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THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE END OF THE WORLD 1.

Chester wanted someone on the train to notice him, ask him if he were the Chester Drummond. But the other passengers paid no attention. C-K boosted, each and every one. Before they'd received the Carcopino-Koster treatments some of them had probably voted for Chester, maybe even cheered him at a rally. Now they ignored him, probably thought it was the only polite thing to do.

The bullet train rushed through the Catskills, carrying Chester into exile. It had been completed in 2017, just about the time his Valutarian Party had reached its maximum membership. He had excoriated the train then, as an example of the deranged values of government-dominated society, a costly boondoggle, a holdover of pre-millennial thinking. He had to admit that it ran well, though. He stared out of the window. Watery gray light washed over the orange and yellow forest; the successive hills were lost in the misty distance. Far to the north the dark purple sky was broken by ghostly flashes of sheet lightning. They were moving into a storm.

He knew he should be updating his journal. For years he had kept the record of his every thought, his speculations, his analyses of his times, fully expecting his journals to become important historical documents. The problem was that he had nothing to say to posterity at the moment, wasn't even sure he believed in it. He had lost everything: his influence, his party, his job, his apartment in SoHo. He had tried living on the streets as a political statement but the civics had scooped him up and taken him to Mt. Sinai Hospital, where he had turned down C-K one last time. He could have detonated his bomb then, but he hadn't really wanted to kill anyone -- except maybe himself. Now he was bound for the refusenik farm.

His dignity. That was what he had left. It had always been at the heart of his message and always would be, even if there was nobody left to inspire. He laid his head back against the seat and dozed off.

At Farron's Landing he shuffled off the train, carrying the plastic suitcase that held all his worldly possessions: journals, clothing, toothbrush, bomb.

"Mr. Drummond?" A woman with dark hair approached him. "I'm Roberta Welch. From the farm."

He shook her hand, pleased to hear his name spoken, even in the condescending C-K voice. She looked to be in her late twenties, strong and pretty -- to his taste, if a little short. He could pretend she was his handpicked chauffeur, at least until they arrived.

But when he followed her around the terminal building to the lot he saw immediately that he wouldn't have a chance to pretend. The farm had sent a lumpy electric van, not a car. And Roberta Welch had another passenger, already waiting. Fine. He'd survive. It wasn't until Chester recognized the man that he felt a sharp tug at the other end of his shred of pride.

It was Brother Emil Sanger, 'Confessor To The All.' Now, thought Chester, the procession of indignities begins.

"Chester Drummond, Emil Sanger," said Roberta Welch, as though they were any two names in the world. Not the founder of the Valutarian Party and the father of one of the most eccentric cults in modern history. It began to rain.

Sanger grinned. When Chester reluctantly extended his hand, the minister took it and grasped it with both of his own. Roberta put Chester's bag in the back of the van. Chester pulled away and climbed into the middle seat. He regretted it immediately, when Sanger followed. He should have taken the front seat; one in the back and one in the front was importance, celebrity. Two in the back was inmates, or children.

They pulled out of the lot. "She's aquiver, Chester," said Sanger. "Such a cargo. We're too old to be attracting fillies like her, but you might as well try to stop the rain from falling." Sanger smirked. "All the great men have been great lovers; it's the price of charisma."

Roberta Welch plainly heard every word of this, but drove on without comment. Chester wanted to disassociate himself from the minister's astonishing presumption but Sanger bore on. "I take it we're here for the same purpose."

"If you mean to say we've both been reduced to the same low point, I'll agree," said Chester. "I don't take it for granted that we'll respond identically to the situation, however."

Rhetoric. Chester had to admit it felt good. However dismal a debating partner, Brother Emil Sanger might, in fact, rouse him from his funk. The Carcopino-Koster drones were no use at all. They didn't argue, but instead smiled, and murmured to one another. Like a world of psychotherapists.

"You misunderstand," said Sanger in his gravelly voice. "I assumed your calling had brought you to the same inevitable destination as my own. Something is here in this refuge that makes it a stronghold for the All." Sanger raised his big eyebrows significantly. "Best that we not speak of it now."

Chester understood that Sanger was speaking less to him than to Roberta Welch, still baiting her, with hints of secrets now, instead of affronts. Indirect address -- Chester didn't begrudge him the technique.

On the other hand, he wasn't much interested in continuing to provide the occasion for its use. He turned in his seat and gazed out the window, making himself unavailable. The rain was picking up. The van followed a two-lane road

that twisted up into the hills, out of Farron's Landing.

"I understand you have quite a library at the farm," said Sanger.

"We don't keep much hardcopy, actually," said Welch. "But we have a four terminal datagate and unlimited free access to the Electronic Library of Congress. All your books are available -- both of you."

"Really?" said Sanger. "And which of those are accessed most often?" God help me, thought Chester. Or should I appeal to the mercy of the All?

"Many of your books have been downloaded recently," said Welch diplomatically. "After we learned you both were coming."

"I don't mean by the staff," said Sanger. "Which of us is read by the other residents? The non-C-K's?"

"I don't know," said Welch smoothly. "Those records are private. Perhaps neither of you is much read . . ."

"My work is out of print in hardcopy format," interrupted Chester. "I'm not interested in libraries anymore, and I would prefer that anything I've written be erased."

"Goodness," said Sanger. "Don't you have faith in the continued relevance of your works?"

"It's hardly a matter of faith. My writings are political tracts, not works of art. I failed to predict the Carcopino-Koster treatments, and their disastrous effect on political consciousness. But, unlike you, Mr. Sanger, I never made any claims of prescience. My work always concerns itself with the present situation. Thus my early works are out of date, though they served in their time."

"Your early works?" At least, Sanger was paying attention.

"In my current writing I denounce C-K in terms which are accessible to prisoners of the C-K mindset. They run things now; that's the political reality. I don't see much purpose in addressing myself to those like us, who have evaded treatment. After all, we're the smallest of minorities, spread over a handful of isolated farms." Chester was simply unwilling to let Sanger cast him in the role of a defeated old man, however near it was to the truth. He'd hint at a few mysteries of his own instead. Even though there was no current writing, there might be.

"Excellent!" said Sanger. "I see we are pointed in the same direction, as we are in this vehicle. When the metaphorical and the literal coincide, the presence of the All is confirmed. Let them banish us to the farm; residing there is a single answer, which by satisfying our two questions will reveal them to be one."

"Where?" asked Welch. "In the library?"

"No, Roberta, not in the library."

Chester groaned to himself. The wipers slapped a numbing rhythm as the van hummed along. They passed a hundred year old white farmhouse, a red barn, an apple orchard, rows of trees losing their leaves to the autumn downpour.

"No, Roberta," Sanger blathered on, "in this instance the literal is contradicted; libraries are behind us, as are conference calls, satellite feeds, federal indictments -- the detritus we are sloughing off as we move to a new life on your farm."

At that moment a car rushed out of the storm going in the opposite direction, trailing a wet cloud behind it. Water spattered the windshield and for a few seconds the world was smudged and gray.

"Like a comet," said Sanger. "That's exactly the image I was seeking. We hurtle away from the past, Chester and I, sluicing off layers of an old life."

Chester couldn't resist. "But that's wrong. A comet's tail is formed by pressure from something ahead of it; it's not a trail left by rapid forward motion. It's not the result of progress but of resistance to progress."

"Splendid!" said Sanger. "Of course I'm wrong! You've defined the difference between us and the sheep that surround us, with their boosted neurotransmitters and squashed spirits. We still have the freedom to err."

"Splendid," muttered Chester. "Though I do hope, Mr. Sanger, that fallibility isn't our only remaining distinction."

"Please, Chester, you must call me Brother Emil."

The van slowed as Welch pulled up before a low, flat-roofed brick building with wide eaves. The Corley Mitchell Cooperative Accommodation Farm. She parked at the entrance and shut off the motor.

"Mr. Drummond, Brother Emil -- welcome to your new home," she said, turning back across the seat to smile at them. At that moment Chester felt an odd and disconcerting impulse to touch the curve of her neck. "I hope you'll be happy here." 2.

Their rooms were in a wing that culminated in a bright common area furnished with a telewall, two couches, datadesks and chairs, and a refrigerator filled with whole grain snacks which, when Chester sampled them later, tasted like they had been recycled from old encyclopedias. The private rooms themselves were spare, and restful.

Chester unpacked his clothes and hung them in the small closet, unpacked his three books and put them on the shelf above his bed. The Republic, The Wealth of Nations, The Devil's Dictionary. For one bookend he used the brake piston of the 1974 Honda that he had kept as an ashtray since he was nineteen. At the other

end he carefully set the bronze bust of Plato, packed with enough superdense plastique to bring down a small skyscraper. The quote engraved on its base read:

"No evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death." His staff had given him the bust during the campaign of 2016; the explosives had come much later.

He'd given the major parties a run for their money in that election, taking five states and 96 electoral votes. Given the growth curve of the Valutarian Party, he knew he'd win in 2020. People had been hungry for his message. They'd suffered enough from the aftereffects of the pre-millennial irresponsibility, the dismal legacy of the late-20th century's complete abandonment of facts. Even

as a young man Chester had seen the inevitable chaos that would come from the pernicious doctrine that there were no absolutes, that everything was "constructed" from language and that science was no more real than wishing. Chester believed in science.

The economic shocks of the first decade had shaken the foolishness out of the people, sent them flocking to the Valutarian Party. He had predicted his own success, seen the rising arc of his career clear as the flight of a fourth-of-July rocket: the crowds, the TV lights, the women, the successful books, his failing marriage, the electoral triumphs.

The only thing he had not for seem was the Carcopino-Koster boost. Chester was alone in his room for a whole quarter hour before Sanger appeared in his doorway. "You must be wondering what I was alluding to in the van," Sanger said slyly.

Chester was in no mood to be polite. "I've been wondering what you were alluding to for the length of your public career," he said. "I consider every word out of your mouth to be obtuse, mystical bullshit. Metaphors for things that don't exist. I can't imagine this comes as a surprise, Brother Emil."

Sanger only smiled. "I'm offering to lift the veil in this instance, Chester."

"Go ahead."

"There's a woman here named Elizabeth Wiley. I've been seeking her for nearly two years, and with the help of the All I've found her. She's masquerading as another holdout, just like the rest of us, but she's different. She's merely the most important woman in the world."

I guess that leaves room for one of us to be the most important man, Chester thought irritably.

"She underwent Carcopino-Koster ten years ago," continued Sanger, and suddenly Chester's attention was riveted. "A year and a half ago she was assigned to this farm, and not mistakenly. She's the Grail. A returner." "That's impossible. C-K is irreversible."

Sanger came in and sat down on Chester's bed. "Elizabeth Wiley worked most of

her life at the Missouri Botanical Gardens. Carcopino changed little in her life; she was a loving wife and mother, by all accounts contented, unremarkable.

Two years ago she and her husband were on a foliage tour in New Hampshire; a tire blew and their bus skidded off the highway. Her husband was killed instantly. Elizabeth sustained massive head injuries, went into a coma. When she regained consciousness her personality had reverted to its pre-Carcopino formation."

"How do you know all of this?"

"My sources are my own. But Chester, the miracle of her reversion is not the most interesting part of Elizabeth's story. What compels me is this: when the doctors explained the situation to her, she refused another boost. She compared the two states, and declined Carcopino-Koster!"

Chester could already see five different slants for the propaganda campaign. Six, because the fact that there had been no press on this meant there had been cover-up of staggering dimensions. A laugh of pure excitement bubbled up out of him, the first in years.

"Yes!" Sanger laughed with him. "You see the true import of Sister Elizabeth; I can tell. Her potential to serve the All is limitless."

When did she become Sister Elizabeth? Chester wondered. And how could exposing government conspiracy benefit the All? Chester resented the speed with which Sanger appropriated people and ideas to his absurd cause. "Gentlemen," said Roberta Welch. "It's time for dinner."

They looked up, startled. How long had she been standing in the doorway? How much had she heard? 3.

The refectory was a brightly lit, lemon yellow room on the south side of the building. Most of the food, Roberta Welch told them, was grown on the farm and prepared by their fellow refuseniks. Everyone stood when Welch ushered Chester and Sanger into the room. Chester was pleased that most of the holdouts knew who he was, although he hadn't experienced his celebrity in so long that their recognition left a melancholy aftertaste. And it galled him that they seemed much more shocked to see Sanger reduced to seeking refuge on an accommodation farm.

Many of the refuseniks were old, though in most cases gerontological advances had kept them looking fit, closer to forty than seventy. Some were legitimately younger -- you could tell by the hands. Chester, engaging a politician's reflexes, memorized names and faces.

They met Nicholas Koundis, a doddering old Christian Scientist who could no longer remember how old he was or exactly who he had been. "Come to die unmuddled with, eh?" he asked them. "Good for you. Welcome aboard."

They met Gail Wood, a cheerfully dim woman who wanted to talk to them about the Red Sox. "The '18 series doesn't count," she said. "Until they win it without

the help of C-K, they haven't proven anything, the curse of the Bambino is intact. I'm holding on till that day comes."

They met Allan Fence, an embittered science fiction writer who said: "I predicted this, all of it. Everything I predicted came true. But my books never sold."

They met Leon Proudline, no older than thirty, who sat huddled in a corner chanting "Fuckshitpenis, fuckshitpenis, fuckshitpenis," in a Buddhist monotone.

They met Darla Coy, who was waiting for Elvis.

They met Colin Hammel, Linda Bartly, Ebb Gonzales and John Whreg. Phil Dietrich and Joane Boyle popped out of the kitchen, wiping wet hands on white aprons. All of the refuseniks possessed belief systems that had kept them at the margins of society. Unwilling or unable to compete economically with the emotionally stabilized, intellectually enhanced C-K population, they were now exhibits in a museum of the human psyche.

If I am to resurrect my movement, Chester realized, my first followers will come from among these. No doubt Sanger was thinking the same thing, but Sanger's prospects seemed distinctly brighter. It was easier, certainly, to convert irrational believers to another form of irrational belief than to political consciousness.

"This is Dwight Greenberg," said Welch. "He's a psychology major at SUNY Binghamton who's my intern for a semester." Chester was not impressed; the C-K boost had done nothing for the college kid's complexion.

Then, as though she'd known to save her for last, Welch steered them to a table in the corner of the dining hall, where a black woman waited alone. Elizabeth Wiley looked like someone who had suddenly shed a lot of weight. Her smooth face was hollow and the skin hung loosely from her arms. She seemed lost in the uniform green jeans the refuseniks all wore.

"Bet," said Roberta Welch solemnly, "this is Emil Sanger and Chester Drummond." She nodded at each in turn. "Gentlemen, Bet Wiley."

Elizabeth Wiley reached out with both hands and took one of each of theirs. She had a cloudy, preoccupied expression, as if she were already carrying on two conversations at once.

"Emil and Chester are joining the farm," said Roberta Welch.

Bet Wiley peered in turn at each of the two hands she held, shifting them slightly, like prisms that might suddenly reveal a new dimension. Her touch was warm and firm.

"Oh, yes," she said, and smiled. "I recognize you now. She told me you were coming last week."

Chester protested, "But she didn't know. I wasn't taken off the street until Monday night."

"She doesn't mean that I told her," said Roberta Welch. "Bet is in communication with the Virgin Mary."

Sanger was suddenly excited. "You talk to her? This is better than I had hoped."

He turned to Chester. "The Virgin Mary is one of the most frequent identifications given the All over the course of history."

But Elizabeth Wiley was shaking her head. "Oh, no. What could I say to the mother of God? No, she sends me messages in the veins of leaves. She whispers in the wind."

Sanger smoothed the conversation back to his advantage. "Yes, Sister Bet, of course," he said. "The divine always seeks new souls to touch. God loves us. I believe we're going to be dear friends."

"Oh, yes." She pulled their hands toward her. "It is here, in your fingerprints." Suddenly Chester and Sanger were touching. "You're to be great allies. The very best of friends." Too late, Chester jerked his hand away.

"What?" It was Sanger's turn to be confused. "No, I meant us. You and I, Sister."

Bet wrinkled her cheeks in a smile. "If you like."

Chester could feel Welch watching them. She must have recognized the danger Elizabeth Wiley posed to the boosted world. Yes, the old woman had some rough edges psychologically, but she wasn't obviously insane. He couldn't understand why she wasn't being held someplace more secure than the Corley Mitchell Accommodation Farm. Here he was, the founder of the Valutarian Party, ready and able to exploit this woman's genuine subversive potential, and so far the only person in his way was Roberta Welch. It was the neverending arrogance of C-K. Welch was less than half his age, and her intelligence, no matter how enhanced, was no match for his experience.

"Your dinner," Phil Dietrich announced, "requests that you eat it." 4.

The next afternoon, as he jogged around the grounds of the accommodation farm plotting revolution, Chester came upon Roberta Welch working at a stuck pump at

the fish pond. She sat crosslegged on the ground, wearing dark green coveralls.

There was a line between her brows as she studied a schematic of the pump unfolded across one thigh, while in her muddy hand she held a large chrome allen

wrench. Her dark hair, combed straight back in wide tracks, had come loose on one

side and fell over her cheek.

He felt an unexpected mix of sympathy and disapproval. "Can't the staff handle repairs?" he asked.

Her mind was somewhere in the intricacies of the pump, and she did not look up right away. When she did she slowly smiled.

"Dwight had to go into town to buy some ready mix concrete. I like to work with my hands."

"What about your sense of dignity? Do you think your staff should see you like this?"

A misstep. She gave him a look that he had come to recognize all too well: the silent sigh of the C-K adjusted when facing an unregenerate human being.

"Don't bother," Chester said. "I should have known better than to ask that."

She laughed. "Thanks. There are about four assumptions in there that I'd have to explain before I could make you understand. But there is no staff, other than Dwight and me. It's your farm; we're just here to help out."

He sat on the ground next to her. His joints were still pretty flexible for a sixty-year-old's, but then he'd been taking juvenation drugs for twenty years. "You know, I'm really not as unreasonable as the civics made me out to be."

She inserted the allen wrench into an aperture in the centrifugal pump and tried to turn it. It didn't budge. "I've never thought you were unreasonable. Too reasonable, if anything."

"Let me try that."

She let him take the wrench. "Something's jamming it. Don't force it too much, you could damage the mechanism."

He put his shoulders into it, and after a moment the impeller broke loose. He almost fell over with the release of resistance. She caught him; her face close to his.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Her breath was fragrant. He felt his weight pressing against the softness of her chest and his breath caught in his throat. He gave an embarrassed cough and drew slowly away. "Nothing like a little brute strength with machinery."

"Let's try it out," she said. She reinserted the fuses into the switchbox and turned on the pump. It whined into life and water gushed out into the pool. "Thanks," she said.

"Any time."

Welch glanced over at the barn, as if looking for a way out of the conversation.

Had she felt something too? "Don't forget you're scheduled for your first group

therapy session today."

"I don't need therapy, Roberta. I'm a political prisoner." "You're not a prisoner, Mr. Drummond." "Chester."

"Therapy is optional, Chester." She packed up her tool box, professionally distant. "Not everybody takes part."

"Who does?"

"It changes from week to week. Usually Allan Fence is there, and Gail Wood, Linda Bartley. Emil Sanger said he'd come. And Bet Wiley."

She'd said the magic words. He sighed, and said: "When do we start?" 5.

Chester stood in the shower, recalling the feeling of being with a woman. It had been a long time. He wondered what Roberta Welch made of him, if she could tell that he was not just another lunatic. There was no point denying the electricity of her touch. When the time for action came, he hoped he would not have to hurt her.

He could not believe that there were only two of them: a woman and a boy. A small group with a weapon and the will power could take over the Corley Mitchell Accommodation Farm in a matter of minutes. Stepping out of the shower, Chester glanced at his ace in the hole: the bust of Plato, with its payload of plastique. The bomb had been his security chief's idea. Poor, desperate Korsakov had schemed to blow up Valutarian Party headquarters back in 2023 and then blame the government for trying to assassinate Chester. Korsakov had been a little crazy, even for an ex-KGB, but at least he had believed. Recently, even Chester's belief had flagged. On the train out to the farm, he had considered taking Plato for a walk to some nice secluded spot and blowing himself from the shadowy cave of life into the eternal world of forms. But now Bet Wiley had given him reason to live.

Unlike Korsakov, Chester was not a man of action, but he believed he could manage this little uprising. He'd need help: Fence and John Whreg seemed likely recruits, maybe he could even co-opt Brother Emil. If he couldn't win Bet Wiley over, they'd just take her hostage. All they really needed was her story, not her cooperation. Hole up in some barn with the bomb and invite the cameras to his very own media circus. He would be a colossus astride the communications net; the world would echo once again with the power of his voice.

On arriving at the lounge, he saw Brother Emil Sanger already seated at the far end of the circle of chairs. He assumed the prophet was there for the same reason he was -- to get closer to Elizabeth Wiley.

Roberta opened the session by focussing immediately on the new arrivals. "Let's start with you, Brother Emil," she said. "You were saying this morning that

you
wanted to be cured."

"Cured, yes," said Brother Emil. "Of the coercion of the state. Of the tyranny of reason."

Roberta raised her eyebrows expectantly.

Allan Fence, the writer, quickly rose to the occasion. "What coercion?" he said.

"You checked yourself in here voluntarily, Brother Emil. Of your own free will."

"When we were neanderthals," replied Brother Emil, "we developed a taste for mastodon. You know how we hunted them, my friend? We'd form a hunting line and drive the herd toward the edge of a cliff. Within the bounds of that line each mastodon exercised free will, yet today" -- he waved at the window, which looked out over the fields -- "one very rarely sees a mastodon."

"No, no, that's terribly wrong." Linda Bartly was upset. "We're not all mastodons, we're not all the same. They're like a hunting line, but what they've crowded together is a flock of creatures: sloths, butterflies, leopards, loons, platypuses--"

Loons indeed, thought Chester.

"-- they want us all to be the same, but we're not --"

"Linda," said Roberta, "would you like to tell the group what you see in Brother Emil and Chester's auras?" She turned and explained to Chester: "Linda sees auras. But not around those of us who've undergone Carcopino. We've lost ours."

Brother Emil held up his hand. "It will avail us nothing to become mastodons, certainly. But if we all grew wings together, the onrushing cliff would become an opportunity."

"Or arm the mastodons with machine guns," said Allan Fence thoughtfully. "Suitably adapted for physiological differences, of course. Trunk triggered, air-cooled fifty calibers with cermet stocks."

"Mr. Drummond's aura is huge," Linda Bartly stage-whispered. "Big enough for all of us. But it's gray --"

"I'm interested in what the group thinks of Brother Emil's image of the wings," said Roberta. "Implicitly, he's proposing to lead you, to turn you into his followers. He's not a man who gives up easily -- only last year he was preaching the end of the world to his cult on Mt. Shasta."

"It was postponed," said Sanger.

"Your following has evaporated since then. Is that the reason you're here?"

"I'm here because the answers are here. I always seek the answers. Others are welcome to join me in that seeking."

"It was postponed," said Bet Wiley. She was knitting, leaning back in her chair, unhurriedly clacking the brass needles, between which hung a tiny scrap of finished work.

There was a silence. It was more than Brother Emil shutting up and staring. Everyone seemed to hang on Bet's words.

"It was postponed," she said again, and shook her head a little. "But now it'll come. She has come back for the stragglers, the lost sheep."

"I'm sorry, Bet," said Roberta, "can you explain?"

Bet Wiley tilted her head. "She says I'm to be the very last. Just look at the way the chairs are arranged in this room, and you'll see it's so. Who's sitting where." Then she turned to Chester. "She tells me you're my test."

"The Virgin sent you a message about Chester Drummond?" asked Allan Fence. "You know, I wrote that story once, only it was Joan of Arc and Hitler."

"What brings you to us, Chester?" said Gail Wood, the Red Sox fan. Chester glared at her.

"You should share with the group," said Roberta. "You agreed to cooperate."

"I did not," said Chester. "Just because I've been forced to seek shelter from your sterile C-K society doesn't mean I have to answer questions. This isn't a prison, it's an accommodation farm. Wasn't that what you said earlier?"

"You think today's society is sterile? I find it closer to utopia than the world your generation left us."

"If it were anyone else besides these condescending, all-forgiving Carcopino clones that had taken away your power," said Allan Fence, "you'd probably have been executed as a war criminal."

"Fair enough," Chester said. "At least it would have been a man's death, a leader's death."

"When you accept Carcopino-Koster treatment," said Roberta, "you'll understand how little difference there is between the leader of a movement and one of that movement's followers. We've no more to hold against you than we would against someone you'd led around by the nose -- you're both victims of a delusive belief system."

"In a parade going nowhere," said Allan Fence, "it doesn't matter if you're standing in the front."

"I was a Valutarian," said Gail Wood. "I voted for you. Sent you money. 'Chester Drummond, he remembers the values of America.'"

Chester was jolted by the slogan. He had heard it through amplifiers in crowded convention halls, seen it scroll across window shirts across the land. Now hearing it spoken here at a roundtable of idiots, Chester realized just how far he was from the ideal America.

"Read your newsletter right up to the end," she continued reflectively. "Lifetime subscriber. Never thought I'd meet you, though."

"At the end," said Bet Wiley, "the universe shrinks to one point, and all that is scattered is collected together."

"Yes," said Brother Emil. "The All is here with us in this room." He leaned forward, excessively pleased.

"Your aura," said Linda Bartly, staring at Brother Emil. "It's flaring yellow, like a beacon of hope in the night."

"It's not night," Allan Fence pointed out. "It's one-twenty in the afternoon."

"The gray one," said Linda Bartly, indicating Chester. "He's enclosing us in his world."

"The melancholic temperament has an allure," said Roberta. "Until Carcopino, it was widely seen as a prerequisite for the deepest sort of insight. But quite the contrary is actually true."

"Tell that to Lincoln," said Chester.

"Or Beethoven, or Malzberg," said Allan Fence, with a vinegar laugh. "The C-K society is hardly lacking for philosophers or artists," said Roberta. "You know that as well as I do. They're simply free of the psychological turbulence, the displaced intensities, that distort your intellect."

"Turbulence," said Brother Emil. "That's one word for what's missing from your utopia. Others are passion, genius, that unpredictable spark that furthers the All. Your churches are empty, your familial bonds have been reduced to economic contracts. The graveyards go unvisited because the dead are forgotten. This is a world fit only to end."

"Everything I said about the depressive tendency applies equally to the manic," said Roberta.

"Let them dance," said Bet Wiley, and again the room fell silent around her, and there was only the click of her knitting.

"Dance?" said Gail Wood finally.

"Our new friends," said Bet. "They dance like my needles here. Call it manic and

depressive if you like. The Virgin knows the truth."

It seemed impossible, but it struck Chester that even Roberta treated Bet Wiley as the leader of the group.

"If it will bring the end She desires," Bet continued, "let them dance the last dance." 6.

There were perhaps thirty hardcopy books in the farm's library room, which was across the hall from Roberta's office. But Chester was not looking for books. He used the datagate to retrieve the architect's plans for the cooperative, and downloaded them into a secure file in his journal, called "Magus."

Over the past few weeks, as he learned his way around the farm, parts of the plan had come clear. The farm kept chickens, a few cows for milk, and six vats of solarfish; all were for refusenik consumption. The cash crops grew in two hydroponic greenhouses, buried in the earth for insulation. From a distance their flat transparent krylac roofs made them look like plastic lakes. Greenhouse #1 was filled with long season crops: tomatoes, eggplant, okra, celery and melons. Greenhouse #2 supplied leafy vegetables: lettuce, chard, pak choi, kale, and cabbage. Labor-intensive fresh produce grown year-round for the restaurant and gourmet grocery trade; the Corley Mitchell Accommodation Farm actually turned a slight profit for the C-K state.

The underground utility room which housed the hydroponic recirculators and greenhouse heating system was virtually impregnable. From it he could emerge to grant interviews, with ranks of swiss chard as a reassuring backdrop.

Bet Wiley was group leader for Greenhouse #2. Chester eagerly volunteered to work there, hoping to discover some way to bend her to his purposes. Brother Emil chose her group as well, no doubt for the same reason. However, as the weeks wore on, each discovered that she was as dedicated to her brassicas as she was to the Mother of God. She had little time for idle chatter. When she spoke at all, it was usually to the plants. Chester tried endlessly to draw her out about the accident, C-K politics, why she had become a refusenik. She was as slippery as a melon seed. At least Brother Emil was being similarly frustrated. Often as not, the two of them ended up trying to convert one another.

Bet's volunteers spent five hours a day in the greenhouse, monitoring the nutrient solution, staking climbers, moving seedling flats, cornposting spent plants. Their most arduous task was hand-picking a maddening variety of pests off the plants: white flies and spider mites and mealy bugs and scale. The irony of this task was not lost on Chester. Just as he plucked offending aphids from the backs of lettuce leaves, so had the civics removed him from the alleys of Manhattan. When he shared this observation with Brother Emil that day, Bet chanced to overhear.

"But you were not removed," she said. "You were brought to where you belong. This is what She wanted." Her gesture encompassed the three of them. "You both working together. Working with me for Her."

"Mrs. Wiley," said Chester, "I wonder how much you know about the two of us, about the different nature of our respective pursuits."

Bet shook her head. "She has told me more about you than you ever could."

"But --"

"You both grew up knowing that the world you were bom into must end," she said.

She turned to Chester -- "For you it was a somber realization," -- and then to Brother Emil -- "For you, ecstatic revelation. But it was the same thing. And you're both afraid you failed. She knows, so I know."

"This mirrors my current thinking exactly," said Brother Emil excitedly. "It occurred to me in group: by claiming to resolve both our agendas, the Carcopino society reveals them to be one and the same."

"I don't for a minute grant your point."

"Look at it this way," said Sanger. "Isn't all visionary political thinking, like yours, ultimately utopian? By definition?"

"Possibly."

"And isn't a utopian state one where communion between different men, and different nations, is so complete that it becomes a state of spiritual -- apotheosis?"

"An ideal politics might send me groping for metaphors like 'communion,' and 'spiritual,' and 'apotheosis,' but they would still be metaphors, employed in describing a thing that would still be politics."

"Wait, listen: in a politically achieved utopia, wouldn't each individual be free from political concerns, class questions, questions of survival and economics?"

"I expect so." Chester noticed that Bet had slipped away.

"Free, therefore, to concentrate on questions of the individual's existence, development, fate- on spiritual questions?"

"If the individual in question so desired," he grumbled.

Brother Emil grew more excited. "Listen, Chester. Isn't that precisely the deficiency you sense in the Carcopino state? They claim it as a utopia, yet the

individuals are all bright surface, without depth, like energetic children! Having made the world one state under Carcopino, they should be struggling with

new levels of meaning, new emancipations. Instead, they appear completely lacking in breadth, completely numbed to any sense of the great human cause, of tragic profundity, the great story."

Chester was silent.

"The only utopia is heaven," said Bet Wiley, passing by with a flat of kale seedlings. "And She says heaven is nothing more than true freedom."

At that moment they were interrupted by the appearance of a group of school children, led by Dwight. Chester stiffened; it was the first group of C-K tourists he had seen at the farm. A boy -- Chester guessed he was twelve or thirteen -- stepped forward, his expression bright and attentive. "Please go on with what you were saying," he said, and then smiled encouragingly at Bet, Chester and Brother Emil. "I was interested in hearing your thoughts on freedom."

As he looked at the boy's open face it came to Chester with renewed force how few they were, how large the C-K society, how formidable were the forces arrayed against his return to power. This boy probably couldn't remember a time before the boost. Chester felt swirling up out of him a despair as black as any he'd ever known.

"My thoughts on freedom are in the public record," he said to the boy, and turned and strode quickly out of the greenhouse. 7.

After stalking around the grounds in a black rage for twenty minutes, he found himself at the end of the drive. The highway stretched east and west like an invitation. He wasn't a prisoner; no one was going to stop him. The worst that could happen was that some civic would pick him up, feed him supper and call the farm. But which direction should he pick? East, back to Farron's Landing and the train?

To the west, the road curved off into the trees. The air had a late-fall bite to it, a hint of the winter just around the corner. West was America's direction, the bearing of manifest destiny. It beckoned.

The road to manifest destiny was, however, falling apart. The C-K state had over-regulated the private automobile to the point of extinction. The vast amounts of money that for the better part of a century had been expended on making and maintaining roads were being spent elsewhere.

A couple of miles down the road he came upon a farm house. White frame, at least a hundred years old. On the roof a satellite dish the size of a wok listened silently to the southern sky. In the yard was a tangle of aluminum siding that had been ripped off the house. Beside it, covered by a blue tarp, was a stack of clapboards in twenty foot lengths. Something he had overheard at the center sparked in his memory: Roberta telling Darla Coy that she was restoring an early twentieth century house.

He tried the side door and found it unlocked. A large butcher block table, scarred and darkened from years of use, dominated the kitchen. It seemed somehow barbaric. Roberta managed to live without a dishwasher, microwave or hydrator. The breakfast dishes were neatly aligned in the drying rack by the sink. One bowl, one spoon, one coffee cup.

Her office was upstairs. In one corner was her personal datagate, the latest from Cognico. There was also a flowered futon and a charmingly anachronistic metal filing cabinet. The walls were plastered with dozens of stickers for long

departed pre-millennial political organizations: Amnesty International, National Rifle Association, Gays for God, The Alphysics Movement, InfoMass, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the Moral Majority. The names stirred a cloud of associations from Chester's youth. Some of these he had belonged to; others he had fought.

She found him half an hour later standing by the filing cabinet, a folder with his name on it opened flat on top of the shelf of other folders, leating through clippings, faxes, photographs, and half a dozen disks in plastic folders, each labeled in her small handwriting: "Journal -- Early Life," "Journal -- Political Career," "Joumal --Relationships."

"Here you are," she said.

He didn't bother to look at her. "You broke into my journal."

"Yes." She settled herself on the futon. "It reads as if you intended it for an audience. You have some amazing insights, Chester. Your analysis of the campaign of '16 is the best I've ever read."

He considered. "You expect me to be flattered?"

"Maybe you should be." She gestured at the stickers on the walls.

"Twentieth-century politics is a hobby of mine. I'm interested in your career, Chester."

A hobby, he thought. Like fly-fishin, stamp collecting. He closed the folder and put it back in the cabinet. "There are lots of files in here. I'm just one of your interests."

"You're a distinct individual."

"Chester Drummond. Your patient."

"Chester Drummond, hunter for secrets. Believer in truth." He could not tell how much of her voice was mockery. It didn't sound like mockery. "Leader of men. Last of the pre-millennial giants."

"And I'm fascinating, right? You're impressed by me, but then you're impressed by Emil. Bet. Allan Fence." He searched her brown eyes for some sign that she thought he was different from the rest. The light was failing and the room was heavy with shadows. She gave him nothing and he turned his back to her, feeling old, almost on the verge of tears.

He felt her hands on his shoulders. She slid them down his back, around his waist, and pressed herself against him. He could not have been more surprised had she pulled a gun on him.

He laughed, a choked laugh. She rested her head on his shoulder blade. She slid her slender fingers between the buttons of his shirt, touching the gray hair

of
his chest. Her hands were warm in the chill of the room. Unbelieving, he
turned
around.

She drew him toward the futon, and for a brief time he stopped asking himself
questions, as surely as if he had C-K'd himself into equanimity, while her
pale
body moved through the gray dusk against his aging one.

When he awoke he found she had covered him with a quilt. It was night and a
Halloween moon threw a wedge of silver light across the corner of the futon.
Roberta was sitting in front of her datagate, another quilt wrapped around her
body. Her dark hair tumbled over her forehead, and the profile of her face
stirred unnameable emotions in him. For the first time since he'd gotten on
the
train in New York, he felt more calm than angry.

"What did this mean?" he asked.

"Did you enjoy it?" She did not look away from the screen.

"Of course. Didn't you?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. So why does it have to mean anything?"

"Because we have some kind of relationship. Doctor-patient, jailer-prisoner --
I
don't know exactly. We work together, maybe we're even friends. This changes
things."

"No, it doesn't." Finally she turned to face him. "You needed something I had
to
give, that's all. It's amazing how a little serotonin boost can change your
outlook on life."

Chester sat up, reaching for his clothes. "You're saying this was behavior
modification?"

"Don't get me wrong. You're a legitimately fascinating man, Chester. Your
rebelliousness, egocentricity, radical self-confidence -- they're qualities
that
should make you a valued member of society."

"They did, at one time," Chester said, calmer than he felt. "In case you've
forgotten."

"I haven't. But there's no reason you shouldn't find a place in the world now.
I
heard you got upset when the latest school field trip came through this
afternoon. Fine. So why shut yourself up in this museum?"

"Were you this much of a manipulative bitch before you were C-K treated?"

"I was very young. I don't remember."

Chester pulled on his pants. He had a knot in his back from the futon.

"You know, there's nothing you can do to change the world," Roberta said. She
reached behind her without looking and shut off the gate. "You didn't change

it
as much as you thought you had, and what you did accomplish was a working out
of
your own inadequacies through denial and projection. You were a dangerous man,
a
trigger waiting to be pulled to set off the millions of similarly warped and
frustrated people around you. Until they all changed, and you were left
alone."

"I'm not alone here."

"Right. The others at the Mitchell center are like you. But I don't think
there's enough explosive material in them for you to make much of a blast."

She rose from her chair, pulled the quilt around her and came to him. She
touched his cheek. "And you don't have to be alone, you know."

Chester pushed her hand away, pulled on his shoes and left. * * * 8.

Chester ate dinner alone, late, sulking. For some reason he couldn't stop
thinking about Charlotte, his first wife. They had been very young, both of
them
law students at Duke, when they'd married. They'd lived in a roach-infested
apartment upstairs from a shopfront a few blocks from the campus. Charlotte
was
scared of insects, and when the weather turned cool the large roaches that
bred
outside in the leaf mold would come into the house in search of food at night.
Charlotte would walk into the kitchen, flip on the light and spot one crawling
up the face of the kitchen cabinet, or in the silverware drawer. She
invariably
screamed, but she didn't allow him to use insect spray, and she didn't want to
crush them. Neither did he -- though he wouldn't admit it, he was hardly less
squeamish -- so they kept a plastic cup and a piece of cardboard on the
bookshelf. Chester would trap the roach under the cup, slide the sheet of
cardboard under the cup and carry the roach to the bathroom and flush it down
the toilet.

After a while, whenever he heard Charlotte's shriek from another room, he knew
that it was time for him to fetch the cup and go roach hunting. The ritual,
Chester later realized, in its gruesome acknowledgment of the imperfect nature
of the world, and the way they coped with it without betraying their
sensibilities, was a textbook example of politics at work. It bound them
together.

Not so firmly, of course, that it kept them bound when the marriage went sour.
A
politics sufficient to the dispatching of roaches hadn't carried them very far
in the end.

In a black mood, feeling all his life behind, nothing left ahead of him,
Chester
was drawn to Bet Wiley's room. She sat knitting, her chair turned toward the
door, as though she were expecting him. There was a portrait of the Virgin
hanging over the bed.

"Ah, Chester. Sit down."

He sat. Her attitude of knowing that he was going to arrive only irritated
him.

"Why are you always knitting? You're a little old to be expecting a baby."

"There are all kinds of babies."

He let that pass. "Do you have children?"

"Two. My daughter Reshonda is a hospital dietician in Rochester. Roger, my son, was studying law before he was C-K boosted. Now he's a landscape architect."

"Grandchildren?"

She shook her head. The clack of her needles filled a long silence. She was waiting for something from him.

"What are you making?"

She fanned the stitches out along the needles to keep them from falling off and then held up what was obviously a sweater. "I started back in March." She came out of her chair, pressed it to his shoulders and nodded in satisfaction. "For you."

"For me?"

"She told me you would come and take over here."

"What do you mean, take over?"

"It's time for me to move on to another farm."

"Move on? I don't understand." His brain was like mud. "Were you-aware of my work?"

She shook her head. "She told me what I need to know. It has nothing to do with your previous work. That has come to an end; you must start over now. She told me you would help me complete my mission here. You and Emil."

Chester started to speak, then stopped.

"You feel very alone," said Bet. "I -- yes, I do."

"The people who seem to want to listen, the people who care; me, Emil, the others -- you think we're crazy."

"I don't know."

"Soon this will be over."

"How?"

"One way or another. You will join us and know you are whole, or you will be left alone to find the martyrdom you seek. The time of hesitation is nearly done."

"I don't seek martyrdom."

"No. You seek release."

Chester lowered his head into his hands, and wet his palms with tears.

Bet looked up, but her needles clacked on. "Emil is coming here tonight too. He needs to talk."

"I can leave."

"No. I want you to hear. But be out of sight." She nodded at the closet door. "Hurry."

He hesitated.

"Go." She waved the sweater at him. "Inside."

Amazed, Chester stumbled up and into Bet Wiley's closet. He closed the door to just a crack, and the closet light shut off automatically.

In the dark he wiped his teary cheek and leaned back against Bet's hanging clothes, and wondered how it had come to this. He might have been about to protest the indignity when there came the sound of Emil's voice.

"Sister Bet. I wonder if I might have a word with you."

"Sit down, Emil."

"I tried to find Brother Chester--"

"Better we talk alone," said Bet. "She would like us to further our understanding together. Then we can approach the others."

"Yes, fine." Chester could hear Emil's sincere excitement. "But we should draw on our collective energy soon. The group here has the potential to function as a cell, a psychic battery."

"Yes." Bet's needles ticked away, and Chester imagined he could hear her nodding.

"I imagine nothing less than that we would sequester together, barricade ourselves against the staff, against the entire Carcopino reality, and together foment the end of the world!"

"Yes, that is very much like what She has in mind for us."

"Really? She has spoken of this?"

"She sent me here to make this happen. And it is close, it is much closer than you think."

"I am beside myself, Sister Bet."

"You are. And yet there is where your work lies. You must turn to yourself, be no longer beside. For that is where the world resides. The world that must end."

"I don't understand."

"How could you? You are beside yourself. We all are. I only know because She

tells me."

"Tell me what She said about me." The certainty had gone out of Emil's voice now.

There followed a pause where even Bet's needles were silent. Chester wanted to widen the crack in the door and peek out, but he knew the closet light would flash on automatically, giving him away. Maybe if he loosened the bulb in its socket --

Bet Wiley began, bringing the words up like water from a deep, forgotten well. "The world you live in, the only world that exists for you, is the world of your reception in the souls of other people. You've lived there all your life.

"Now it has narrowed. A great forgiving, a great erasure has dwindled the world around you. Those who have taken Carcopino are deaf to your passion. In them, your world is dead. Your world is here, down to these last few who might still hear you."

"You mean the farm?" Sanger whispered.

"Join me in bringing these last sheep into the pasture, Emil. Then you'll have the end of your world. Then renewal can begin, God bless."

"My message," protested Sanger. "The All --"

"She says you lived and breathed your message into the fiber of the world. Now comes the forgiving, the forgetting. The treatment is making the world a clean slate, and the seeds you planted with your works will arise or they are not meant to. But first the job must be finished. Your world must end, just as you've always promised. You too must cross to the other side, where the C-K souls await you. There you will find your destiny. You must go to the life after your life, in the world after your world."

"Can it be?"

"You were sent to me to help me finish my work, Emil. She sent me back to gather the strays, and she sent you to help me. The others here need you."

"Incredible. And she says my works will flourish, in the future?"

"If the Carcopino world needs your message, it will find it. The same is true for Chester. The time for passionate embodiment of your works is over. Now you must move on to that bright new world yourself. But first help me bring this last tattered remnant of the old world home. You are not the only one who needs convincing, Emil. Use the power of your voice, your vision."

"But there are other farms. Other handfuls of refuseniks --"

"She has provided. Soon, you and Chester will lead this farm to the C-K treatments, and take the treatments yourself. Then I will be moving on to another facility, where my work may continue, Her will be done."

"You're like Moses," said Emil wonderingly. "You'll lead your people to the promised land, though you may not get there yourself."

"Don't worry about me. I've had the healing once."

"You're beautiful, Sister Bet. You have the radiance of the truth. May I -- may I kiss your hand?"

"It is Her work that is beautiful. You might as well kiss the leaves in the greenhouse."

"Nonetheless --"

Chester heard him kneel and smack his lips.

"I'm going to find Chester," Emil announced, his brightness recovered. "He'll be my first convert. A hard nut to crack, but if it's Her will . . ."

"No," said Bet. "You mustn't speak to Chester as you have been. You must not harass him. He's not a stray for you to tend, like the others. The Virgin picked him out to do her work, sooner or later; he is another leader, like you, and he will join us in our work, or find his own way. But he is not to be bothered."

"What if he doesn't see?"

"If he refuses treatment, he and I will be transferred together. Leave him to Her gentle hand. Go to the others."

"Yes, sister."

And at that, Emil hurried away.

Chester emerged from the closet. Bet was knitting, and singing sound-lessly to herself. He stood before her.

Her eyes met his briefly, then fell. Clack, cIack.

He left without saying anything. 9.

He locked the door to his room, turned slowly to face the bookshelf. Plato stared back at him impassively. He realized he had been asking all the wrong questions. It was hopeless to try to resurrect the world before C-K. That world

had ended; Bet was right. The only question Chester really needed to address was

this: Did he want to go on in the new world? Otherwise he ought to bring himself

to an end as well. He reread the inscription on its base. "No evil can happen to

a good man, either in life or after death." He picked the bust up for the first

time since his arrival; its weight tingled down his arm. With a strangled cry, he hurled the bronze at the wall. It rang hollowly and skittered across the floor. Gone, all gone: his precious plastique, his measure of ready death. The bust was as empty as his takeover plan. Like every other refusenik on the farm,

Chester had been deluding himself.

He sat on the bed and felt a moment of vast relief. It was out of his hands; he had done everything he could but the damned C-K's had outwitted him. Roberta. So this is how the world ends. He chuckled bitterly. Definitely not with a bang. What had she said? There was not enough explosive at the farm to cause much of a blast.

And then he was angry.

He found her in her office.

"Oh, that," she said. "Dwight emptied it out the first day. We have a weekly weapons scan, of course."

"Without a search warrant? What about the right to privacy?"

"You want privacy? Leave us and go back to the world. Citizens have rights," she said patiently. "You have very deliberately chosen not to be a citizen."

He was about to tell her that was un-American but she didn't give him the chance.

"What did you expect, Chester? That we didn't know how dangerous the unboosted mind can be? You think we forgot the history of the twentieth century, with all its political terrorists, religious fanatics, mass murderers? We did it for your protection, for the protection of everyone on the farm. There are people here with problems. Do you want Darla Coy making life and death decisions for you? Well, she doesn't want you making any irrevocable decisions for her either."

"And what about Bet Wiley? You're using her against us. Or is she a plant?"

"Bet Wiley is a seriously disturbed woman with her own agenda. If you asked her, she'd probably say that she was using me, according to some plan the Mother of God left on a piece of toast. If I knew some way to convince Bet to reboost, I would do it in a second. It is true that she has helped close several accommodation farms; she's convinced many of the stubbornest refuseniks we have to take the treatment. But whatever good she has accomplished is far outweighed by the pain she suffers. We do not believe in sacrifice, Chester. Everyone deserves sanity."

Chester sagged as the anger drained out of him. "And what do I deserve?"

"It's up to you, Chester. Always has been." 10.

In the common room, Emil had Gail Wood in a corner: "I had a vision, Sister Gail! It came flooding over me." He moved his hands like a hypnotist. "I was just the receiver, however; it was intended for you. I was only the channel."

'My goodness," said Gail Wood. "What -- what sort of vision?"

"I was transported to an alternate universe. In it the Red Sox retained the

rights to Babe Ruth. He only hit five hundred and sixty-three home runs in his career, but he pitched more, winning one hundred and thirty games. In Fenway that's not bad! And the Sox won the series in '26, '28, '32, '51, and '74! The curse of the Bambino is alleviated, Sister Gail!"

There were tears in Gail Wood's eyes. "How can --"

"I talked with the Babe, he asked about you. He wants you to know that your suffering, in this universe, helped the Sox triumph elsewhere. He's sorry --"

Gail Wood was soon to accept treatment, Chester saw. Emil was good, an efficient emissary for Bet Wiley's message. Chester felt a little stir of competitiveness; he wanted to be responsible for some conversions himself before this farm closed, before he and Emil accepted C-K treatment. He recalled again what little the two of them shared: a love of rhetoric. And a belief in conversions. How odd that they had both surrendered to the same conversion here at the farm.

Bet Wiley's message was beautiful. She'd been to the promised land and come back, and she wanted Emil and Chester and the other holdouts to have what she'd had, so badly that she was willing to delay her own return to paradise. She wanted to make sure that every last holdout was aboard before she went back herself. She could speak the language of the unconverted, convince them in a way the C-K's never could.

Ironically, it was Roberta Welch, with her typical C-K impatience and condescension, who had provided the final evidence. Bet wasn't a plant. The C-K's couldn't even grasp the nature of her Martyrdom. Bet was so like Emil and Chester -- they three were the last to understand what it was to have a cause. Bet, however, had discerned what Emil and Chester couldn't: there was only one cause left to have.

Chester felt marvelously odd. What a thing it was, after a lifetime, to be a convert.

He wandered out of the room, rehearsing speeches in his head. Rhetoric would have one last moment of glory, would flare before it died. He decided to find Allan Fence. Fence -- now there would be a challenge. Chester couldn't see him responding very well to Emil. No, he was certainly Chester's responsibility.

Nut to crack, to use Sanger's phrase.