pocket. He feels this, and it startles him. He gropes for his wallet as the car swerves back and forth across the lanes. I flip through it, learning his home address, studying the pictures of his family. Such wholesome-looking kids.

I sit up in the back seat and lean forward, putting the gun to Cooper's head. He starts, his breath caught in his throat. I drop his wallet in his lap, staring him in the eyes through the rear view mirror. "I want to know what you did to Heather Clarke," I ask him.

"We let her go," he said.

"Just like that? You torture her, and then you let her go so she can tell people about it?"

"So what if she tells people about it."

"You don't care if the public knows you torture innocent people and starve them to death in prisons?"

"Who questions the government? You really are from another world, aren't you?"

"Another reality."

"How do you expect to get away with this? If you thought you were in trouble before, you're about to find out what real trouble is----"

"You were going to let me die of thirst and starvation in prison!" I shout at the bastard. "What can be worse than that?"

"There are a lot of things much worse, and you're going to find out what they are." He grins. "Go ahead, shoot me. Kill me. We're doing two-hundred and ten miles per hour. You shoot me and you'll die with me."

"I can shoot you in the head and disappear from the car, you idiot. Or didn't they tell you anything at the prison?"

His smile fades. He hadn't thought of that.

"I can also disappear from here and reappear at eighteen-eighty-five Watercress Drive," I tell him, my voice low. "I can tie your wife Marlene up and make her watch as I kill your kids. Then I can drag her back to this car and make her tell you about it."

Cooper is silent. On his forehead, beads of sweat form as he thinks about this.

"I'll offer you a simple deal," I tell him. "You and your buddies leave me alone, I'll leave you and your family alone. I won't say anything about your precious government secrets. But if I ever see one of you or your jerk-off co-workers again, I'm going to come out of nowhere and destroy you. I don't care where you go, where you try to hide, I'll know exactly where you and your family are."

Cooper grinds his teeth and stares at the road.

"Think about it," I tell him. Then I fall backwards, rolling through the gap in the back seat and into the space beyond. Cooper slows the car down and stops, jumping out and walking around the car. I can hear his frantic footsteps, his shoes scuffing across the pavement. He opens the trunk and even the hood looking for me. I can hear him muttering obscenities under his breath.

He climbs back into the car and turns it around, speeding down the highway and heading directly home. It takes a couple of hours, and judging by the swerving and sudden slamming of brakes, he's driving like a maniac. A wreck at these speeds would mean instant death. I resist the urge to pop out again and tell him to slow down. I close my eyes and pray we make it.

The tires squeal as he pulls into his driveway and stops. I hear him open his door and slam it, his footsteps fading as he goes to the house. I slip out and enter from the other side, slipping between the corners of the walls.

His wife is stepping out of the kitchen to greet him, and I come in behind her. He's asking her if she's okay and then he sees me, standing calmly there behind her in the doorway to the bright, clean kitchen. The expression on his face is almost dumb. It's humble, I've got him where it hurts. "Do we have a deal?" I ask him.

His wife gives a start and swings around, staring at me with surprise.

"Yes," Cooper says. He sees I'm still holding the gun, though I'm not pointing it at anyone. His hands are together in front of him, and his shoulders are hunched. He looks like a schoolboy in the principal's office.

"As long as you keep your side of the deal," I tell him, "your family will never see me again." I turn and walk into a corner, disappearing right through the wall.

#

Heather isn't home when I arrive. It's just as well, as I look and smell awful. I'm also covered in grease and oil from the bus with which I'd snuck a ride. The only hidden cubbyhole I'd found was next to the engine, and I was partially deafened and choking on fumes by the time I got off.

Tossing the prison fatigues in the trash, I scrub myself clean in

the shower and then find, thankfully, some of my clothes left in her closet. They fit loose --- it seems I've lost weight over the past several days. I do look thin to myself in the mirror. Well, more than thin. Gaunt.

I help myself to a sandwich and a beer from her 'fridge, and I'm sitting there at her tiny kitchen table when the front door rattles and opens. Heather walks into the kitchen holding a grocery bag, looking weary and dazed. Seeing me she freezes, standing still and staring at me, grocery bag clutched in front of her.

I stand up and walk around the table toward her, and she takes a few steps back. She flinches when I reach out and take the grocery bag from her, like she expects me to hit her. Setting the grocery bag down on the table, I close the door and then slowly reach out to her, gently put my hands to each side of her head. Her eyes close at my touch, and I notice her breathing is hard and her body is trembling. I lean forward and give her a soft kiss on the lips. She kisses back, and when I pull away there's tears on her face.

"I thought you were dead," she whispers.

"No, I'm fine."

"They let you go?"

"Yes, they let me go. They're not going to bother us any more."

"Never?"

"Never again."

Her arms slip around me and she buries her face into my chest. Quiet, body still shaking, she cries. I hold her, rocking her gently and stroking her hair. I have this odd feeling, a kind of a strange sadness; in the dim light of this dumpy little house there's a haunting familiarity, like a sudden childhood memory coming to mind and you realize you've been to a certain place before. Thin echoes of memories thread through my mind, memories of times spent with this woman, in this reality --- they're somehow filtering in from another version of myself. A voice in my head, my voice, says, "It's come to this." I don't know what it means, but I open my mouth and speak, saying "We're going to make a fresh start. We're going to put this all behind us."

I feel her nodding, her face still pressed against my chest. Then she pulls her head back and looks up into my eyes, her expression sad but hopeful. She nods again, making sure I know she agrees. The muscles of my face take control of themselves and smile, then my head bends down and my lips kiss her forehead. She closes her eyes and hugs me again. I'm suddenly confused because I'm not in control of my body. The smile and kiss came from somewhere else.

Across the room, on the wood-patterned paneling above the small refrigerator, is a brilliant point of red light. As I stare at it in surprise, Heather and my body turn and walk out of the room without me. At the same time the red light jumps out from the wall, elongating from a point to a beam, and spears me through the chest. The details of the room fade into a jumbled confusion of shapes, and I begin drifting forward, following the beam.

11. LITTLE RED BEACON

The shaft of laser light shines brilliant red through murky air, down what looks to be a long hallway of corners. As I move down this hallway I have to fight to keep myself from being pulled to one side or the other, as the corners I'm passing seem to have a gravity of their own, and following this beam straight down this hyper-direction is akin to walking a tightrope.

The corners I'm passing are sets of dimensions, each one an

alternate world. I catch a brief glance into each as I pass them, seeing someone sitting in a chair, seeing a car pass, seeing a road beside the bay.

I pass a figure pressed up against the lee side of a corner, which unnerves me. There's not much light in here, and the air is thick with dust motes. I can't see any details of the figure as I pass, though I get the impression his or her mouth is hanging wide open in the position of a frozen gasp. After several minutes I pass another figure on the other side. What are they, I wonder? Ghosts? Maybe they're not really there, just figments of my overloaded mind. Staring intently at the third one I see, it loses depth and turns to gray shades of shadow. I pass silently and shudder. Perhaps that's what will happen to me if I fall off this tightrope.

As I continue, the beam begins to dim and the air itself grows progressively brighter. It feels like sunlight --- the brightness and the warmth are there, but it's like the sun is in my blind-spot, I can't see it anywhere. The light itself is diffuse.

The corners gradually drop below me, and above are more. I'm going uphill, working my way up through another level of corners. It boggles my mind --- an infinity of alternate worlds layered in infinite layers. Infinity is a hard enough concept to grasp, but to find an infinite amount of different infinities is even worse. As I work my way up among the upper plane, the light ebbs and shadows return. The laser beam brightens. I pass more ghosts.

It continues like this for three more layers, gradually climbing an uphill tightrope, and then the beam is gone. I stop, feeling suddenly lost and frightened, but when I turn around I see the beam emerging from a point and shining down the path I'd just followed. I've passed the originating point of the beam. Moving closer to where the beam starts, I see an elongated crystal, the hyper-dimensional part of a 4-D prism, poking out of one of the corners. Easing myself down into the corner, I emerge into a room full of electronic equipment. Standing amid this scientific hardware, wearing a lab coat and shaded goggles, is Alvin Laurel.

He pulls the goggles off and shuts down the laser, then gives me a big smile. He looks relieved. "You made it back," he said. "You were a long ways away."

"Where am I?"

"Berkeley."

"Yeah, but which Berkeley?"

"The one you came from."

"How do you know? You weren't a scientist in the Berkeley I came from."

"No?"

I shake my head. "You of all people should know there's thousands of versions of me lost out in that chaos."

"Well, yes, I know that. The best I can hope for is an approximate. Ask me some questions about this Berkeley and I'll tell you how close you are to being home."

"In this Berkeley, do I live in the Euclid Building, or the Escher?"

"You live in the Euclid Building on Euclid Street, and you have a roommate named Tom Harrison."

"Am I a Herpetologist?"

"Yes, you teach Herpetology right here on campus."

"What are my class hours?"

"Your --- I have no idea." He laughs. "We can find out. Lets go to your office."

"Let's go to my classroom."

"Whatever you wish."

On the door of my class is a hand-printed note telling the students

that the class has been postponed until further notice, as the instructor was away on urgent personal business. "I told administration you had a death in your family," Alvin says.

Inside, the carpet is the pale blue I remember --- the color it should be. I walk around my desk, savoring the sight of something familiar, then pull out the class schedule and look it over. Not only are the starting times the ones I'm used to, I actually recognize the names of several students. Alvin is watching me as I look things over, checking the brand names of pencils, making sure paper clips are the correct shape.

"Is this what you remember?" he asks.

"Yes. At least, here in the classroom it is." I think about Pris, wondering what kind of relationship we have here. "Something just occurred to me."

"And that is?"

"I was searching for Pris this whole time."

"Who?"

"A woman I'm in love with. Every time I shifted dimensions in my sleep, I found I was in some sort of relationship with Pris --- but the relationship was always ending. It was like my subconscious was pulling me from one universe to the next searching for a place where Pris and I were together."

"That makes sense. Your subconscious is in control when you sleep, and your subconscious learned to move between planes of the universe before you consciously gained control. I suspect the subconscious is in fact part of the bigger collective."

"The what?"

"The whole human creature. We're like giant four-dimensional starfish----"

"Starfish?"

"The part of us that we perceive in three dimensions is just one segment of the whole, which extends through hundreds --- maybe even thousands --- of planes of the multi-dimensional universe. When you shift from one 'body' to the next, it's your consciousness shifting along the four-dimensional nervous system, which your brain is a part of --- and when you physically shift, such as the way you arrived here, you actually moved physically through planes of the universe."

"Starfish?"

"Yes. Imagine all the versions of you which are strung out through the planes of the universe, all connected through a fourth dimension, and one major four-dimensional nerve running the entire length. Your brain is just a segment of that nerve. You and I becoming aware of the fourth dimension is actually the beginning of the human 'creature' attaining a state of true self-awareness."

"Really?"

"Yes! And this explains a lot of things that we've never understood before. Things like deJa-vu, and psychic connections. And twins --- twins may actually be two ends of the same creature, manifest in the same plane of the universe."

I nod, not really understanding nor accepting what he's saying. I am not in the mood to sit around and discuss it. "I'm going to go take care of some business. Do you have a phone number where I can reach you?"

Alvin pulls out his wallet and fumbles with it for a moment, managing to produce a card. I put it in my shirt pocket and walk over to the door. Alvin looks a bit lost, perhaps feeling slighted because I'm not willing to stand around and discuss his theories with him. At the door I grab his hand and shake it, looking him right in the eyes. "I appreciate everything you've done for me," I tell him. "We'll get together later and talk, okay? It's just that, right now, I have to see

a couple people."

"Of course," Alvin says.

We part, he wandering back toward his car and me heading off across the campus toward the Euclid. The campus is so familiar, each tree and walkway right where they should be, that it feels like a homecoming --- like I'd just returned from visiting a foreign country where everything was alien and backwards. The walkway leads to Hearst Avenue, and I cross it and walk the half block up to Euclid Street. On the corner of Euclid and Hearst sits the large gray-blue building I'm so fond of; I stare at it for a long moment before crossing the street. I feel a sudden anxiety. The Euclid looks weary and run-down, the paint peeling in places. After a moment my anxiety eases a bit, because nothing is different --- the Euclid never was that much to look at, really. I do remember paint peeling here and there. Still, I'm cautious and on-edge as I make my way up the steps. Reaching into my pocket, I find keys to a house and car, but none to the Euclid. It occurs to me that the money in my wallet, and the credit cards and driver's license --- hell, even the clothes I'm wearing --- are from another world.

I glance around to make sure no one is looking, then walk around the door and inside to the foyer. There's an awkward moment as one of my neighbors, who's checking his mail, turns and gives me a startled look. I manage a grin and walk past, up the stairs and down the hall to the apartment. The door is locked and no one comes when I knock, so I slip through dimensions around the door and into the dark hallway beyond.

"Hello?" I call out. "Tom?"

The apartment is quiet; nothing stirs. I turn on the lights and walk to my bedroom. It's exactly the way I'd left it; camera equipment cluttering the desk, terrariums full of reptiles everywhere. Dirty underwear and socks on the floor. I dig through a desk drawer and find my cache of emergency money and a spare key to my Jeep. Lord knows where the Jeep is --- it's probably been towed away.

I pick up the phone and dial Pris's number. It rings three times and a voice answers. "Hello?" It's one of her roommates.

"Is Pris there?"

"She's at work."

"When does she get off? Do you know?"

"Who's this?"

I tell her. "Oh," she says, "you're the one that studies dinosaurs. Yes, Pris should be home in a few hours. I don't know if she's free or not, though."

"I just need to talk to her."

"I'll tell her you called."

"Thanks." I hang up, feeling a low fountain of jealousy. Free or not? She'll be free all right. I put the green money in my pocket along with the keys to the Jeep and leave my room via the gap between the wall and the floor. I emerge outside, dropping to the ground in the small alley behind the building.

I search the streets up and down the hill for my Jeep, but it's gone. I eye several other Jeeps, wondering if one of them is mine --- it's possible, as I don't really know how close this world is to my own. I even try my key in a couple of them, but no luck. Giving up, I wander down the hill on Hearst Avenue toward the BART station, which looks exactly like it should. The ticket machine accepts my money and issues me a card, I use it to pass into the boarding area, and a genuine squarish post-modern BART train rumbles into the station and makes it's "Booop! Booop!" sound. I board the train, trying to think hopeful thoughts. I should be able to make it to Pris's house by the time she gets home from work.

BART takes me through Oakland and then out under the bay. I used to think the train was fast, but that was before I got used to cars that raced down the freeway at Indianapolis 500 speeds. In San Francisco I

transfer to a Muni bus and ride the rest of the way out. The trip is long and tedious, as I find myself on edge thinking about what to say to her. "Hi, I may be from another dimension. Do we have a relationship?" Other passengers glance at me, and I realize I've been thinking out loud. I frown and remain silent, watching the houses and shops pass outside the window.

As the Muni bus nears Priscilla's street, I pull the cord to signal the driver to stop. There's a hissing sound from the air brakes and the vehicle grinds to a halt. There's another hissing sound as the doors pop open, and I step out. The Muni bus continues on it's way, and I take a breath and start walking. As I near her apartment house I feel nervous and flushed, and I don't know what to do with my hands. I end up jamming them into my pockets. It feels like everyone on the street is watching me --- even every window of every house seems to have someone watching, using binoculars and high-powered telescopes --- examining my every move, every twitch on my face.

When I reach her house and knock on the door, no one answers. I knock louder. Either no one is at home, or Pris doesn't want to see me. Fine then, I think, and wait outside. I sit on her front steps and brood. In the sky above, clouds are rolling in from the West, blocking out the sun. It looks like a summer storm is brewing.

Twenty minutes later I see Pris coming down the hill from the Muni stop, her arms full of groceries. I walk up toward her, meeting her halfway and taking the heavier of the two bags. "Hi!" she says brightly, and flashes her beautiful smile. But the smile is nervous, self-conscious, and she doesn't look me in the eyes for more than a split-second. "Where have you been?"

"Oh, I went on a little trip." I fall in beside her, walking back toward the house. "How have you been?"

"Fine."

"Seen much of everybody? Tom and Aaron?"

"No, but Tom called a couple times to see if I knew where you were."

"Been seeing much of Felix?"

"No." She says it flat, with emphasis, letting me know that she has not seen him whatsoever. A little weight lifts off my heart. "Where did you go on your trip?" she asks.

"Nowhere in particular. Here and there, visiting some friends and family." I almost say "Spent some time in jail," but at the last moment I decide against it. We reach the steps and head up to the door. I take the other bag from her so she can pull out her keys.

"Are you sure you didn't take off with some hot chick you met in a bar or something?" she says as we step in.

I laugh.

In the kitchen we unload the grocery bags and as she puts things away I wash a few dishes that her roommates had left in the sink. I can tell that there's something wrong; she's stiff and formal, not to mention nervous. Could it be that we've never been intimate in this version of reality? That my visit here, like this, is inappropriate? Is she wondering what the hell I'm up to? I'm trying to think of some subtle question I might ask her that would let me know where I stand when she says: "Let's go out for a beer." She smiles, pushing her hair away from her eye. The hair falls back.

"Sounds good to me."

"I'll go change." She rushes off to her bedroom.

I stand in her living room, feeling awkward. The door to her bedroom is partially open as she changes clothes. Does this mean we've been intimate and she doesn't care if I watch, or is this just the Pris-casualness that I love so much? Since I'm unsure, I stand where I am, and she is out of sight as she changes. When she emerges she is

wearing tight jeans and a white cotton shirt, and is carrying a big red and black sweater. "Let's go," she says.

The tavern is up and around the corner, just past the tiny Laundromat where she does her laundry. We walk close together, cringing at the sudden gusts of wind. The clouds have congealed into one solid mass in the sky; it looks like a thunderstorm. We reach the tavern, ducking out of the wind and into the darkness beyond; the place is all dark wood and neon beer advertisements. I order a couple beers --- beers with familiar brand names --- and we sit at a table way in the back. This is a familiar, comfortable place. We sit and drink, and make small talk. After a while our conversation falters, and there's a long quiet. I'm about to break it with some inane comment when she leans over and says, "I've decided not to sleep with you anymore."

I stare at her, feeling a sick, sad, strong sense of deja-vu. "Why?"

"I'm still not over Tom, and I started seeing you on the rebound. I like you very much . . . very very much. But, I'm not in love with you. I shouldn't be making love to you. I don't want to make love with anyone until I'm over Tom. Do you understand?"

My mouth is hanging open. I'm feeling such intense emotional pain that it's like being back in prison. And, feeling this pain, I watch in astonishment as she begins crying. Her!

"I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't want to hurt you. I tried to be in love with you, but it didn't feel right." Tears are streaming down her face.

"I'm the one that should be crying, here," I tell her.

"I didn't want to hurt you. Tom told me how you feel about me. So did Aaron."

"Oh great."

"I'm sorry." She puts her hand on mine, then, leaning forward, she hugs me and cries on my shoulder. I hold her, smelling her perfume, wanting to cry with her. But damn it --- damn it! I feel angry. Nowhere --- in all of infinity! --- is there a place where this woman and I can be together. Fate will not allow it. The Universe is against it. It is not something that is possible. I can walk through walls and pass from one reality to another, but I can't make this woman love me.

What is wrong with me? Why does she affect me like this? The power this woman has over me is frightening. Even now, hurt and angry, in intense pain, I still love her more than life. I would do anything for her. It's an obsession. Why?

She kisses me, and I push her away. "Please don't," I tell her.

She looks at me through her tears, pushing her dark hair out of her eyes. It falls back. "What?"

"It's torture."

This brings on a new gushing of tears. It hurts her to hurt me. She's hurting too, because of Tom, so she knows what it's like. To think that she's causing me to feel this pain makes it worse. Now I feel bad for her because of the pain she's putting me through. It's ridiculous! Then it occurs to me that this is why I love her --- she is an innocent, kind, beautiful person. She doesn't want to hurt anyone.

"I should just leave," I tell her.

"No. Not like this."

"I'm okay."

"Walk me back to my house, then."

I nod. We stand up, and she takes my arm and we leave. Outside the wind is still strong, and the sky is dark. It looks like it'll start raining at any moment. As we walk down the sidewalk and turn the corner onto her street, I feel sick and detached, apart from the world. Her touch does nothing for me.

I stop at the steps but she tugs at my arm, pulling me up. "Come in," she says.

I nod. I walk up the steps feeling like the Tin Man, clunk clunk clunk, made of tin and rusty at the joints, and hollow inside. I stop at the door, ready to say good-bye, but after she unlocks it and it swings open, she doesn't let go of my arm. "Come inside," she says.

I obey, following her instructions as if I were a robot. Clunk clunk clunk, I step inside, shut the door behind me. She leads me to her bedroom, pulls me inside, shuts the door. Then she puts her arms around me and starts kissing me.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to do something to make you feel better."

"You said you weren't----"

"We'll do it one last time."

"Why?"

"I want to."

There's a name for this. It's called a "pity fuck." I'm thinking this as she undoes the buttons on my shirt, but I don't say anything because I don't want her to stop. She kisses my nipples and then unzips my pants. Part of me does want her to stop, but the other part wants to let her do it because I'm angry at her. She hurt me, now let me degrade her.

My pants fall around my ankles, and then she yanks the front of my underwear down. Kneeling in front of me, I feel this distant warm and wet sensation as she puts my penis into her mouth. It's far from erect, and even as she runs her tongue around and uses her tiny hands to knead my butt, an erection does not happen. This whole thing seems inappropriate.

"Wait," I tell her. "Go over there, take your clothes off, and get on the bed."

She gets off her knees, walks over by the window and begins stripping off her clothes. I pull off what remains of mine as I watch. When we're both naked she walks over to the bed and lies down on her back, spreading her legs. "Turn over," I tell her.

Without a thought she rolls onto her stomach and pulls her knees up under her, arching her back. I crawl up and over her, pressing myself against her, rocking back and forth and running my hands over her soft skin. But she's not sexually excited and neither am I. After a few minutes she turns over and we try it face to face. Still nothing happens for either of us, and it becomes embarrassing. Pris's eyes are closed and she's trying to relax. I keep my eyes closed and imagine I'm somewhere else.

There's a slipping feeling, an comfortable S-movement along my spine, and I can tell I'm starting to shift dimensions. I open my eyes, roll off of Pris and off the bed. She lets out a loud sigh.

"This was a mistake," I tell her, looking around to see if anything has changed. Nothing has --- I must have stopped it in time --- but I still feel like I'm recovering from a bout of vertigo. Looking over at her, I say, "Let's shake hands, tell each other good-bye, and leave it at that."

Still lying on her back, legs splayed, she nods her head then sits up. Silently we dress. When we're finished, we walk out into the living room and stand by the front door. She comes close, gives me a kiss and a hug, then we shake hands. "See ya," she says.

"Good-bye," I tell her.

"I'm never going to see you again, am I."

"I have no idea." Reaching out, I grab the door knob with my right hand and give it a twist, letting the door swing open. I pause before stepping through, facing her one last time. I give her my best smile. "I hope you get Tom back."

"Not likely," she says.

"Well, then, have a happy life." Turning, I leave. I can feel her

eyes on my back as I go down the steps, but I don't look back. There's no point. Heading up the hill, I catch a MUNI heading downtown and climb aboard. Lightning flashes across the sky, and the clouds break open and oceans of water come pouring down.

#

The rain continues far into the night. I sit on my bed, eyes closed, unwilling to clean up the mess around me. All the terrariums are open and empty, all the specimens once again free and wild. I hadn't the heart to keep them anymore.

I hear a key being inserted into the front door and the door opens. I listen carefully for voices, footsteps. There's only one set. It's Tom, and he's alone. I open my bedroom door and step out into the hallway.

"Hey!" he says. "Where the hell have you been?"

"I went out and got drunk."

"For two weeks? Jesus, you should have called. I was worried, man. I turned you in as a missing person."

"I'm back."

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah."

Tom takes off his wet jacket and hangs it up on a hook by the door. "Where were you really?"

"I can't believe I have to explain this all over again."

"What?"

"I've told you at least three times, and here I am having to tell you again."

"What are you talking about?"

"I was in an alternate universe."

"What did you do, go to Mexico? You should have told me, I would have gone with you."

I laugh. "I was in an alternate universe. A different plane of reality. Another world." I roll my eyes. "Whatever you want to call it, I was there."

Tom is silent for a moment, waiting for the punch line. "Felix sold you some LSD or something?"

"No."

"What are you talking about, then?"

"It's not important." I pull my emergency money out of my pocket and hand it to him. "Here. This should take care of my share of the rent for a couple months."

"What? You going someplace?"

"Yeah. I'm leaving again. I might not be back."

"Where are you going?"

"I've got a ranch house somewhere, and uh . . . a girl."

"Oh! Aha!" He grins. "Now the truth comes out. You're shaking up with someone. She isn't married, is she?"

"Ah . . . no. She's not."

His grin falters. "This means I'll have to get another roommate."

"Yeah, if I'm not back by the time that money runs out."

He looks down at the money in his hands. Now his expression is somewhat sad. Tom puts it in his pocket and slaps me on the shoulder.

"Join me for a drink."

"Sounds good."

As we head to the kitchen, he says, "Tell me about this girl."

"She could be Heather's sister," I tell him. "She looks almost exactly like her."

"No!" Tom looks intrigued. "Where did you meet her?"

"San Francisco."

"Really?" He pulls out margarita mix and salt, sets them down, then

pulls ice out of the freezer. I grab a bottle of tequila and two glasses. For a moment the whole apartment is filled with the sound of ice being ground up in a blender.

I salt the rims of the glasses; Tom pours the drinks. "I went over and saw Pris today," I tell him.

"How's she doing?"

"She's still hurting. She misses you."

"I know." Tom shrugs. "I'm not in love with her. What can I do?"

"I understand."

"Tell me more about your girl. What's her name?"

"Judy," I tell him, saying the first name that comes to mind. "Judy Jones."

"Judy Jones?" He smiles --- he likes the name. "What does she do?"

"She's a waitress."

"A waitress. You went and picked up on a waitress, eh? You meet her while she was working?"

I nod, not really interested in continuing this fiction. I had intended on trying to talk him into seeing Pris again, but there's no point. The universe is against me being with Pris, and also against Pris being with Tom. It's not like there's a choice --- it's simply not to be. It's like trying to put two similar poles of two magnets together. You might get them to touch with force, but the universe is going to push them apart when you let go.

I lick the salt and drink my drink, savoring the tart and the sting. Tom has pulled himself up and is sitting on the kitchen counter. I lean against the refrigerator, saying nothing. Finally Tom says, "When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"You leaving your job at the University?"

"Yes."

"Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"No." I shake my head.

He looks puzzled. "What have you gotten yourself involved in?"

"I don't really know."

"Why are you leaving?"

"I've found a better place."

"A better place than Berkeley?" This is hard for him to believe. To Tom, Berkeley is heaven on Earth. "You've got to tell me what's going on. What was this about an alternate reality?"

"Do you really want to know?"

He nods.

I step into the corner of the kitchen, through the dimensional gap and emerge into the living room. I hear Tom give off a startled shout, and he drops his glass. He's still staring at the corner where I'd disappeared, broken glass at his feet, when I walk in from the entrance on the other side. He swings around, staring at me with an open mouth. "How did you do that?"

I get him a glass, pour him another margarita, and we go into the living room. By the time I finish explaining things, it's past 3 AM. I think I've put him into some sort of shock. He just sits on the couch with a dazed expression on his face, like a lost kid. I'm sleepy and my eyes are drooping, and my voice is hoarse from talking so much.

The rain, which has come and gone, is back again and pattering against the windows with the randomness of the wind. We listen to it for a while, then Tom grunts and gets to his feet. "Well. You've succeeded in blowing my mind, that's for sure." He yawns and stretches. "What time are you leaving tomorrow?"

"I don't know. I may leave in my sleep. If not, I'll say good-bye before I go."

He nods. "Just in case you don't, it's been a blast knowing you." We shake hands. "You're a fucking weirdo, you know that?"

"Thanks a lot."

"My friend who walks through walls. Shit." He trudges down the hall toward his bedroom, still talking. "People are going to think I've been talking to Don Juan. Eating peyote with Indians. Jesus Christ . . ." His voice fades and I hear his door shut.

I listen to the rain a moment, then shut off the light and walk through the dark to my room. On my bed, sleep just moments away, I listen to the rain and hear it suddenly stop. In the sudden, unnatural silence I feel my bed turn and gently rock, as if the building was adrift in a giant flood. I feel my spine make a slow, uncomfortable S-movement and I know I'm on my way.

12. QUALITY OF LIFE

The surf is rough today. It rolls in with great, sweeping violence, mist spraying off the white tops and filling the air with a shimmering haze. The sound is a continuous cycle of ripping, booming and hissing. Behind me, off the sand, one of the horses make a huffing little whinny. The brown one is hoarding a thick tuft of grass, edging the black one away. Heather scolds the brown one (which is mine) so that her's can get its fair share. I smile, lying back in the sand and closing my eyes. The ripping, booming and hissing fills my mind. From somewhere to my left a sea gull calls out, its echoing voice ebbing and flowing with the ocean.

Heather joins me in the sand, pulling a half-empty bottle of champagne out of the picnic basket and popping the cork. I can hear her pouring another glass. I open my eyes a bit, peeking, seeing the wind blowing her hair across her bare, brown shoulders. I close my eyes again, relaxing, feigning sleep.

She settles down next to me, takes one of my arms in hers, and does the same.

Here, America has emerged into a new renaissance. Here, art and culture are held high in esteem. Science and knowledge is widespread, and we have no enemies. Gasoline is only 28¢ a gallon. My ranch house is just up the hill, and this beach --- for a mile in each direction --- belongs to me.

Here, I am some sort of guru. I teach the ways of a pseudo-scientific mix of quantum physics and eastern religion. I've been reading up on my teachings, and it makes some sense. I'm going to have to work on it a bit, though. Next week I'm being flown to Washington D.C. to advise the President, and after that I'm attending the opening of a new monastery in Quebec. Sounds interesting.

For now, however, I'm on my honeymoon. It's a beautiful day on a beautiful beach, and I'm lying here, half drunk, very happy, with my wife sticking her sweet little tongue in my ear. I may not have attained a state of nirvana, but at least I've found peace.

[home.gif (1981 bytes)]