

Selected Archive (2000-2008)

Mental Contagion

Arts & Literary Journal

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Tin Can
Literary Series

Memories from the Past & Future

November 2002 – November-December 2008 (*Exceptions)

*January 2004 (Redacted, Not Found)

*March 2005 – April 2005 (Redacted, Not Found)

*July 2005 – September 2005 (Redacted, Not Found)

*January 2006 – July 2006 (Redacted, Not Found)

Selected Emails From the Future (Sub-Series)

By Gene Dillon

May 2003 – December 2005

After the Jettison: Tales Told From Memory In Zero Gravity (Sub-Series)

Fictional essays about baseball and haikus.

August 2006 – October 2006

Opening the Can: Publishing in 125,000 Easy Steps (Sub-Series)

Ongoing documentation of Gene's effort to publish of a collection of stories.

November 2006 – November-December 2007

Freelancing for Sasquatch (Sub-Series)

A fictional account of iChat sessions between Gene and Karen regarding Gene's disappearance to British Columbia.

January 2008 – November-December 2008



Gene Dillon lives in Boulder, CO with his wife, Michelle. His two young, adult children are currently navigating school and real life. A native of Chicago, Gene moved out West for a multitude of reasons he still does not understand. He first appeared in Mental Contagion in April of 2001 with a plumbing story entitled Karmic Baptism. After that, he began documenting his present and future life in a monthly column for MC called Tin Can. He is currently working on... thinking about writing again.

Gene was an integral part of Mental Contagion in the aughts. At times, he contributed as an editor and producer, and was also the creator of a conversation feature called The Shovel, in which he interviewed people from all walks of life. In his third chapter with MC, Gene documented the depressing and humiliating process of trying to get published, in a column called Opening the Can. There were a lot of worms.

Gene misses you. He writes the column Tin Can for Mental Contagion.

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November 2002

Tenderfoot — Part 1: A Couple Mistakes

The moment I stopped resenting my parents was the moment I began to feel sorry for them. I was the youngest of eight children, one year behind my brother Andrew, two years behind Kathleen, three years behind Mary Therese... You get the picture. For the better part of two decades, there was always a kid in diapers, while another kid was endangering the life of some other kid, while yet another kid was off in a corner, huffing airplane glue. By the time Andrew and I came along, our parents had gotten spread pretty thin. They had to be so tired. From the get-go, Andrew and I did all that we could to help make their lives miserable, and we did not let up as we got older.

Andrew was thin and small for his age, so we were pretty evenly matched. Our bloody bouts of whiffle ball in the back yard could have brought prison guards to the brink of tears. The wrestling always got out of hand - body slams, foreign objects, blood curdling screams... We held brutal boxing matches in the square-shaped, upstairs hallway on a nightly basis. Our short-sleeved, Catholic School uniforms did nothing to hide the hideous bruises that decorated our arms at school the next morning. We showed them off proudly to our classmates. Lord knows what our teachers must have thought.

We did not limit our interests to violence alone. We also thrived on the rush of destruction. Brand new bicycles were thoroughly demolished by “ghost rides” before summer reached its end. We set things on fire - anything that would burn. The hair on a GI Joe would burn over and over and over again. Stuffed animals were strung up on telephone wires. We combed the alleyways of our neighborhood, picking through trashcans and dumpsters in search of discarded appliances. Old televisions were best. We opened them up, and pulled out the little tubes, tossing them as high up into the air as we could. They made the coolest sound when they landed. We flipped a coin to decide who would throw the first brick at the picture tube. The aftermath of our demolition was left scattered up and down the alley behind our block. Nobody made a big deal out of it. We were boys. Boys did these things. We were merely emulating our greatest heroes - Dick the Bruiser, Evil Knevil, Mohammed Ali and The Three Stooges.

Mom and Dad, now well into their forties, didn't need the consistent and relentless aggravation that accompanied our existence. At this point in their lives, they preferred a restful martini to the antics of two pre-pubescent boys all hopped-up on Crunch Berries. So they jumped at any chance to get rid of us. During previous summers, they had dumped us on aunts, uncles and grandparents, for afternoons, evenings, and even an occasional sleepover or two. The weekend jaunts were a big deal to us. But they had their ups and downs.

Staying with my grandparents was always a little bit weird. They were pretty old by the time we came along, so they didn't have the kind of energy that we truly required. Their house was too quiet, and smelled like Woolworth's. Their candy was old. And for some reason, my grandfather refused to refrigerate his jelly. I did not understand this. Since they never ate it, the same dusty jar was always there, waiting only for us to consume during our semi-annual visits. We were always taught that old people did weird things because of The Depression, like hiding money under their mattresses. So Andrew and I blamed The Depression for the grape jelly that smelled like feet, and tasted like vinegar. One year, the jelly had really turned, but our grandparents were incapable of noticing or caring. We told them we didn't eat jelly anymore. So they gave us bruised bananas for lunch instead.

I remember one glorious weekend, when my Auntie Doe had us stay with her at her apartment on the North side of Chicago. On the last afternoon of our visit with her, she went up to the attic to retrieve some old boxing gloves that somebody had left there. Boxing gloves? Good God in Heaven, Auntie Doe is giving us boxing gloves! Like a seasoned trainer, she helped each of us to lace up our gloves, and then she sent us out into the back yard to beat the crap out of each other. The tiny yard was just about the size and shape of an actual boxing ring. We pounded on each other's wobbling heads until we could hardly stand up. Knockdown after knockdown - we kept getting back up to trade more blows. The beatings continued until it became too dark to see. Perhaps the sun was setting. I can't say for sure. I don't think I'll ever know Auntie Doe's true motive for letting us do this. The gloves were huge, and well padded, so perhaps it was just good, clean fun. Or maybe she was sending a message to our parents. I don't know. We begged our parents to buy us two pairs of boxing gloves for years afterward.

At some point during the seventies, it seemed like there was a significant gap in time during which no invitations were extended to us. Once our parents had exhausted every possible avenue for dispensing

their two biggest problems onto one of their cringing relatives, their choice was clear. They'd have to fork over some dough and get us signed up for an extracurricular activity. Something, of course, that didn't involve them.

Our folks opted for something appropriately militaristic. They enlisted us in the Boy Scouts. This was a brilliant move on their part, because in the Boy Scouts, they have overnight camping trips. That meant an occasional quiet weekend around the house, free from the sounds of epic wrestling matches pounding down on the ceiling just above the TV. I distinctly remember the fact that while I was at my weekly troop meetings, my dad would get to watch Wonder Woman, uninterrupted. Dad always kept up the air of being a good and well-behaved man, a devout Catholic. But he never made any effort to hide his attraction to Linda Carter, running around in her strapless, red, white and blue costume, flying an invisible helicopter. I once overheard a conversation he was having with one of my older brothers, that what he liked most about her was her butt. To a nine or ten year-old, this is a shocking revelation. Butts were nasty things, and certainly not the focal point of any kind of sexual attraction. It made me wonder about him. When he proclaimed once that a particular woman was “built like a brick shit-house.” I was really thrown for a loop.

Scout meetings were painful. Boring and long. We had to go to somebody's house, and somebody else's house always smelled funny. Being a year older, Andrew always attended different meetings with some boys his own age, and he was able to enter the Boy Scouts right away. I myself was forced to endure one year in the Cub Scouts, which was a tad humiliating. We sometimes had to wear our uniforms to school, which included these little plaid scarves that fitted around our necks. Very manly. At least I managed to jump in at the highest rank of Cub Scout - the “Webelos.” (Pronounced WEE-blows) It was pretty easy to turn the word “Webelos” into an insult, and quite a few people did exactly that. In the Cub Scouts, I guess we still required a maternal figure, so they gave us a Den Mother. I'm sure that this was volunteer work for the Church or school - most likely some lady working out the penance laid out for her by a priest in confession. A Den Mother - like some wolf with a few extra teats to spare for helpless, abandoned babes.

The following year, I graduated into the Boy Scouts. As rookies, we were bestowed with the title of “Tenderfoot.” which is Native American for “Pussy.” More awful meetings... This time, we're stuck in

a tiny, dark room in somebody's basement. We learned a thing or two from our benevolent Scoutmaster, Mr. Stockton, a kindly old gentleman, with shock-white hair, and a persistently grim expression. I guess he taught us about animal tracks, and how to prevent forest fires, and stuff like that... But mostly, all this guy could talk about was tying knots. I just didn't get it. We spent well over half of our time tying dozens of different kinds of knots. Square Knots, Sailor's Knots, Granny Knots, Taut-line Hitches, The Halyard Bend, The Hangman's Noose... In retrospect, I probably should have worried that he was planning to kidnap us all in the middle of the night, and force us to set sail with him on his secret pirate ship hidden somewhere behind the trees in Montrose Harbor.

I remember one evening, one of my troop-mates got pretty loopy - I can't remember his name, but I remember he was part Sioux, which really impressed the Scoutmaster. Most of what we learned about survival and living in harmony with the land was taken straight from the Native Americans, just like everything else we stole from them. The kid even looked the part, with straight black hair and dark skin, but unfortunately, he had a little too much of the foolish white man in him. That night, he took his little length of rope and just started tying and tying and tying knots until he couldn't tie anymore, and his little rope was stiffened into a pig tail of about 45 knots.

Now, Mr. Stockton was an okay guy - but so was every other grownup we knew. In my experience, every parent, teacher and nun that I had ever known possessed something sinister, welling deep inside them: The Fury! That cauldron of rage that they kept on simmer, just in case the guests arrived and they needed to bring it up quickly to a rolling boil. As a kid, growing up in a large family and going to a Catholic School, you had to know and understand The Fury, and to know it... was to know how to diffuse it. The Fury kept you from crossing the line. And every authority figure had their own threshold, their own line that you could feel free to jump across, if you were totally nuts.

Stockton's line had something to do with knots.

The half-Sioux kid giggled, showing his little prize to everyone. I turned my back to him and went back to work on my single, perfect Sheepshank. I knew what was coming. The kettle was whistling. Over my shoulder, I heard the unmistakable whooshing sound of open palm cutting through damp, basement air at the speed of a Nolan Ryan fastball. The noise created by the resulting impact would have made Moe

Howard blush. I don't think Stockton held back at all. Not one bit. My own ears were ringing. I'm not sure what the kid's ears must have been doing, but I am sure that he never came to a Scout meeting again.

Tales of corporal punishment tend to read like sad stories of abuse, but rest assured, most parents didn't mind too much, as far as we could tell. On rare occasion, maybe a nun went a little overboard, like our teacher in second grade. With a strong right to the belly, she once lifted Kim Scaggs clear off the linoleum. Oof. Yes, the girl was nuts, a real problem, but... The kid was taken out of school, and that particular nun was gone the following year. Perhaps that was a coincidence, but then again, perhaps there were limits to what the grownups could pull off. There certainly are limits these days. In days past, parents sent their kids to Catholic schools for the firm discipline that they were willing and able to dish out. Somebody had to get the job done when the parents weren't around to smack their kids upside the head in person. They respected our teachers, our nuns, and our priests, and trusted their judgement. Perhaps one day, these surrogates would be taking care of their kids for an entire week, and an uncommon level of trust would be required...

December 2002

Tenderfoot — Part 2: Never Get Out of the Boat

A week? Yes, a week! For Mom and Dad, the big payoff was finally here! Boy Scout Summer Camp - 7 days and nights, free from our hijinks! For close to 20 years now, our parents had not been able to afford anything close to resembling a vacation. For them, this would be as good as it gets.

Summer Camp was a time for rigorous outdoorsmanship. It was a bad idea. It was a time for learning and growing. It was a nightmare. It was a time for earning merit badges. It was painfully humbling. It was a time for the few and the proud to attain the level of Eagle Scout. It was like training a herd of rabid squirrels.

We were off to Camp Shin-Go-Beek, (shin-GO-bik) in Waupaca, Wisconsin! Shin-Go-Beek was a typical Wisconsin wilderness scene, nestled in the woods next to a good-sized lake, with an office and Mess Hall built out of logs. “Shin-Go-Beek” was yet another Native American phrase, which meant: “Your parents aren't here, swear as much as you want.”

The trip began as you might imagine, with a long drive in a faded blue school bus that began to smell worse with each passing minute. We sang the usual stupid songs, over and over and over, until we were all ready to kill each other. We ate healthy snacks - something that Andrew and I had never done before. We drank juice instead of root beer.

I looked around at the clean and seemingly innocent faces. Three of the older scouts would be gunning for the Eagle ranking, which was the Boy Scout equivalent of a black belt in karate. All three of them sat way in the back, donned peach-fuzz mustaches, and maintained an air of smugness that just barely concealed their fear of failure. The middle of the bus was packed with a hodgepodge of scouting veterans from the middle grades. They were a rude and lackluster bunch, whose uniforms tended to be more dirty and wrinkled than everyone else's. Huddled behind the Scoutmasters at the front of the bus were us Tenderfoots. Nobody called us Tenderfeet - too confusing. Our equipment was brand new - too new and too cheap, for the most part. I had a stiff nylon backpack from K-Mart that was improperly

weighted and uncomfortable. My mom wrote my name on every article of my clothing, because that was what moms were supposed to do. And my boots... I was told that I needed to “break my hiking boots in.” These boots were created for the sole purpose of walking 5 or 10 miles at a stretch, but somehow, these were the most excruciating pair of footwear that I had ever worn. Of course I outgrew them before I was ever able to “break them in.” which I now understand is why parents always buy cheap clothing for their kids, until they get wise.

At one point, about 5 hours into the journey, we stopped for gas, and everybody got off the bus to stretch their legs and blow the stink off. After loading up on the 50 or so gallons of leaded gasoline that was required to fill the tank every couple of hours, we all climbed back on the bus to endure the last leg of our journey. The driver turned the key, and the bus... would not start. Never, in all my ten years, could I possibly imagine that something as reliable as a school bus could ever fail in its assigned purpose. I knew that old station wagons broke down and overheated - they were towed to gas stations and fixed. What the hell do you do with a bus? The driver and the two Scoutmasters huddled together under the gigantic hood and conferred about what to do.

Did you know that you can push-start a bus?

“Okay everybody. We need your help.” About 25 boys, aged ten to thirteen and adorned in silly little uniforms, filed off the bus and were then instructed to get behind it and start pushing. “You want us to push the bus,” someone resigned all too quickly, in a statement that should have been a question. But you don't question the orders of a Scoutmaster.

School buses are heavy. And I imagine they're kind of dangerous, when you're not actually inside them, and they start to roll. We grunted and shoved and fell down and got up. A mass of weak flesh struggled against the immovable. “Is it in neutral?” the Scoutmaster begged. My guess was No. Something started to give. I found myself trapped in the middle, getting pointlessly tossed around. The bus began to roll a little bit more, then faster and faster, and amidst the yelling and the cursing and the laughter came the sound of the old behemoth coming back to life! Dear God, it worked! CHEERS erupted from the crowd of us, some standing, and some sprawled out on the dirt alongside the highway, giggling...

And the bus was still going, of course - you don't stop a vehicle once it's been push-started. We scrambled to our feet and ran to keep up, the Scoutmaster waving, "Hurry up! Come on!" As one by one, we ran, and jumped up on to the steps of the moving bus, accelerating to 10, 12, 15 miles per hour, while being passed on the highway by the big rigs going 55. We made it. And the bus kept on rolling, until it came to a quiet rest, on the grounds of Camp Shin-Go-Beek. The experience filled me with a sense of accomplishment that went unmatched for the remainder of that long week.

We were to spend this entire week away from home, sleeping in old, musty canvas tents pitched atop wooden planks. We laid our sleeping bags on top of these rickety little cots. For camping, this may sound a tad luxurious, but the fact is, there were no seals or zippers, so we were about to serve as a week-long buffet for ten thousand exotic bugs. I shared a tent with my buddy and fellow Tenderfoot, Paul Wicklow, the tallest and most talkative kid in my class. Paul was as clueless and excited as I was. He was a really positive influence on me. On the way to camp, Paul told me about how he had burned down his neighbor's garage, and never gotten caught.

We became intimate with spiders and outhouses. Andrew's tent-mate was Glen Hughes, a freckle-faced, All-American type. Glen was so disgusted at the notion of crapping on top of a mound of other people's crap at the bottom of a dark, stinking hole, that he refused to crap for the entire week. He just held it in. The outhouse was a filthy, old construct of rotting wood, with no windows or vents. It smelled so horrible. Everyone peed outside in the trees, but for number two, we held out as long as we could. This proved to be difficult. With 13 year-olds being trusted to cook all our meals for us in the Mess Hall, it's a wonder they didn't issue us all a bottle of penicillin and a bag of diapers.

For an organization as legendary as the Boy Scouts, I certainly expected a more rigid system of discipline. To be honest, I don't think anybody had really thought this through. Aside from being alarmingly outnumbered, the Scoutmasters of Troop 20 were a couple of cream puffs. I guess they expected a fair amount of assistance from the oldest scouts. Those guys gave us a lot of guidance, all right. They taught us plenty of new words and biological facts pertaining to the reproductive system. And they were always eager to share advice on the laziest ways to do things.

The campsite for Troop 20 felt like an outpost nestled somewhere behind enemy lines. We lived in squalor - dirt, fires, smoke, tin cups, and a couple dozen boys who were always a little on-edge, nervous about what was coming next. “What are we even doing here?” was the number-one thought going through everyone's minds. The age-old motto “Be Prepared” made the most sense in all the wrong contexts:

“Be prepared to know the true meaning of the word grundy.” Also known as a wedgy, it is the process of yanking upward on somebody's underwear from behind, thereby creating a painful wedge of material up that person's butt-crack. Grundies were a very popular form of humiliation, and kept us all in a perpetual state of paranoia. No one could be trusted. We always knew where everyone was, and became keenly aware of what was going on behind us. Some clever scouts even conspired with each other - one to distract, and one to attack from the rear. The grundy helped us to develop our peripheral vision, to sharpen our sense of hearing, and to understand the basic tactics of avoidance in guerilla warfare.

“Be prepared for a marathon 3-pin bowling match.” The campsite came with 3 bowling pins. Was this Camp Shin-Go-Beek's idea of recreation? “For every 25 kids, we will supply 3 bowling pins, to keep them occupied and delirious with excitement for hours on end!” We hurled rocks and logs at them, and kept a 7-day tally of scores. In another clever variation, we would set up 2 pins, and knock them down with the third. This was okay, because the third pin was splintered from many summers of use, and kept falling over.

“Be prepared to make use of those sharp knives we made your parents buy for you.” There was an inordinate amount of down-time, which was mostly spent whittling sticks into sharp points, which could then be used to impale a marshmallow, a piece of cheese, or the thorax of a large ant. Everyone had a collapsible Swiss army-knife, with various accoutrements, such as can openers and corkscrews. Paul's had a toothpick, and that impressed me. We rarely encountered an official task that required the use of a knife, but I left camp thinking that whittling sticks into points was the very key to outdoor survival.

The word “fuck” was used no less than twice in every sentence uttered by anyone. Catholic boys on holiday. Most of us were from Ascension grade school, but for some reason, we got hooked up with 3 kids from St. Vincent's in Cicero. One kid was all right, but the Claussen brothers were a goddamn

shame. They were almost identical, real fat and sloppy, with bad 70's plastic-rimmed glasses - the young one never said anything, and the older one never could figure out how to shut the fuck up.

Among my own schoolmates, this was a great opportunity to get to know some new people, especially the guys in higher grades. This was exciting, because we looked up to these people, but they would never be caught dead talking to us in the hallways. Now, they had no choice. They were bored. A delinquent named Craig Dienberg, 2 years my senior, eventually took a liking to me - probably because we were about the same height. He was a genius with “language.” He was gritty and unclean. His hair was never combed. And oh, could he whittle a stick. He was my mentor.

So, this was the deal for our Scoutmasters, 2 simple men who willingly volunteered to serve as guides for the uncaring sons of their community. They stood, ignored, amidst dozens of boys, newly afflicted by a surplus of hormones that had no outlet, running this way and that, with knives and bowling pins and sharpened sticks. It's no surprise then that our Scoutmasters tended to be somewhat aloof. Absent, even.

The smaller of the two was named T.J. He was afflicted with Cerebral Palsy, and walked with a sort of pigeon-toed limp. He had wild curly hair and glasses, and when he talked to you, he appeared to be looking over your right shoulder. He got along well, and he was a really nice guy. But “nice” didn't matter around the campfires of Troop 20. When he was off running an errand or something, there was no shortage of little T.J.'s limping around camp, looking over your right shoulder. It wasn't my bag, but I was just a Tenderfoot. Perhaps I would one day discover the wonders of thoughtless cruelty.

I can't remember the other Scoutmaster's name, but I certainly remember his girth. Behind his back, he was called H.R. Puffenstuff. He was a huge man, a gigantic man with black curly hair and olive skin. Once again, this was too nice a person to find himself immersed in a situation like this. The Scoutmasters had to wear the same uniforms as all the boys did. For him, they should have made an exception. It just wasn't fair to force a man to look like that - like a cartoon character, the one skipping around with a huge lollypop.

Boy Scout Camp was not all fun, games and whittling. As part of the deal, we had to feign some sort of attempt at earning “merit badges.” Merit badges were awards, symbols of accomplishment in one field

or another. Merit badges made your uniform look cool. If a scout was entering his third year, and his uniform was a sparsely populated documentation of his failure, then he could officially be promoted to the rank of “Idiot.” We Tenderfoots had nothing but blank real estate on our shirts. We had to sign up for 3 badges, and our elders at the campsite instructed us to choose the easiest ones possible. We had to take a few classes, study a bit, and then pass a little test at the end. Everyone said Canoeing was fun, so I took that. I had taken swimming lessons several times already, so taking Swimming was a no-brainer. Ricky Beech told me to take Mammals, because he was the instructor. A 13 year-old teacher? Okay! Others took Sewing. Archery. Rifles. There was no merit badge for Swearing, but we planned on creating some for ourselves back at camp, which we would ceremoniously pin to our underwear on the bus ride home.

Canoeing: The best thing I have to say about the Canoeing merit badge, is that I learned enough about canoeing to keep myself from getting killed on drunken camping trips as a young adult. The instructor was an older kid from a different troop. He seemed annoyed to have to be doing this. I wondered if he was in the process of earning a merit badge for teaching, and that his pain and reluctance were equivalent to our own. I partnered with Paul, which would eventually prove to be a big mistake. I should have picked a partner with some meat on his bones, somebody who could lift a canoe over his head all by himself. I was certainly no help. We learned the basics of steering, and we were instructed to fear the undertow! I had no problem identifying with my own fear of death or injury. Imagine my surprise on the last day, when we were forced to paddle our canoe out into the middle of the lake, and capsize it on purpose. Huh?

“Just paddle out about 100 yards past that buoy, jump out of the canoe, and then turn it upside down.”

“Then what?”

“Then flip it back over, get back in, and paddle back to shore.”

“Wouldn't it be safer to just... NOT capsize the canoe in the first place?”

Thank God for life-vests anyway. This guy gave us no battle plan, no technique for achieving this impossibility. Here we were, a couple of 10 year-olds with skinny little arms, treading water, and trying to lift the equivalent of 20 fish tanks over our heads.

When our bodies became lifeless from the struggle, little orange floaties with mouths and noses sticking barely above water, our Asshole reluctantly paddled out to us, expressing a genuine loathing towards us for forcing him to assist. I suppose he would have gotten in trouble if the crows started pecking out our eyes. He reached down to lift up our canoe. “Jesus. This thing is heavy... Oh, you guys got THIS canoe!” Thanks, pal. He made us help him get the canoe turned over, and we all paddled back to shore. Paul and I could hardly lift our arms for the rest of the day. We received a “partial” merit badge, which gave us great satisfaction.

Swimming: I looked forward to my swimming test. It had to be easier than treading water while hoisting ten times my weight over my head. What was it gonna be? Breast stroke, back and forth to the dock? Holding our breath for 30 seconds? We showed up in our bathing suits, as is customary when going swimming. Wrong again. The Swimming Asshole sent us back to put our uniforms back on. What? He even looked at us like we were nuts or something. Like everyone knows that the swimming test would be conducted in full military dress.

“So here's the plan. You are all going to jump into the lake in your clothes.”

We were supposed to learn what it was like to save ourselves, in case we ever did something as stupid as jumping into a lake in our clothes. I didn't bother to comment, because I was beginning to see a pattern forming. It was a Boy Scout thing. Perhaps one day I would understand.

Now, this guy told us that some day in the future, we might get thrown overboard, or we might find ourselves in a sinking boat, lost at sea, with no raft and no floatation device. In the event of this improbable occurrence, we needed to learn how to survive out there, afloat for days.

“How?” we wondered.

“While treading water, you need to blow air into your shirts to help you float. Then, you have to take your pants off, tie the ends of both legs into knots, and then fluff them up over your head like this,” he threw his arms over his head with an effortless motion, as he stood dry on the dock. Our clothes would serve as life preservers. We could bob up and down in the middle of the ocean with our puffed-up pants for days, even weeks, waiting for a passing ship, while the sharks circled around us.

Was someone filming this? Because it had to be some kind of joke. I pictured a small group of Scoutmasters, giggling behind a bush and passing binoculars back and forth.

The instant I plunged into the water, I wasn't certain that I would ever come back up. As I choked for air, barely above the surface, I realized that I had become as heavy as a capsized canoe. I treaded wildly, and made feeble efforts at blowing air into my shirt. This was bullshit. Cotton garments don't hold air. If shirts and pants were so effective at saving lives, then why wasn't there a huge rack of cotton clothing in the Boating Safety section at K-Mart? Why manufacture life-vests at all? Because this was bullshit, that's why. If the motto “Be Prepared” was the order of the day, then we should have all been issued rubber floatation shirts with little air nozzles on them as part of our standard uniform.

Giving up on my shirt, I threw all my remaining energy into the floating pants concept. Taking off my pants while treading water is, to this day, the most awkward and unnatural thing that I have ever done. I managed to get both legs tied into knots as my life flashed before my eyes. I looked around me to check on the progress of the others. What a pathetic sight! Drowning ten year-olds, hurling their tangled, soaking pants through the air, flopping down heavily again and again on the surface of the water. We gasped and spat out the water that was about to become our grave. Our strength was leaving us. We were sinking. We were all going to die.

Our instructor made sure that saving ourselves would be just as humiliating as dying at the bottom of the lake, clenching our pants in our hands. He stood, grinning on the dock, forcing us to beg for his mercy. One by one, he extended a long pole to each of us, pulling us back to safety. I dragged myself up onto the dock, and lay there in my underwear and shirt, staring up at the sky for God knows how long, unable to move, with my soggy pants balled up at my side.

I received NO merit badge for Swimming.

Mammals: Ricky Beech was a legend in the eyes of all the Tenderfoots. Among the older guys, he was the biggest joker at Camp 20. He was shooting for Eagle Scout this summer, so he had to take care of teaching his Mammals class before he became mired in a vow of silence that was to be part of his test. Ricky took us out into the woods one afternoon, and started showing us some flash cards of animals and their tracks, and told us about what they did and what they ate. We each had this thin little book that we were supposed to read. Suddenly, he said, “Look... You guys don't want to do this right now, do you?” Of course we didn't, although we were in good company, and this was the first merit badge that didn't present any danger of drowning. “If you guys all promise to study and learn all the animals in this book, I'll just give you all your merit badges now.” Ricky had basically dubbed himself the King of Troop 20, and had inherited a dozen loyal slaves for the rest of the week. He would make a fine Eagle Scout. The BEST, we assured our Scoutmasters and anyone else who would bother to listen.

Between the hours of boredom and back-breaking educational programs, we actually got to have a little bit of fun. One day, they let us try out bows and arrows. Another day, they gave us 22 caliber rifles to shoot. And if the weaponry training wasn't American enough for you, there was also an applesauce-eating contest at the Mess Hall, followed by a hearty round of puking behind the dumpsters.

The highlight of the week was the Troop 20 Canoeing trip. This was a few days prior to our traumatic test, so Paul and I were actually looking forward to a long afternoon in a canoe. Being Tenderfoots, the Scoutmasters insisted we each partner with an older kid, one who was wise in the ways of the river. Paul got stuck with Bill Devore, a real slob, but I got to ride with Craig Dienberg. Dienberg was an aggressive little-big man, and as soon as our boats hit the water, it became evident that our leisurely float down the river was going to be more like an aquatic version of “Ben Hur.” Bragging rights were a big deal around the campsite, and taking first place in the canoe “race” would outshine any merit badge or promotion, in Craig's mind. He shouted out orders, and sent out a flurry of “fucks” and “shits” to the weeds that slowed us down in the low, muddy river. He pushed other canoes into logs and overhangs with his paddle as we jockeyed for position. “RAPIDS!” he roared, as we paddled frantically through the low, brown froth that presented the biggest challenge we would face on a river in northern Wisconsin. The first hour of the race wiped us out, but we still had 4 or 5 hours to go. With the river floating at a

calm stretch for now, we paused to eat sandwiches, and drank water from our canteens, conserving almost nothing despite all the warnings. “That was hard work. You don't want to get dehydrated. We'll drink from the river if we have to,” was my mentor's advice.

We looked way down-river to see all but one of the other canoes pulling away from us for good. Behind us, we could barely make out the figures of Paul and Bill, obscured by a prison of cattails, dragging their canoe through the mud. It became a very close battle to stay out of last place. The four of us would not see any of our troop-mates again until the sun was beginning to set, and we dragged our canoes up on the beach, among the napping and the hungry. Craig and I emerged victorious, having sunk our canoe only twice. Nobody else cared.

At night, we had campfires, and twice, there were huge bonfires held for the entire campground. Ghost stories were told, and corny songs were sung too loudly. Some of the songs were kind of funny, like “Gee Mom, I Wanna Go Home.” in which anyone in camp had the temporary right to shout out something he hated about the place. This song always needed to be cut off by a Scoutmaster before it reached the length of an album side. For one bonfire, we had to sit through a God-awful talent show. Each troop had to come up with a light-hearted comedy sketch or something. Thankfully, the participants were all volunteers, which left me out of it. Four or five of my troop-mates threw something together in a matter of minutes. A pasty-faced guy named Frog was the narrator - being further along in puberty than anyone else, his voice was the deepest. Our oldest scout, a funny dude whose name escapes me, was cast in the part of the king. The light from the bonfire cast a rich texture of shadows across his acne-riddled face. Their extremely short play had a Holy Grail theme. Unable to find anything resembling a chalice, they wrapped up our best bowling pin in tin foil. Stunningly, one of the other troops performed almost the exact same play, as if each troop was given a small pool of appropriate topics to choose from. I don't remember any of the plays casting any female roles. Cross-dressing is frowned upon in the Boy Scouts. It is no place for Shakespeare.

January 2003

Tenderfoot — Part 3: Meat, Blood and Crucifixion

Toward the end of the week, Dienberg started talking about how we were going to “have us a night out under the stars.” He was really vague about it, and Paul and I started to get a little bit worried. Bits and pieces of information started trickling down to the Tenderfoot scouts. We had to pack our backpacks and sleeping bags, and hike out about a mile into the wilderness, with NO adult supervision. We would gather wood and start our own fire. We would have to cook our own food. Then, we would lay out our sleeping bags and sleep on the ground, without tents, at the mercy of the elements. Dienberg was very excited about it. It just sounded like another bad idea to me.

“What do we do if it rains?”

“Don't worry about it.”

The other half of the troop went out the first night. It poured rain, and they had to hike back in total darkness with their flashlights. They were all pretty pissed. But at least they didn't have to lie out on the ground all night, waiting for a pack of wolves to devour their flesh.

The next day was Friday. It cleared up, and the rest of us would have our own turn that night. This was the one and only time that I used my lousy backpack. I shoved all my things into it, and met everyone at the picnic table. Ed Trifone came over to Paul and me. “Hey Webelos!” (The ultimate insult to a Tenderfoot) “You don't need all that crap.” And he started dumping out our backpacks, which were filled with everything we owned. After we stored our good-sized bags of dirty laundry back in our tents, we were off into the woods. Trifone was kind of an intimidating oaf, but he meant well.

A mile is not too far. It was weird being out there without any adults, but the older kids had suddenly become uncharacteristically responsible. It may have been the power trip talking, but their obligation to the rest of us felt genuine. They were going to take care of us. We came to a clearing. I was surprised to find out that there was a campsite waiting for us out there. It was rough, but there was a fire pit and a

couple of picnic tables. Behind the tables was a structure made of two logs fitted together to form a large cross, upon which we hung our large containers of drinking water.

There was no outhouse here. If you had to take a crap, you were supposed to dig a hole out in the woods, and then make sure you buried it really good, so as not to attract raccoons. Some of the scouts saw this as a pleasant opportunity to take care of business without having to go into the revolting outhouse back at base camp. Five days into the week, it was a common sight to see Glen Hughes doubled over in pain.

“Jesus, Hughes. Take a dump already. Come on! We'll dig the hole for you!”

He'd come this far. He preferred to wait it out.

The Tenderfoots were sent out to collect firewood. A massive pile of timber was constructed, and set ablaze. This was getting good. Boys love the flame. And nobody had to rub any sticks together - it was just good old-fashioned newspaper and matches. The fire took hold successfully, and burned long into the night. The older guys started pulling out some foodstuffs for our dinner. Back at Camp Shin-Go-Beek, we had a Mess Hall, and the meals were bland and nondescript. But our meal out in the wilderness was something I wouldn't forget. Everyone was handed a ball of tin foil, containing a fistful of raw hamburger meat. In the center of the table, were some raw potatoes, carrots and green peppers. Hey, they were giving us something to do with our knives! We went right to work, and began cutting the vegetables into bite-sized chunks.

Ed told us to add some of every vegetable to our hamburger packages. “But don't use too many,” he instructed.

“Why not?” one Tenderfoot asked.

“Because you have to wrap the tin foil up tight, and throw it into the fire.”

Silence.

“Who the fuck thought up this menu?”

“Shut up, Webelo.” Ed was apparently the designated chef that night.

We reluctantly tossed our packages of meat into the fire. Wouldn't they get all dirty and burnt in there? Ed assured us that once we pulled them out, we could dust them off, and everything inside would be just fine. We went in search of the perfect sticks to use as cooking utensils. We sat down at the picnic tables, and quickly whittled the ends of our sticks into points. We would use them to poke our dinners around before eventually dragging them out.

We began to see some activity, and even detected a whiff of something that actually smelled like food. Smoke billowed out of some of the foil wrappers. Knowing nothing about cooking, this worried us. Grease bubbled out and intense little blazes cropped up here and there. Ed told us to be patient and just leave them in there, but we were hungry, and this was our only shot at getting something to eat. Better to gnaw at some bloody raw vegetables than to see the whole thing go up in flames.

Panic began to get a grip on the weak and inexperienced. Tenderfoots were pulling out their burger-packs way too early. We fumbled with the dusty, white-hot foil. Trifone just stood there, smiling and shaking his head at all the dumb little Webelos. The first four or five dinners to come out of the fire were completely raw, and had to be closed back up for re-entry. Still, nobody trusted Ed. It didn't make sense. The fire was really hot, and any minute now, all the food would be completely ruined. Dan Dever, a tall, gangly character with feathered hair, lifted his searing meat-package up into the air on his big, jagged stick. It was completely engulfed in flame, reaching 2 feet into the air. He screamed a hideous, horror-flick scream, shaking in make-believe fear. We roared, as the ball of flame sagged and dropped off the stick and onto the ground. Someone yelled jokingly, “Step on it! Step on it!”

So Craig Dienberg ran over and stepped on it.

Again and again and again, he smashed it into the ground with his dirty Converse sneakers. The fire was out. I watched the expressions mutate across Dienberg's face. The pride of his accomplishment turned to

a dumbfounded and horrified regret before the smile could even be completed. His worried gaze turned upward, about 14 inches, to meet the face of another hungry scout.

Dan looked at him, deadpan with disbelief, holding his blackened, smoldering stick in his hand. For a moment, there was complete still. Then, nature took its most obvious course, as the hinge of his right elbow gave way to gravity, and the burning stick came down hard, POK, on the very top of Dienberg's head.

That was a surprise to everyone. Most of all to Dan, who was really a likeable, peaceful guy.

“That was my fucking DINNER!”

Dan was fishing for some laughs to break the tension, but it didn't work. Everyone in Troop 20 was friendly to each other, not counting the Claussens. Nobody wanted this.

I don't think the blow hurt all that much. Craig actually started apologizing and offering to share his dinner, but... A thin stream of blood began to drip down his forehead. Another stream of blood ran down his cheek. And another ran down the side of his head, soaking his hair. Soon, ten or twelve individual streaks of blood were flowing down every side of Craig Dienberg's damaged cranium. It threatened to ruin everyone's appetite.

The silence continued to rage. Some of us knew how to make a tourniquet, but nobody out here knew how to treat a gaping head-wound. More apologies began to flow, this time from Dan. The older scouts voiced their concerns about the loss of blood, and decided that the best action was to get Dienberg back to camp as quickly as possible, and into the care of professionals. Ricky pressed down on the top of his head with a tee shirt, as he and Frog walked him calmly back to Shin-Go-Beek in the fading twilight.

In all the excitement, we had forgotten about the searing heat that was threatening to ruin our meal. Dan dragged Craig's meat out of the fire just in time. As luck would have it, he wouldn't have to starve after all. My own burger meat was severely well done, while the vegetables were miraculously raw. Overall, it was the worst meal of the trip. As we struggled to get our food down, we quietly wondered if Craig

was already dead. Ed assured us that he would be okay. “Skulls have a lot of capillaries, so they just bleed a lot. He'll be fine.” He gnawed on his raw potato.

After dinner, by the light of the campfire, one of the scouts glanced over to notice the huge, ominous cross, upon which we hung our water. The water had been taken down, and it was just standing there, glowing in the firelight.

Someone needed to be punished.

Dan Dever was led over to the mighty cross. We found some railroad spikes, which Ed pretended to nail into his hands with a log. It was a quick and pleasant crucifixion. Dan was sentenced to remain there on the cross, while the rest of us sat around the fire and ate Girl Scout Cookies.

Ricky and Frog eventually came back to tell us that Dienberg was not dead. The nurse decided that it was best if he didn't try to hike back with them after losing all that blood. By now it was late, so we all crawled into our sleeping bags, feeling a wee bit chilly, and stared straight up at the sky. Craig was right about sleeping under the stars. It was the clearest night of the entire trip. Living close to Chicago gives you the opportunity to see 11 or 12 stars on any given night. That night, I saw the Milky Way for the first time. Shooting stars. I didn't want to go to sleep.

When we trekked back to camp the next morning, Craig was sitting at a picnic table, whittling. He felt fine. He started telling me about the last big event. “Tonight is the ceremony to initiate the Eagle Scouts. It's a fuckin' privilege just to be there.” It'll be a fuckin' privilege to get back on that bus and go home tomorrow, I thought.

Ricky, Vince, and the older Claussen brother would be taking their vow of silence that day. It was amazing to see Claussen with his mouth shut, as we hung around the campsite, bowling. Everybody messed with his head and tried to get him to talk. If he spoke one word, then he could not become an Eagle Scout that night, because we would tell on him. We all stopped torturing him when we realized that he hadn't sworn off slapping us around for the day.

That night's ceremony was, in fact, a fuckin' privilege. There were beating drums, Eagle Scouts dressed as Native Americans shooting flaming arrows over our heads into the lake, and right before our very eyes, boys were becoming the Scouting version of men... This bonfire was a very solemn occasion, and we felt truly proud of our new Eagle Scouts. Except for Claussen.

We marched back to Camp 20 in the dark. Seven long days were now past us. We had fulfilled every obligation. We had attended every event. All that was left was a good night of sleep and a long drive home on the blue bus. Our Scoutmasters had us pack our things pretty well before the Eagle ceremony, so there would be no delays in the morning. I think they were just as anxious to get home as we were, to take a hot bath, and snuggle up close with a fifth of bourbon.

After a restful night of sleep, and a simple breakfast of cereal in the Mess Hall, we headed back to the Troop 20 campsite to bid farewell to the dirt and the outhouse and the bowling pins. The driver had been tinkering with the engine all week long, and he even started it up a full hour before we were ready to leave. We spent our final moments at Camp Shin-Go-Beek rushing around and gagging in a cloud of blue exhaust.

The ride South was considerably more quiet. The boredom was welcomed with open arms. Some of us at the front of the bus began a round of "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall" until everyone in the back of the bus told us to shut up. The driver and the Scoutmasters had been preparing themselves for that moment of dread when they needed to refuel. We were about half of the way home, with three hours to go, when we pulled into a gas station. Everyone turned around to look at Glen. He looked like he needed a colostomy. He saw his chance and he took it - this toilet may not be clean, he thought - but it's a toilet, filled with water, made of porcelain. He was gone for 20 minutes. He emerged from the gas station smiling, victorious. The blue bus erupted with applause.

Puffenstuff was under the hood of the bus, with T.J. hanging out the door, relaying the order to the driver to start it back up. The starter scraped on unsuccessfully for thirty seconds or so... Panic!

"Hold on a second," said Puffenstuff.

"Hold on a second," repeated T.J.

“Okay try it again,” groaned Puffenstuff.

“Again,” called T.J.

And BOOM, THANK GOD, it started, close the hood, let's get outa here, NOW!

We were really going home. I'm not sure how many of us doubted that we would ever see our families again, but it was time to leave those thoughts behind. Dumb songs started blaring from the back of the bus this time. People started joking around with the elder Claussen. This was such a great experience for all of us. Forget everything I said before. I...

I...

Wait a minute... I knew that sound. Our old, green Chevy station wagon used to make that sound in the summer, on the way to Wonder Lake, where our parents used to dump us on our Aunt Mary. A sort of a sputtering, a knocking, followed by an eerie sort of silence, when all you can hear is the sound of other cars zooming past you, and the sound of your own tires crunching upon the gravel on the shoulder of the road.

The engine coughed and then quit. The bus driver put it in neutral, frantically attempting to restart the engine while it was still moving. He let it roll on for as long as it would go, before the big blue bus came to a rest on the side of a flat stretch of road next to a cornfield.

“LET'S GO!” somebody yelled, and there was a brief moment of excitement, as we all got to our feet and started to bum-rush the door. “No, no,” T.J. explained. We were not going to push-start the bus this time.

This bus was dead.

Puffenstuff headed off down the side of the highway on foot, already sweating, with a list of our parents' phone numbers in his hand. It was about six miles to the next exit, and the heat was stifling. He was gone for an impossibly long time. We began to wander off the bus, 2 or 3 at a time, to stretch our legs,

or pee, or just to look around. Eventually, everyone was out by the side of the road except for T.J. and the driver, who preferred to sit. It was a typical stretch of road with a 30-yard strip of weeds. Some of us slid down the slope, jumped over a little ditch, and then climbed up to the edge of the field. There was a barbed-wire fence here, with thick wooden posts every ten feet or so. The sound of crickets was deafening. Car after car after car whooshed past. Time dragged on. And on. And on. And on. Paul and I made plans for a new life in Central Wisconsin, a life without parents, a life without toilets...

Puffenstuff made it back to the bus after about 2 hours. He had gotten a few rides by hitchhiking. He told us to be patient, and that our parents were all coming to pick us up. Then he climbed up on the bus with the other 2 men, to leave us to our own devices.

The end was in sight! But we still had a few more hours to kill. Some of us wandered on and off the bus, but it was like an oven in there. Some of us read our Mammals books, and actually earned those merit badges, for lack of anything else to do. Some of us played cards on the gravel, leaning against the tires of the bus. There was nothing to whittle. Out here in the void, thoughts turned to mischief and violence.

Everyone had had enough of the elder Claussen. Having lulled him into a false sense of security earlier that day on the bus, the other scouts continued with their false pleasantries until they had him up next to the barbed wire fence. Frog gave the signal, and 5 or 6 guys jumped Claussen, initiating a struggle to inflict him with the ultimate punishment: The Fence-Post Grundy. Ed had his underwear yanked out pretty good, and the rest of the guys were trying to lift him high enough to hang him up on the fence. It was like watching an amateur rodeo at the county fair. He was heavy, strong, and determined, and after taking a few swings and throwing a few elbows, he convinced the boys that it was too much trouble on such a hot day. He walked back to the bus, his elastic stretched to the point of permanent damage and hanging out of the back of his pants.

Well, one Claussen was as good as any other, so the Good Scouts of Troop 20 decided to go after the younger one. He didn't put up much of a fight, and his brother was hiding on the bus, providing no help at all. Paul and I hid there, too. It was touch-and-go out there, and the mob seemed to really enjoy its first taste of success. The younger Claussen was just dangling there, bent over sadly, his arms and legs completely limp with humiliation. His underwear was stretched to the point where his feet were almost

scraping the ground. After the mob dispersed, his brother went out to lift him down from the post, with much difficulty.

The mob was fickle. A larger group quickly materialized. This one included both Claussens, bent on revenge against the entire world. The mob shifted this way and that, randomly seeking out its next purpose. And then... It turned on one of its own.

“DIENBERG!” they cried.

And they showed no mercy, dispensing swift and brutal punishment upon him. He was up on the next fence-post in a matter of seconds, wriggling and gnashing his teeth like a wild animal caught in a trap. A couple of minutes passed by, and nobody was helping him down. What was next? Would they set the bus driver on fire?

Nobody in his right mind could have prepared himself for what would happen next. It was so shocking, so brilliant in its conception, that it brought the unwieldy mob to its knees. Craig Dienberg improvised an escape tactic that would go down in the annals of Scouting history. He pulled out his knife, and cut himself free from his underpants, dropping safely to the ground. He destroyed his underwear!

The Dienberg Maneuver. More than once, I knelt and prayed that I would never need to use it. And I still do.

This was outrageous and terrible fun, and wouldn't you know it? When we turned around, there were about a half-dozen parents standing there with their arms folded. Mr. Dienberg was there too. We all knew him well. He was a Deacon at the Church.

One by one and two by two, we all grabbed our gear and climbed into the comfort of our parents' fresh-smelling cars. Few words were spoken between the parents and the Scoutmasters. None of us realized it yet, but this was the end of an era.

Would there be an investigation?

That was our last day in the Boy Scouts. As far as I could tell, Troop 20 folded, and everybody traded in their merit badges for cigarettes. None of my fellow Tenderfoots ever spoke of scouting again. We were returned to our normal childhood. “Why?” We actually wondered aloud. Was it too much effort and expense? I guess our folks thought it would be much cheaper to leave us unsupervised at home next summer.

Andrew and I returned to civilian life in our neighborhood, bursting at the seams with newly acquired knowledge. Certainly, nobody on our block was as capable of understanding how heavy water could be. Other, more subtle lessons seeped into our minds unnoticed. How to avoid persecution through conformity - that was a good one. The development of a power structure in a void of supervision - now that was something we could use. We dreamed of marching down the alleyways of Oak Park, Illinois, wielding our sharpened sticks, past row after row of children hanging on fence posts, gleefully singing our praises. We didn't need the Scouts anymore.

Next summer was going to be beautiful.

February 2003

Vegans In Furs — Part 1: Out of the Frying Pan

Dropping out of college twice really placed a limit on my career choices. But that was all right, because my decision was final - the restaurant business was the life for me. The rest of the world could keep their 9-to-5 reality and leave me the 5-to-1 shift. They could keep their cup-o-soup in a microwave - I would take the martinis and the delicious snacks. Cubicles and spinning chairs on wheels? I would run the whole floor, 80 covers at once. "Happy Hour" at the end of the day? A beer on the train? No, sir. I would have "After Hours" at the *real* end of the day, breakfasts at sunrise, and taxicabs home for a long day's slumber.

Glamorous, huh? I wanted to open my own place. In my mind, I began to devise a plan to establish the most deliriously fun nightclub in Chicago. In blurry fits of inspiration, I dreamed up every menu item, shopped for used tables and chairs, attended restaurant auctions, and even scouted out possible locations. Money would have helped. I didn't have any of that. That was the dilemma. I WORKED in restaurants. How could I ever earn enough money to OWN one?

Okay, I lied. I didn't actually *decide* to drop out of college - not the second time. The gods of cash flow had everything to do with that. Each year, I had a small scholarship, and a wee little student loan. The total of both sums equaled my tuition. It couldn't get any simpler. This time around, I would be sharing a house with friends, instead of signing up for the prepaid comforts of a dorm. Annoying little expenditures kept cropping up. Food, rent, heat... The things that had been handed to me my entire life. But that was only part of the story.

I had plenty of savings - enough to keep your average frugal student lazing around college towns for ten years or more. But I had developed a lust for making money disappear. For the last 27 months, I left my restaurant job every night with huge wads of cash stuffed in my pockets. Notice that I didn't say I went *home* every night... These were exciting times. I could waltz into any bar in my neighborhood at the age of 19. In fact, my fake ID was given to me by one of my favorite bartenders. If you walked into a bar with a bunch of older restaurant people, they wouldn't dream of carding you. We all tipped like kings and queens.

Old habits died hard or not at all. The social rigors of college life competed with class time and studying, and I had little time or energy left over to earn enough coin to stop the bleeding. But I continued to spend like I knew how to spend. My music collection continued to grow. I saw movies and concerts. I ate out every night. I had forgotten how to live like a student. And my poor, impoverished roommates, they needed my help, whether they knew it or not. I insisted on bringing them rounds of good dark beer in between the armloads of stale, warm drafts served in plastic cups. I sprung for pizzas before anybody understood how hungry they might be.

It was tough watching my best friends graduating at the end of my own delayed sophomore year. After most of them departed, I was left wondering why I should bother staying, but I kept on with it. I worked hard that summer, bartending in a nightclub and telemarketing for a political action group. You can't make real money in a college town on just one job. And I was several months late with the tuition for the previous semester. The loan money for that semester was already spent on something. I'm not sure what, but it must have been something large and valuable.

The deadline came, and a minor miracle occurred. The loan check arrived for my fifth semester. I used it to pay for the fourth. I was pleased that everything worked out for me.

Later that December, I headed back home to my parent's house, to anxiously await the arrival of the loan check for my sixth semester, so I could pay for the fifth.

I didn't get a check. I got a letter.

The letter said there would be no more money coming. I didn't bother to read into it much, or to learn and understand the details. I just quit. Again.

This is why the restaurant business chose me. It knew me. It welcomed me back with arms wide, like a loving mother waiting for her child at the bottom of the slide. "Enough of schoolin'!" I told myself. The only path to success in the restaurant business is through experience and hard work anyway. I would land the best bartending gig I could find in the city of Chicago, and then save, save, save, until I had enough money and resources to open up my own place.

I didn't have much success finding that dream job - the one that had me pulling down \$600-800 a week plus benefits. I didn't have any luck at all actually, so I took a job working as a waiter for Larry, my old boss, who was managing a restaurant/bar near the Board of Trade downtown. The restaurant was named after a brand of whiskey, and it was as soulless and frustrating a place to work as any other, but it had a silver lining - I met a lot of great people there, my wife included.

In restaurants, I worked side by side with some of the most wonderful and interesting people I ever met - many of them on their way to some higher calling. A restaurant job is often a transitory adventure and an education of sorts. We served the general public - in a sense, we were confronted by the entire world, a world in a state of wanting. Each meal served was like a performance intended to bring instant gratification to the senses and to the basic human needs. To the customers, it was all about pleasure, flavor, ambience, and getting

someone to run off and fetch things, and to clean up their mess after they left. Our connection with the people helped us to understand a thing or two about human nature, for better or for worse, and to learn humility and manners through gritted teeth. I have often thought that people should be drafted right out of high school and forced into service as waiters and waitresses for 2 years before they move on with the rest of their lives. It would make them better people. And it would make them nicer customers, one day.

The money at my new job was pretty good, and since it was a "businessman's lunch" kind of establishment, I didn't have to work late nights or weekends. But after about seven weeks of giving lousy service to a bunch of drunks, the New Year was upon us, and Larry thought that now would be a good time for me to start working in the kitchen. "It's the only way to get to know the real backbone of the business," he told me. He was absolutely right, actually. I had to do it sooner or later. I needed that experience, and he needed a level head back there. I had put in enough time at the front of the house, anyway. Now, I would head back behind the swinging doors to learn how to handle the big knife, and to spend my days working with fire.

My culinary career began at the grill. All flames and meat. Well over a hundred burgers and chicken sandwiches a day, with all kinds of stupid ingredients piled on top of them. Ruben trained me. He was a Mexican guy who looked like he was sixteen years old, but had three or four kids. Larry called out the orders. "Ruben, fire 3 burgers, one medium with swiss, 2 medium rare with cheddar!" "Ruben, fire a chicken sandwich, no barbeque!" Stuff like that. "Ruben, fire a Rueben!" That was a funny one. Larry stood in cool comfort in an extra large Cosby sweater on the other side of the line. We peered at each other through a space ten inches high and ten feet wide, through which every meal was presented to Larry on the stainless steel shelf under the heat lamps. He would assess each plate for quick approval, and then hand them in batches to servers and runners. Larry never stopped eating onion rings throughout the entire hour-and-a-half-long rush, and there was usually part of a sandwich or burger sitting there, directly on the shelf with a few bites taken out of it. He exploded in

anger several times a day, but this was just the way of things. All was forgiven when the orders began to slow down around one o'clock.

The next afternoon, Larry called Ruben into the office. Moments later, Ruben emerged from the office, picked up his personal belongings, and walked out the back door, a grown man with tears in his eyes.

A voice boomed out from behind the office door. "Gene, fire me a chicken sandwich!"

Larry, fire a Ruben.

Restaurant work haunts you in your dreams. When you learn a new job, you spend the entire night tossing and turning, with 40 burgers cooking on your grill at once, and all of them are burning into lumps of coal with the cheese dripping off. Some days were almost as crazy as the nightmares. But the thing I remember most was the raw chicken. Every morning, the first thing I had to do was to dive into bag after bag of raw chicken, and cut the slippery tenders off of each and every breast. Fifty or sixty pounds a day. I developed a weird rash on my fingers that wouldn't go away.

I would barely finish getting my prep work done when the lunch rush began. Within ten minutes, we'd all be slammed. Beef patties and chicken breasts on the grill, plus a catfish or two - 15 or 18 items going at once, all having started cooking at different times. I measured doneness by how much a chicken breast had decreased in size, or by how springy the burger was when I flattened it with my spatula. All of the flames were on high for a couple hours straight, turning my tiny little domain into a convection oven of its own, and I'm convinced that my frontal lobes were getting cooked slowly over time. Cooked brains can lead to insanity, aggressive behavior and alcoholism. That's an educated guess, based on the personalities of just about every chef I ever knew.

Our "chef" was called Jim. The quotes around the word "chef" are intentional. It was his title, anyway. The only words I can think of to describe Jim's personality would be "pirate" and "ex-con". He was as gritty and vulgar as they come, with a voice like a shovel full of gravel. He was muscular, with a weathered, biker-style tattoo of a tiger on his arm, and a rugged head that sported a wavy semi-mullet hairdo and a thick fu manchu moustache. His food was crap. He saved all the bacon grease in a bucket, which he stored under the dishwasher. He would add grease to the bucket, and take some grease away, and add some, and take some, revealing the fact that the grease at the bottom had to be as old as the restaurant. He used the bacon grease in just about every menu special he could think of. I think his taste buds were just fried, most likely from several decades of HARD drug use.

There was a "sous-chef" down at the other end of the line, working the sauté station. Essentially, he was the assistant manager of the kitchen. Jim's slave. This guy was psychotic, and he treated our Mexican co-workers like shit. I was glad when he got canned after some kind of debacle on St. Patrick's Day, and as my Irish luck would have it, his departure opened up a new opportunity for me. This would be my chance to learn just about everything else there was to know about the back of the house. I would become Jim's new slave, and switch positions from grill to sauté.

Jim wasted no time in dumping all of his extra work on me so he could go home at 2:30 every day. I was trained in ordering, food costs and inventory, and I was given plenty more prep work to do. We went through every shelf, every container and every bucket. Over in the dry goods area, Jim showed me where the cornstarch was kept. He reached into the bucket, grabbed a fistful, and shoved it down his pants. "Good for chafing," he instructed. There was so much to learn.

Sauté was set back a little deeper into the poorly ventilated cooking area. The burners

seemed to generate a lot more flame, and there were several ovens beneath me, which were on full-blast at all times. Here, I would prepare the high-end dishes, such as pastas and other entrees that required the use of a pan or broiler. So it was hotter, MUCH hotter, and I assume there was less oxygen. At the peak of the rush, with all the burners going, I staggered around, dazed and sweating, the front of my chef coat smeared with grime. I would occasionally glance around, seeking out the demon who had sentenced me to this endless toil, having tricked me into thinking I was still alive and did this all by my own choice. I never saw his face, but I swear I heard him laughing.

Enter Summer in Chicago. Sweltering, muggy... 120 degrees in the hot corner during the peak hours would not be an exaggeration. Tempers roared, but we were a team, and we tolerated and depended on each other. Until it all fell apart one day toward the end of May. We showed up on a Monday. Two brand new managers were there. And one less Larry. What followed was a lot of suspicion, interrogation and back-stabbing. Rumors floated that money was missing and that certain employees may have benefited from "under the table" enhancements to their paychecks - a way to keep good people around to do some really hard jobs. Larry was a good guy. He resigned under the accusations.

Jim rushed into the restaurant that afternoon, desperate to save his job after checking his answering machine from the airport. He had just taken a vacation, and his plane landed at around 11 a.m. He hated flying, so he showed up to the new management meeting under the influence of about six Jack and Cokes. They fired him. Then they decided to let me battle for Jim's position with Donna, the pastry chef. I didn't want it, but I pretended that I did. The money would be better. Given the extra responsibility, I demanded a \$75 per-week raise, which they had no choice but to pay.

The new managers were a couple of clowns with Restaurant Management degrees from some college. They knew nothing about the real workings of a restaurant. Dweebs. The man

on the new management team was called Skippy to his face before anybody bothered to learn his real name. Aside from the cheap suit, he looked like a gigantic kid, with straw-colored hair sticking up in the back, and pink cheeks that made him look like his daddy just slapped him around. The woman was nothing more than an overpaid hostess who blended in well with the upholstery.

About a week after the big management change, a young fry cook named Guillermo was draining the oil out of the fryer. It was a daily practice to strain all the crap out of the fryer oil, and then put the oil back into the fryer to make "clean" fries for the dinner crowd. Guillermo was young, who knows how young, and he was pretty new at the job. He didn't close the latch properly on the drain. The oil was 325 degrees. He poured the scalding hot oil back into the fryer, and it all came rushing out of the drain and onto his foot.

I screamed for a bucket of ice water, and forced him to shove his foot into it, shoe and all. He was in a lot of pain, but he kept it in there, and I think it lessened the injury for him. The oil spread out across the entire kitchen and seeped under doors in an ever-widening pool.

With the situation temporarily under control, I offered to drive him to a hospital. Skippy said, "He's okay. He doesn't need to go to a hospital." I couldn't quite process what he had just said, but then Guillermo started saying, "I'm fine, I'm fine." I tried to insist that he go straight to a hospital and get it checked out, but it was obvious that he couldn't afford it, or some such. He looked at Skippy, and I looked at Skippy, and it was clear that Skippy had no intention of offering any kind of help whatsoever. I tried to convince Guillermo to ignore him, and that the restaurant WOULD pay the bill, I would make sure of that, and if they didn't, we'd take up a collection... but he wasn't buying it, and he headed home to rest. Perhaps he was an illegal immigrant, terrified of getting caught. I don't know.

Leo mopped up all the oil. It took a long, long time. Waiters and waitresses slipped and

complained. I threw down some salt.

The rest of the day continued as "normal", as Celestino and I closed the valve, put in some fresh oil, and shared the duties of fry cook for the rest of the day. Before taking off, I went into the office, and asked Skippy for an accident report form, so that the event could be documented in case Guillermo's condition worsened. He actually said, "What for?"

I gave him my notice.

The next two weeks were uneventful, and somewhat freeing. Skippy bit his tongue as I pretty much did whatever I wanted back there. I blasted the Butthole Surfers out of my boombox loud enough to compete with the Sinatra that was playing in the front of the house. I created elaborate specials, doubling up on shrimp with no concerns of food cost. Guillermo came back, feeling okay, and we all had a really nice time together for that short while.

On my last day, I was making the carrot cake - my last project of the day. Our paychecks had always come at the beginning of the day on Friday, but that day, they held on to them. I began to get suspicious, so I went into the office, and asked Skippy if I couldn't just look at my paycheck. He showed me the check, and sure enough, he had left off my \$75-dollar raise. I was now ready to rip his head off.

Our argument escalated into threats of violence, before I stormed out of the office and dumped out all the carrot cake batter onto the floor. I was escorted out by security to the sounds of Skippy demanding payment for one entire carrot cake. He was adding up the cost of twelve pieces as the door clicked shut behind me, for good.

My only regret: Leo probably had to clean that up, too.

If anyone who is reading this is considering a career in the restaurant business, I have this small piece of advice for you. Don't dump the carrot cake batter on the floor in early June. Dump the carrot cake batter on the floor some time in April. Nobody's hiring in the middle of the summer. Their rosters are all set. And no matter how good you are, dumping the carrot cake batter on the floor at your last place of employment is not going to help you land a new job.

I spent the next 4 weeks procrastinating. Then, in stifling July heat, I began roaming around Chicago in khaki pants and a white shirt with the Chicago Reader under my arm, begging for a bartending job, which is what I wanted all along. I collected rejection and animosity like a homeless man filling up his shopping cart with aluminum cans and discarded appliances. I peddled t-shirts at street fairs. I ate ramen noodles for most of my meals. I sold some good CDs so I could buy coffee. CHEAP coffee.

My roommates were no better off. Keith would sell his CDs too, and he would use his money to buy smokes. He would drink my coffee. I would smoke his cigarettes. I remember the day we almost hit rock bottom. Keith, Pete and I were up at the crack of noon. You always knew when Keith was awake. He would set his alarm, for 10:30 a.m. or so. He would hit the snooze over and over and over. I think his alarm clock had unlimited snooze capability. Eventually, you would hear the alarm go off for the ninth or tenth time, followed by the sound of a Zippo igniting the day's first Camel. On that particular day, in our dark and gloomy kitchen with the shades drawn, Keith shuffled into the room in his slippers and robe. Seeing the lack of any respectable dregs of coffee left, he proceeded to go through the usual motions, zombie-like, with eyelids heavy. Dump out old coffee grounds, rinse filter half-assedly, dump new grounds into filter directly from can, close filter compartment... Rinse coffeepot half-assedly, fill with eleven cups of water, pour water into reservoir...

Then, just as the mid-day sun began to stream in through a tiny little hole in the shade just

above and to the left of the overflowing garbage can... Keith shattered the coffeepot against the corner of the stove, shards of glass cascading downward in slow motion, scattering into tinier and tinier bits as they reached impact on the filthy linoleum floor. We all stood motionless, in total silence, every eye fixed upon the yellowy stained handle, gripped tightly in Keith's fist, attached to nothing but a jagged piece of curved glass. You could almost see the ghost of the coffeepot that only recently thrived with stimulating joy for all of us at the beginning of each new afternoon. Dry grounds were laid to rest, parched inside the filter compartment, destined to mix with the dust of many tired and groggy years to come. It may have been hours before any of us moved. I lifted up one heavy leg, then another, and stumbled across the apartment to my brother's room to find a pile of change, so I could go out and purchase three styrofoam coffees at the Yum-Yum Donuts.

Hot, sticky and unshowered, I stood in line with the gathering masses across the street. We lived across from Wrigley Field, and each home game brought 38,000 complete strangers to the neighborhood to steal every parking space and take turns urinating in our back yard. After 25 minutes of pushing and shoving and a throbbing headache setting in for good, I trudged back home and up the stairs to our apartment.

Much to my surprise, Pete and Keith were sitting in the kitchen with the shades pulled up, smiling and drinking nice, hot cups of coffee. Chatting like a couple of happy little schoolgirls. At first I was pissed, but then it occurred to me that some holy miracle must have taken place, and that I should probably hold someone in reverence. I looked at the automatic drip coffee maker. It had a saucepan sitting on the warmer, which was half-filled with steaming hot coffee. "How...?" Keith showed me his method. He put the pan under there where the pot should go, then he crammed a spoon between the handle of the pan and the filter mechanism. The tip of the spoon held open the valve that allowed the coffee to flow through.

How could such a man be unemployed?

This is how we made coffee every day for the next four months.

By August, I was getting desperate and disillusioned. I wanted a job, any job, just to get me out of the house. It was so hot and stuffy in there, and it stunk. Keith's cat, Audrey, who had the markings of a dairy cow, also had a urinary tract infection and felt the need to pee all over the furniture. This would be the end of the burgundy-velour sofa-and-love-seat combo with the mirror stripes, given to me by my second oldest brother from his bachelor days. The couches were soaked with cat piss, and we basically abandoned the living room, retreated into exile in our own rooms, and closed our doors to keep the cat out.

Pete joined Keith and I in the job hunt, as if we needed the company. Pete amazed me, quite completely, with his uncanny ability to find the weirdest low-paying jobs imaginable. He had just finished a temp job taking surveys from shoppers at the Century Mall. Before that, he took care of a group of mentally disabled adults for six bucks an hour. Within days, Pete came back from a successful interview at Nuts on Clark, the store that sold, you know... NUTS! He woke up the next morning, brewed a fresh pan of coffee, and left for his new job. Ten minutes later, he walked back in the door, plopped down on the pee-stained couch, and whined, "I can't work in a nut factory!"

Good for you, Pete. Good for you.

Maybe I could learn from Pete. Maybe there were standards we should all be setting for ourselves. Having all but given up hope, I decided that I needed to simply follow my heart, and pursue an avenue that was a little more idealistic. If nobody was going to hire me anyway, then why not take a shot at doing something that I felt was right?

I was contemplating becoming a vegetarian, and hadn't eaten any meat since I downed a pretty nasty gyro at a street fair the previous week. There was an all-vegetarian restaurant in the middle of a gay neighborhood not far from my house. It was a small place, and I knew the pay wouldn't be that great. But a little money is better than no money. I had cooking experience and management experience, so I decided to wander in and see if they needed anybody who cared.

March 2003

The Jets

*"I saw as the jets were flyin' over
No one amongst us even tried
I saw you lookin' at the ground there
And we were breathin' smoke and leavin' notes
And for the first time in our lives, we decided
The only place for us would be on Mars,
Or on the back of the bus.
- The Flaming Lips*

What was it? January 16th? I know it was 1991.

I was working at Jameson's that night. Michelle was cocktailing, and I was working in the kitchen at the grill, cooking burgers and steaks and chicken sandwiches. The evening was winding down, and we were starting in on some prep work and cleanup - me, Celestino, Heriberto and this tiny little dishwasher named Leo, who looked like he was 12. Michelle came through the swinging door, and just told me to come out into the bar.

Everything stopped. Nobody ordered any food. Nobody ordered any drinks. For what seemed like an eternity, there were no customers, no cooks, no waitresses, no bartenders, no busboys and no dishwashers... This was just a big ol' room filled with about 70 or 80 people who resided in the USA. These people all stared at the big-screen TVs, where they might usually be staring at ESPN or the Weather Channel. Never CNN. But there it was.

War had been declared. Jaws dropped. Beers went flat. No one came in and nobody left. Before our bulging eyes, the jets took off, the bombs were dropped, and on the ground they

exploded. The soldiers scurried around bases in Kuwait, hauled their gear, and did a lousy job of concealing fear. Talking heads flashed by, one by one - secretaries, generals, anchors, reporters - serious and flustered, some of them virgin-pure on the war experience. Was I crazy, or could I look into each and every eye on that screen and easily read a mind that was asking itself, "What have we begun?"

After about a hour, the news people began repeating themselves, so Larry turned off the sound and put Sinatra back on. "That's Life." Eventually, tentative conversations began here and there. Nobody wanted to say the wrong thing. Perhaps there was a large contingent of people waiting to be informed of their opinions. Then, there was a big shift. The bartender shouted out, "Thank God!" and started clapping. Ex-Marine. Customers started clapping. Some employees started clapping. There was an overwhelming show of support.

I was at once shocked and embarrassed. Then I evaporated. A ghost hovering out there unnoticed, watching and listening.

We had never known war. The last major war, in our own limited understanding, was defeated by popular opinion sometime in the early 70's. Nobody wanted them anymore. Did they?

In my small circle of friends and acquaintances, it was not difficult to connect with other people who understood and shared my view on the situation. In short, we wanted no part of war, but we were not what you would call "activists". We were the impassioned, but rather silent opposition. We stood tall against the war as we sank into our couches, watching it unfold before us on our TVs.

What could we do?

We puzzled about this, each and every day. As a starting point, visualize a stray molecule of water attempting to bring relief in a drought. What is the opposite of Empowerment? I don't even think there is a word for such a thing. Why bother creating one? There was nothing I could hold onto that even closely resembled Hope. I attended a peace rally outside the Federal Building. There were about 100 people there, and no press around to cover it. It was cold out. I may be wrong, but I don't recall any major protests being organized in Chicago, the nation's 3rd largest city. There was a march in Washington. If you flipped channels for an hour that evening, you might have been able to catch a 30-second piece about the protest, which showed visuals of a sparse group of people wandering around on a small patch of dirt and grass, not saying anything. It was reported as an insubstantial, lackluster event. A local news station even took time to focus on the apathetic side of the opposition, by interviewing a cab driver who told them, "I know I should be out there marchin', but you know I gotta make money." Conflicting reports from various sources claimed anywhere from 10,000 to 60,000 participants in the Washington peace protest. But Television didn't seem to care.

TV ran this war. TV gave us "Coach" Schwarzkopf. TV gave us those eerie videos of precision bombings dropped by airplanes from spectacular altitudes in the dark night, nailing their targets and exploding in infrared splendor. TV showed us war correspondents holed up in cramped quarters in darkened hotel rooms in Kuwait, nowhere near the fighting, hundreds of miles from the truth, wearing gas masks to conjure up the demons of our deepest, most heinous fears, right there on our sofas. It was the War Show. We came home and watched it every night. TV had become by far the top source of information for most people in America, and they soaked it all up. The media support was unprecedented and all-encompassing. They gave America a very specific version of reality, and that reality was devoured.

How could you make the slightest dent in a machine like that?

Well, we did what we could. Michelle put a peace banner in her window. I drew some comix that nobody ever saw. My brother, Andrew, compiled some video that cut through the fog. We talked a lot. One night, we went to a huge event over on Belmont, in a warehouse space. From out on the street, the building thumped with the sound of several hundred humans. We wandered and wondered up the stairs in a daze, and in that daze we remained. Every face I saw appeared shell-shocked to some degree, but as I looked closer, I could detect an illumination in everybody's eyes. It helped. We were not alone. There was darkness, broken by a few colored lights. Plastic cups and kegs and smoke. A circle formed around something or someone. There was this guy bent over to the floor. He wore nothing but underwear and a gas mask, and he was laboriously soaking a dead pigeon in motor oil. The crowd stared at the spectacle and moved on to let other people see. Midway through the party, some stage lights suddenly blazed upon a stage we didn't even know was there. Four dudes climbed up there, wearing the red, white and blue Uncle Sam getup, striped red and white pants and blue shirts with stars, and they were pounding out some heavy, heavy sounds on two guitars, bass and drums, a noise that came deep from the soul of something long forgotten.

It was really hot in there, and there was no place to put your coat. But it felt good to sweat. As the party wound down, we left in twos, threes and fives, back out into the cold, where our hair froze and cracked beneath our hats, and the world never knew what had happened. We ended all wars in there, for just a little while.

As the days and weeks passed, momentum was gathering all around us. We could do things. We could change minds. We could have an impact. We WOULD end this, this... Then one day, with no help from me, the war just ended. They told us that we had won. But the oil fires continued to burn.

*"...As he weeps to wicked birds of prey
who pick up on his breadcrumb sins.
And there are no sins inside The Gates of Eden."
- Bob Dylan*

History can tell us a lot of things. History teaches us about cause and effect. History teaches us that events don't just occur, at random, but that each major event lies at the end of an infinitely long chain of interdependent happenings. History teaches us that there is a side to every story, and that the texts of this History are written from countless different perspectives and in many different languages.

Debates about the causes and the effects and the fruitlessness or the necessity of The Gulf War could rage on for centuries. But one thing is certain and entirely true. History continues. And history takes all things into account before penciling in the next big thing. Usually, you can see that next big thing coming a mile away...

When our boy Cooper was three and a half, he had a pretty important job around our house every morning. He was the alarm clock. By screams or hugs or kicks in the ribs, he got the job done, every single day. I remember one day in particular, the awakening was gentle, but brutally early, the skies barely glowing with a luminous haze of red. I groaned my way back towards the living and hopped in the shower, it being Michelle's day to attend to all of Cooper's immediate needs - potty, clothing and breakfast. Clean, refreshed, but not yet human, I thudded into the kitchen, grabbed a hot cup of what my body needed, and sat and sipped and waited for the caffeine to make me real again. Michelle read the paper. Cooper munched on half of a waffle, sticky with syrup and gripped in his hand, each bite preceded by a dip into a puddle of vanilla yogurt. Emma too was awake now, her tiny hands chasing Kix around the tray of her highchair.

Peacefulness was shattered - the phone rang. I looked up at the honey-bear clock. 7:30. Only another parent of small children would do such a thing, knowing full-well that we too had been wide awake for at least an hour already.

"Hi, Suzie," I answered.

It was Mike.

"Two airplanes just crashed into the World Trade Center."

" ? "

And we watched, and our son watched, and Emma kept pretty quiet, and we took turns trying to get Cooper distracted and out of the room, but soon gave up, and then the White House was evacuated and Michelle took a shower and the Pentagon was hit, and then one tower collapsed, and then the second tower collapsed, and I took Cooper to school, and they suggested to the parents not to talk about this - the kids are too young, and I went back home and Emma took a nap, and the ball of shock unraveled gradually into a vast, ongoing revelation of what had happened and why and why and, and, and we took random turns crying and walking away, and I went to work.

Nobody got anything done. We ate lunch and left.

In Historical terms, I would classify this event as an Effect. I've been screamed at for saying so, but... What else could lead 20 men to dedicate their lives to such a well-orchestrated act of suicide, murder and destruction? Could we classify this as a random act of lunatics?

This was a supremely misguided, insane and purely awful thing to do. At the same time, it

was an organized, intense reaction to a long chain of related, interdependent events. Bad ideas. Bad decisions. Wrongful actions. Miscommunication. Misguidance. Ignorance. Hypocrisy. Lies. Greed. Mistakes.

Failures.

In the midst of all this, rested the souls of three thousand.

At the heart, a profound lesson poured forth from the unprecedented compassion of several hundred men and women. These people were said to have rushed into the jaws of black smoke, molten steel and a crushing mountain of concrete to save the life of even one more fellow human being.

I hope there are others like them, still remaining among us.

To be faced with crisis, and let all actions be guided by this supreme level of sacrifice...

Couldn't that bring an end to the long, unbroken chains of failure?

"When not bein' stupid is not enough

When not bein' wrong is not enough

Waited such a long time.

Have I waited too long?"

- Built to Spill

Though there was a great deal to be gained from the strength and generosity and unity that blossomed in the wake of the unthinkable, what lingered thereafter was the odor of a roiling stew of anger, fear and panic, seasoned heavily with a lust for revenge. Oh, the anthrax sure

didn't help any. Hell could not only invade our shores, but it could come sliding in through our mail slots. The long-shimmering illusion of safety that engulfed all of us in this great land of ours had been instantly sucked into a black hole somewhere, leaving us raw and exposed.

A War on Terror. What does that mean, exactly? A Battle Against the State of Intense Fear, by one definition. That's a pretty esoteric concept for a war, but it's easy to garner support for such a thing. I personally had no voice to speak with, no call to answer, as I followed the progress of our troops on CNN.com, pummeling their way through Afghanistan, seeking out and destroying the violent radical factions that sent this Fear across our borders and into our homes. I didn't think too hard about what would come next. About where this would lead.

Meanwhile, we were all supposed to resume life as normal. I got to thinking about how regular life would go on for people like me in Afghanistan and Pakistan and Palestine and Iraq. This global war targeted militant Muslims. Peaceful Muslims here at home were feeling some persecution. I had no idea how the other billion of them must have felt. So, being able to think of nothing else, I went on a fast. I did this in isolation, still dominated by my own fear and anger. It left me feeling hollow and alone.

After that, I pretty much ignored the news for an entire year. Unless you count baseball. I think I had resigned myself to believing that this thing was going to run its course and that we had no choice but to just sit and watch it. I took note of some of the strange developments here and there. The most amazing of these was in how the war that resulted from the attacks in New York and Washington could eventually lead to Iraq and North Korea. When you don't pay any attention to the news every day, your view of world events over the span of a year can read a bit like a child's picture book. Jets - Terrorists - Al Qaeda - Taliban/Afghanistan - Hussein/Iraq. Hold on, that was a bit of a jump there. What's Iraq have to do with this?

Nothing.

I see an administration exploiting fear and riding a wave as far as it will take them. The boundaries of the War against Terrorism were expanded to include the nations that stand out as our greatest threats. And it is Fear again that is being used as fuel for the fire. "Iraq might have these weapons and might use them against us. Sodom Hussein is evil. He wants to kill you. We'd better go to war. You know... Just in case."

You can accept the stacks of evidence against Iraq, or you can call this entire construct a bunch of nonsense. Either way, it doesn't matter. The bottom line is: our leaders have failed us. War is failure.

I could spin a web of conspiracy theories, and call out all kinds of facts. But I think, at the heart of what's going on, we have a group of leaders who are bringing their own fears and inadequacies to the table. Leaders are supposed to lead, and communicate, and bring intelligent perspectives to the problems facing our world. But time after time, on many different sides, we see provocation, deceit and pointless struggles over small chunks of power. This is a vicious cycle. And now, the dangers of these ongoing struggles are unprecedented. Where do things like this end?

They are not trying hard enough. Their inadequacies are felt by us all, and the results will continue to do harm in the future. And what an opportunity they have! Humans are capable of such compassion for each other, yet the people making most of the decisions for all of us seem to be the least willing to connect with that fact. We're not apes anymore. It's basic human nature to want what's best for everyone. How did these people manage to lose touch with that? Especially those claiming to be so strong in their faith.

Solutions are infinite, if they would only open their eyes wide to the past and to the future as they deal with the problems of today. Many of the solutions can be found by examining the past and addressing the causes of the conflict, and then at least some attempt may be made to rectify the situation and set things right. Efforts need to be made on both sides, or this nonsense will never end. It's not caving in. It's compromise. What peaceful agreements have ever been reached without compromise? It's their job to figure out how to arrive at peaceful solutions to any problem. Anyone who claims that this is impossible would only have to look to people like Mohandas Gandhi, who never, ever gave up on a peaceful ideal. Not everyone can be a Gandhi, but everyone is certainly welcome to try.

It would take a lot of courage for a leader to stand down and cooperate and work for peace, as ridiculous as that sounds. It's a lot more difficult to pinpoint the most righteous things to do. It could all begin with losing the fear to even try. The spectre of any more pain, death and suffering must make a powerful man grasp at anything to keep it from happening to his people ever again. So why invite more pain and suffering into the world?

It's up to them. But I also think it's up to all of us. If the blanket of fear brought down on us by 9/11 could suddenly be pulled away, then what thoughts or feelings would remain?

All I see is the courage to do what's right, no matter how crazy or insignificant it might seem.

Would you rush in, beneath one hundred thousand tons of crumpling steel and concrete to save the life of one innocent stranger? Or, to look at the question through the eyes of another, would you have an innocent stranger do the same for you? And what is the difference between those two questions? A stranger is a stranger. Would you pluck the bombs from the sky for that same innocent stranger?

Is that even possible?

Maybe. Probably. Sure. Of course, nobody can do something like that alone.

But who is alone? Is there such a thing as hopelessness?

No. Not again. Not this time.

I have given up my search for the antonym to empowerment.

Out here in the West, the drought chokes our trees, turns our lawns into straw and transforms vast areas of pristine forest into huge piles of kindling. Sooner or later, a few stray particles converge and gather with others. A few clouds materialize. A drizzle. The sky becomes gray and heavy. A splattering in a puddle. Then a relentless, driving rain soaks each and every leaf and branch and blade of grass, and with persistence, the earth is soaked, down to ends of the deepest roots.

And there may be enough water left over to fill up all the reservoirs.

April 2003

Vegans In Furs — Part 2: Tofu or Not Tofu?

Gene Dillon lives in the United States of America with his wife and 2 kids. He began learning to write in kindergarten, starting with simultaneous instruction in capital and small letters. In second grade, he moved on to cursive, a curious method of connecting letters together in one flowing line. Then, during the summer before his freshman year of high school, he learned to type on electric typewriting machines, which slammed letters down upon paper with long metal arms through magical "ink-ribbons." Later in life, Gene applied this rarely-used skill in his communications via the Macintosh Computer, an exciting new piece of technology which he avoided completely until 1994. He's been writing upon it ever since.

I stepped into the Chicago Diner on a rather pleasant day in the middle of August. It was a small but bright space in a beautiful old three-flat on Halsted Street. It sat about 40 customers at once, plus about 20 more on the patio during the summer. I'd been there a couple of times. The food was good, especially the chili, but you didn't want to be in a hurry when you ate there.

It was around 3:30, the most appropriate time to apply for a restaurant job - no customers, no distractions - somebody usually has time to talk to you, whether it's to politely accept your application or to tell you to fuck off. There was an older woman behind the front counter, very friendly, reading some sort of glamour magazine. She graciously handed me the photocopied restaurant industry application form, which I carried over to a booth with high-backed wooden benches. I sat facing the kitchen. Through a tiny window I could see a couple of guys in there doing prep work and horsing around. Behind the front counter, waitresses were making iced tea and doing some other nonsense with salad dressings and desserts.

I felt a duality here at Booth 2, somewhere halfway between a complete lack of ambition and a feeling of being at home. I pulled out my pen - always bring your own pen - and took my time with the very familiar form, upon which you listed the last three jobs you held, how much you made, what your job was like, and why you left. I decided to be honest about it. I was tired of lying or worrying about how to paint some kind of picture without ripping on my former employer, which is supposed to be a big no-no.

It wasn't quite clear what they were looking for - a busboy, a GM, a cook, a dishwasher - I just completed the thing, handed it to the lady and thanked her. Then I started walking out the door to go and find a shopping cart so I could fill it up with scrap iron. She glanced at the application, and told me to hold on. I stood by the register as she disappeared behind the kitchen door. While I waited, I looked around and tried to get a feel for the place. It was nice. The people seemed genuine. The decor was a blend of hippie organic and 50's retro. Wood floors, unpretentious, five booths, ten small tables and a counter for six. Suddenly, the woman emerged from the kitchen, accompanied by a person of genuine authority. Even if I didn't get the job, this was already the most successful day of my entire 6-week job search.

His name was Mickey, and he owned the place, along with his wife, Jo. He was a small, frail man with a giant head. He was 40, but he looked more like 50, pale and asthmatic. He had a sparse, wiry mustache, and the unmistakable, familiar look that could be found on so many faces around Chicago - one of disgust, barely concealed behind a proud smirk. He motioned me over to Booth 4.

As is customary in the interview process, I shook Mickey's hand, firmly and confidently, but not too hard. His hand crunched like a bag of Fritos. I felt kind of bad, seeing this strange look on his face - one of both appalled shock and sheepish admiration. I'm sure I didn't go overboard with the handshake thing, and I've never been all that strong.

I began to worry. Is this what will happen to me if I stop eating meat?

We sat down, across from each other. He offered me nothing. And then, he began to talk. And talk. And talk. Mickey looked and smelled like a restaurant owner. There are a few different types of restaurant owners, but there are some common themes. They are benevolent and self-absorbed. They are gregarious and moody. They love to put their trust in people, but are hopelessly paranoid control-freaks. Many of them have chemical dependencies, or have some unhealthy means of compensating for them.

One thing I liked about Mickey, though: he was open and honest, even if he was crazy. We were all crazy - It was a prerequisite for restaurant work. Owners had to take their psychoses to a new level. They dealt with the ups and downs of a seasonal business. They dealt with 30 or so uniquely antagonistic personalities - their employees. Sometimes they had to deal with thievery. Sometimes they had to watch huge portions of product go bad and get dumped. Sometimes a salad had a huge rusty staple in it. The average employee only had to deal with the narrow view before him or her, like juggling a 6-table section, or getting 4 hot plates of food out at the same time. Making coffee, grating cheese. Getting paid. The owner had his mind fixated on the happiness of every customer in the restaurant at any given time, and every single action of every single employee. It's all they could do to walk through the kitchen or dining room without noticing a table with crooked silverware or a cube of tofu that's not the right size.

He had the stresses - had them in spades - but he also had some real passion, deep down. He named his restaurant the Chicago Diner because this town was the meat capitol of the world. It's Meat City - an 8x16 mile grid of fresh carcasses, paving the streets with beautiful red and white marbling. Ask anyone who ever spent any real time in Chicago and they'll tell you fond stories of the culture, the sports, the music and the art... But before you know it, they'll

start telling you about some fabulous hunk of meat that they devoured some place. They will then glaze over and begin drooling.

Mickey wanted to challenge that image. He had a huge cartoon cow painted on the side of the building that said "Love Animals, Don't Eat Them" and "Good Food, Good Mooood". It was a tall order for a small man with an inferiority complex.

I think he talked about himself and his place for about an hour and a half, because the dinner crowd started rolling in, and he had to cut our meeting short. He looked at the salary I had listed at my recent job, and promptly ignored it. He offered me \$5.25 an hour...

"Or \$5.50!" he added, as tears of disbelief began to well up in my eyes. Seeing my continued displeasure he told me about his "30-day plan", in which employees are eligible for substantial raises after they truly prove themselves worthy of a salary in the range of 6 to 7 bucks an hour. I forced a pleasant expression upon my face, and told him that I thought that sounded GREAT!

Then he sold me two uniform shirts, the cost of which would be taken out of my first paycheck.

I had been making about \$400 a week at my last job. It never, ever occurred to me that I could possibly end up taking home less than 200 bucks a week. I think I made that much money as a caddy when I was 14. Still, somehow, I left all my negative reactions back at Booth 4.

I had a job.

My summer of unemployment was officially over. I liked the idea of trading in my 60

pounds of raw chicken flesh for brick after brick of bland, unassuming tofu. I picked up a 6-pack of Milwaukee's Best on my way home, at the liquor store under the el tracks for \$2.09, and then went home and used it to wash down a double batch of ramen noodles.

Legumes and Nuts

It was kind of refreshing, leaving the house the following Monday and heading off to work for five and a half bucks an hour. It certainly takes the pressure off. I arrived at the Diner just before 9 am to learn their version of the Grill. This was a flattop griddle, actually, not a grill over flame like I was used to working with. Upon this griddle, we made pancakes, scrambled tofu, tempeh burgers and future burgers™, among other things. I had never seen tempeh before - it's another soy product, but more mealy and flavorful. The future burger™ actually had a trademark on it, like it was some big deal secret recipe. It was made from various grains and a lot of okara. Okara isn't even food, actually. It's what's left over when tofu is made from soybeans - a by-product, like the beaks and snouts of the vegetarian world. The tofu guy gave it to us for free. It must have been edible, because nobody ever complained or perished.

Robert trained me that day, while Juan worked the Steam Table. The person who worked Steam received and expedited the orders, steamed the vegetables, dished out soups and specials, and made pastas and other things in the sauté pans. In general, the pace was so much slower, I couldn't even believe we were getting paid.

Robert was a bit of an anomaly. He was a grizzled veteran of 3 years, quiet and unassuming, in his thirties. He wore a Cubs' hat and coke-bottle glasses, giving him the look of that one guy who sat by himself at Wrigley Field, keeping a scorecard, and listening to WGN on a transistor radio. This was not the look of a vegetarian cook. As I came to know him, I

learned that he practically lived at the Cabaret Metro since the late 70's, and never missed a punk rock show. He was on speaking terms with Joey Ramone. He was also a vegan. A vegan doesn't eat dairy, or eggs. They won't even eat honey - it exploits the bees. But he couldn't live without his leather jacket and Doc Marten boots. I'd run into a lot of contradiction during my two years at the Diner. I'd come to live it myself, too.

I didn't get to talk with Juan too much that day. I did notice that he was showing the waitresses the new pair of baby shoes that he had just purchased for his 3 month-old daughter. He was a proud papa and a friendly guy.

He got fired that afternoon, and left with the little bag in his hand that contained the little box that contained the little shoes. No tears, just a small amount of rage and acceptance, like he'd been expecting it. I moved up to full-time immediately.

The next morning, Robert moved over to Steam, and another guy named Dean gave me further training on Grill and Prep work. He was pleased to have a trainee who could help him blast through all the prep work in half the time. We would become pretty good friends. We had similar tastes in music and in various extreme forms of entertainment. Dean lived illegally in a classroom of an old school in Wicker Park that was rented out as studio space to artists. He was forming a performance art group called Slug Muzzle, for which he incorporated prosthetics for lifelike masks and fake scars and things. His glasses were broken when I met him, with one lens shattered like a spider web. He wore them anyway, and never indicated that it bothered him. After about two months, Mickey couldn't stand it anymore and bought him a new lens, so customers wouldn't get the idea that all of his employees were poverty-stricken.

Tofu. We submerged our hands into ice-cold buckets, fishing for the elusive and spongy swimming blocks. We cut them into cubes and strips. We mashed them into scrambled form.

We pureed them, and baked them into loaves. It was the primordial building block of all our foodstuffs.

Tofu tastes like Playdough. It's true. I have eaten both. It requires a lot of seasoning. Our chef struggled hard at making tofu taste like something that resembled meat. Deep down in the hearts of all vegetarians, they wish that God made some kind of bean that tasted like a Polish sausage. We did our best. The food was okay. One mistake that vegetarian restaurants make is that they try to tackle every kind of ethnic food imaginable, and in the process, they don't excel in anything. Or they assume that all their customers want to eat really healthy food, instead of really good food. Whole grains, legumes, seeds and nuts, kale, sprouts, wheat grass juice... Stuff that some people just have to force down. My favorite was the tempeh reuben, which was a grilled tempeh burger, topped with sauerkraut, swiss cheese, and thousand island dressing. You could just close your eyes and pretend it was meat.

The head chef was Mickey's wife, Jo. After speaking with Jo, you always felt like putting a coat on. On first meeting her, I thought she was pleasant enough. She was actually rather attractive, like an older Nancy Kerrigan, and she skied over Mickey at a height of six feet. Her assistant was an angry woman named Danila who decided to hate me upon introduction. As the weeks passed, I discovered that Danila was the nice one, and that Jo was only pleasant to me that first day because she hadn't had a chance to learn how to hate me yet. She hated everybody. But she worked upstairs, and we didn't have to deal with her too much.

The Bubble — Selected Emails From the Future

Intro and Conclusion by Gene Dillon

Email by Gene Dillon, 2057 AD

Gene Dillon lives in the United States of America with his wife and 2 kids.

On April 27, 2003, Gene received over a hundred emails from someone claiming to be himself, 54 years in the future.

Each email contains 2 items of a personal nature as authentication - to prove that he is who he says he is. Gene insists that all of the stories are true, and that he can't think of anyone, even his wife, who could have access this information in the level of detail that they are presented.

If anyone else has an explanation, please contact him.

May 2003

Selected Emails From the Future — #1

I must apologize once again, for an interruption in my story in progress, but last week, my inbox filled up with a massive amount of the strangest emails I have ever seen, and I've been spending almost all of my time reading them.

It could be a hoax, I have no idea, but I suppose it's entertaining enough to just post it here, and people can make up their own minds about it. If there were just one or two emails here, I would just laugh it off, and try to figure out who did it. But there are dozens of very long emails here, filled with hundreds of stories about ME — personal, mundane things that only I would know. Some of them are kind of embarrassing. It's creepy. I've only read about a fourth of them, but part of me is starting to believe it.

The best thing is, I'm totally uninspired this month, so if I post this, then I don't actually have to write anything.

This seems to be the first one:

Subject: Ascension: Bell Rings, You Puke on Doorstep.

From: xPAwe945er-s-d0973IzQm=4P@qperp8u0087777Rgg.com

Date: 17 Apr 2057 16:43:02 -0600

To: gene@genedillon.com

What's up, fat-ass?

I know you get a lot of spam, so I had to think of a subject header that only you would understand.

Ascension Catholic Grade School... What was that, third grade? Everybody was standing outside, holding their lunchboxes and books, and the moment the bell rang, you puked all over the steps in front of the door. Everybody had to kind of step over it. Milk and bile and shredded wheat. You were shuttled into the

nurse's office by a nun — I can't remember which one — probably Sister Frances Claire. She was annoyed, as was Mr. Nick, who always seemed to be cleaning up your puke. The nurse called your mom, and sat you outside the principal's office to wait for your older brother to pick you up in his yellow Maverick with the black top. They gave you an empty coffee can, in case you had to puke again. Your older sister, Mo, sat with you until Dave got there. A huge Puerto Rican girl from eighth grade walked by and asked her mockingly, "Is your brother sick?" and laughed all the way up the stairs.

Why would I bring up such a mundane memory? How could I possibly know this?

Because I am you.

Of course, I need a little authenticity, and what could be better than a good old-fashioned tale of childhood humiliation? Something you would never tell anyone about.

Look at the date up above. I don't know if it will come through, because the technology is kind of fucked up, and they have to be careful, because it's illegal. The date should say April 17, 2057, if everything went as planned. I'm sure your imagination could wrap around the silly concept of Time Travel? Well, transporting matter and keeping it intact seems pretty far-fetched, but how about sending some energy backwards in time? You can email someone in China within seconds. Why not email them yesterday?

Some friends of mine have figured it out. Our "leaders" could not stand for this kind of Godless technology, so it's been outlawed. Most of us have nothing to lose. I'm 89, for chrissakes — what can they possibly do to me? We're trying to send some messages back to you people. You don't want the life that we have. Trust me. Something has to change.

I will never know the results of all this. I'm just living in one possible future.

By the way: **The moment you began reading this email, you broke the universe in half.**

So now... there is MY future, which I have mostly exhausted, and YOUR future, which could be pretty much the same, unless you and a handful of other people bother to take any of this seriously.

Oh, I forgot — you might still be skeptical. Mo could have told somebody that story, and I could be just some weird friend of the family who is fucking with you for no reason other than boredom. Okay, here's one:

You and your brother found a porno mag in your neighbor's bushes when you were around 12 years old. It was called "Knave". You stashed it under the basement steps, behind the water heater. In the first spread, there was a blond woman, disrobing while playing tennis. I can't remember the second part, but in the third part, there were these 2 "lesbians", squashing grapes in a huge barrel for making wine.

I'm sure I could have come up with some better stories, but 89 is pretty fucking old. You're lucky I'm not babbling on and on about Armageddon, and about how much this ulcer hurts. Speaking of which, listen up: if you want to free yourself up from years of intense pain, lose some fucking weight, and simplify your life a little bit. Right — like you don't already know.

This must be pretty weird. Reading this is really no different from thinking, because I am just you. And we never pay enough attention to our own advice, anyway. So I guess I'm gonna have to scare the shit out of you to make you take a little more notice of what you are trying to tell yourself here.

I apologize in advance.

Yes. I'm a little cranky, as old people in pain tend to be. I'm sure you are probably amazed that you are even still alive and speaking in coherent, complete sentences. It's also a little hard to concentrate around here, and especially hard to type without making a mistake every 5 seconds. I'm in zero gravity right now. Space shuttle to Mars. They cram a lot of people into these things now, but I have ways of protecting my privacy.

My buddy is the pilot. He's been making this run for about 8 years. He's taking a big risk sneaking these files back with him on the shuttle, but hopefully the encryption we're using will keep him from getting nailed with any kind of concrete evidence. I keep telling him he has to smuggle it out in his ass, but he doesn't think it's funny. Actually, the file will fit inside his wedding ring.

Shit! I'm wasting time.

Okay, here's the deal — this is how the Retro-Messenger affects reality:

Imagine it is Tuesday. "Sender" sends himself an email, for delivery yesterday — in this case, Monday. Did he get it? Of course not — he can't just be sitting there one day in the future, and suddenly remember something that didn't really happen to him yesterday. The universe split in two when he opened the mail in the past. Now there are 2 paths of existence for everyone, as a result of this simple action.

So how do we know that Sender received the email on Monday? We didn't have any proof. Until yesterday, right before I left Earth. Yesterday, Sender sent an email to himself for the previous day, a day on which he refrained from checking his email, which is kind of hard for him, if you know him personally. So yesterday, Sender checked his email from 2 days ago.

The message was there.

Isn't that cool?

It was a big surprise to everyone, because to be honest, nobody ever believed that any kind of authentication of the technology would ever be possible. This resulted in some very serious discussion about the nature of Life in the universe. The message had no effect on the future until a sentient being actually looked at it.

We were up all night debating our next action, coming up with the best strategy, wrestling with ethics. Thankfully we figured it all out before I had to leave. The shuttle launched just this morning.

Yeah, the technology is kind of new, although people have been working on it for the last 6 months. As you can imagine, it's difficult to curb the excitement over a significant scientific discovery such as this. So it was outlawed before anybody made any significant breakthroughs. Equipment and research were confiscated and destroyed. Luckily, people of science are generally smarter than the alpha apes, so the

project continued on in secret, behind a very dense web of mundane distraction and incongruous research. Nobody is who they say they are anymore. It's too dangerous. So, unless you're a sheep, you lead a double life, if you care about anything. I'll try to explain that in more detail later.

Our plan is pretty simple. We have a deadline, April Fools Day of 2057, to get all the info we can to Sender. Until that time, we will type fast and furiously, sending our files back in secret for the Big Send. We will not censor our thoughts — there are issues here that we have all struggled with, and hopefully with 50 extra years under our belts, we can give you some insight, and offer some explanation about what we feel we can, and can't say, what you should, or should not do, etc. etc.

Sender only sent the 2 messages. We all agreed that was enough. There is something sacred at stake here, and we need to respect that. We aim to blast out a hefty number of messages, all at once, in the hopes that the fewest number of possible universes will spawn from that one moment. We chose April 17, 2003 — there is a silly little war winding down in the Middle East right about now. You may have guessed that this moment in history would have some special significance.

Why now, you ask? Why not several months ago, so we could stop this thing? I doubt there was anything you could do. You saw all the protesters taking the streets. Did the media cover it? No. How about the public opinion polls? Overwhelming support for the War in Iraq? All bullshit. Nobody could have stopped it. Nobody could have prevented 9/11 or the War in Afghanistan either. The War on Terror... I shudder when I type that.

I suppose we should all be chastised for not warning everyone about the jets on September 11, 2001. Believe me, we all fought and cried and beat the shit out of each other over all of this. What date should we choose that would have the most profound effect? Just trust me when I say this — things are going to get a hell of a lot worse. Through debate and democracy, we settled on a vaguely precise day, a moment that we all considered to be about the last time in human history when human beings around the world were fed up enough, and still **FREE ENOUGH** to do anything about it.

There is no telling how many messages will make it through on that day. We are aiming at about 25 people getting between one and oh, a hundred emails. And you are one of those lucky people. I know this probably

doesn't sound like much, but this is powerful stuff, and the dangers of getting caught are pretty overwhelming, so we've kept the inner circle as tight as possible. None of my best friends and family knows anything about this.

Before I forget — **you are not in danger!** What's done is done, so you don't have to worry about getting into any kind of trouble. You could be imprisoned or executed, or die in a plane crash, and it will have no effect on the universe in which I exist now. So for anyone to try to stop you in 2003 from becoming who I am in a different reality in 2057 is entirely impossible. That being said — I hope you don't get imprisoned or executed or die in a plane crash on account of what we are doing. That would suck.

I'm not good at explaining all this stuff. The scientists get all pissed at me, getting all the terminology about parallel universes and time travel all wrong, but I suppose that if you understand what I'm talking about, that's all that matters. Holy crap! We just started venting something and got thown off course, but they patched it up. This shuttle has got to be 40 years old.

This whole thing is so hopeless. Thousands of people living in a dome — some kind of seed for humanity. The last thing I heard was that nobody was allowed to exert themselves or get any exercise because of the oxygen depletion. Next thing we know, they'll start counting our breaths.

None of this technology is ready. It could have been, if any of our leaders of the past 90 years had any real understanding that the future does indeed exist. Terraforming of any kind is probably 20 years away, so they're totally winging it with hydroponics and other methods. It's not enough. The rationing is almost obscene. And there's so much sand. So much sand...

You'd get a kick out of this — it didn't make sense to transport topsoil in expensive shuttles, so they figured out a system. They launch a vessel filled with topsoil — a shuttle grabs it while in orbit, and they stick it into another launcher which is also currently in orbit. The topsoil is then jettisoned toward Mars. They can't afford any guidance mechanisms on these things, so they just aim it in the general direction, and another shuttle picks it up when it gets near Mars. Most of them have made it. They look like huge cans of coffee — remember those?

Shit. That guy's coming over here again. More later.

G

Well, that seems to be message #1. It also happens to be one of the more coherent messages he sent. Some of them are, oh, "inconsistent", but if he's really 89 years old, I suppose that would explain everything.

I just started reading one that's pretty hairy, where he just arrived on Mars. I'll probably post that one next.

...

Last month, I published the first of a stack of emails sent to me by someone claiming to be my future self. I have finished reading all the emails. In fact, I've read them all several times. I'm pretty fucking freaked out right now, so just read this, and I'll have something to say at the end.

June 2003

Selected Emails From the Future — #2

Subject: Two. Old Man in Boulder in a Brown LeSabre.

From: v8f888ff8888883as#frr4\$@p000oII8888dfqzzz7r.com

Date: 17 Apr 2057 16:47:18 -0600

To: gene@genedillon.com

Hey, Lardass!

Having fun? I don't know if you'll get every message — but I'm not going to waste my time explaining everything every single time. The messages will be numbered, but to aid in avoiding detection, I have been instructed to alternate numbering them numerically, or spelling, or roman numerals, or whatever. Two, 3, IV, Cinco (sp?), F, gee, 8, neuf, ten... Understand?

Authentication from your past — you know the drill. Incidentally, if you do not receive at least two stories of authentication within every single email from me, then there is a good chance that the jig is up, we have all been incarcerated, and the morons are trying to send some kind of phony messages to you. Yeah, that would be kind of awful. Just be discriminating. I'm sure you'll figure it out, if that happens. But it's not gonna happen.

Actually, if you think about it... Couldn't these fuckers send alerts back in time to their ancestral mob? Send their primitive goons over to wipe you out? That never came up in the meetings for some reason. Get a bunch of scientists and artists together and it becomes an endless battle of ideologies and more often than not, the utopian results sell big around the table. They laughed at my pessimism. How could they? Just like with all technology, the practical matters tend to get overlooked, and time and time again, this beautiful thing falls into the wrong hands and gets fantastically misused. I sit and think about all the terrible things that are going to come out of this. Those results are far more likely than the best-case scenario we are all dreaming of here. But we still dream, which is nice. This is our only shot.

Forget about it.

It's not gonna happen. Really.

Anyway, that was a pleasant thought. Here's the story from your past: I'm a little unclear on when this happened, but I do know that you walked Cooper to school a little bit in 2002, and then pretty frequently in 2003 as soon as it got warm.

A few blocks east of the preschool, there was this old man, kind of small, full of life. You loved seeing him, because Boulder had been overrun with yuppie health-nuts driving SUVs and wealthy retirees driving you to drink. This old guy looked like he had been living in his house for 40 years, watched it all happen. Really nice, always said hello and smiled at Cooper. One day, after dropping off Cooper at school, the old man was getting into his Buick LeSabre, which was parked on the street. It was a HUGE boxy model, 4-door, shit-brown and weathered, but no rust. Just old, and well cared-for. It was so big, it had to be a mid-70's model, but I can't remember when they made them so boxy. Maybe it was a late 70's or early 80's machine. Anyway, the little old man got in, slammed the huge door with a creak, aided by gravity from the street, and then, he turned the key.

That sound...

The starter whirred slowly about six or seven times, grinding and crunching it out, for about 12 or 15 seconds trying to turn that big V6 over. Then, the engine slowly came to life, as he pumped the gas. The ROAR! A sound that no animal could ever make, no human could ever imitate. It can't be spelled. He made it to bellow three or four more times before pulling down the big shift lever to the right of the steering well and cruising slowly in peaceful loudness down the avenue. And away it went, big brachiosaurus, inhaling huge volumes of gasoline, torching it up into black hoary clouds and blasting the smog through a clanging heavy tailpipe like Thor, God of Thunder.

God, what a sound. You were 30 feet away, but you could just smell it, the inside of that car. Old cars all have that old smell, whether it's leather or vinyl or fabric interior, they all smell like a really great old car. Idiots used to talk about that new car smell, like it was something special, all plasticky and carpet-fresh.

Fuck that. There's nothing like the smell of a reliable old car. I don't need to describe it to you, because you know it well. You walked the rest of the way home feeling completely recharged by that sound and by that smell, like you just spent a week on vacation.

You're gonna miss that smell.

And one day, you'll really miss that sound.

That might be the last time I ever really heard that sound...

Your 76 Century made that sound. But that's a story for another time. Maybe. Not your happiest days, were they?

A lot of what we do these days is revel in the meaningless memories of our past. Remember baseball? Yeah, me too. I remember when they played their last game. Yeah, some of us sank a pretty huge chunk of our lives into following one sports team or another. Seems pretty silly now.

Professional sports, condiments, wood-burning fireplaces, closets... Some day, you will understand what "basic necessities" truly are.

But for now, let me save you a lot of grief:

THE CUBS WILL NEVER WIN THE WORLD SERIES!

Bunch of idiots, Cub fans. You don't believe in curses, any of you, but curses are real. And bad management from tightwad corporations is pretty real too.

As long as I am on the subject, I'll go ahead and get another story from your past out of the way, so I can move on to more important things. Unless any of this crap is important to you:

In 1984, you were in the bleachers at Wrigley Field, with some guys you hardly ever saw again. Ray Carlin, maybe Tim Murphy and that Buscemi guy, and your good pal, Ian Mosely, well before he skipped town owing a bookie six grand betting on the Bears against the Patriots. For some reason, it was REALLY easy for 16 and 17 year-olds to purchase beer out in the Wrigley Field bleachers in those days.

Cubs were having a rare good season. You may have gone to two games in a row, not sure. But I remember this one. Four game sweep of the Mets. It was 2 divisions then, so the Cubs needed to beat the Mets to take the East. They had a decent team. Our heckling targets for the day were George Foster in left, and Mookie Wilson in center. "Foster! F-o-o-o-o-ster!" It was so fucking loud. The bleachers were a brutal place. Somebody threw a banana at Mookie. Fucking horrible. You know what? That shit never ends. It's human nature for some people to be really fucking stupid. Sorry, I shouldn't say things like that. I meant MOST people.

I hate for my letters to turn into some kind of a daily advice column, but what good am I if I don't try to release you from at least some of your perpetual misery? Give up the Cubs! You've given up smoking, you stay away from drugs, you don't need to drink, and if I am not mistaken, I think you are in the process of shedding a few pounds. Why can't you stop following the Cubs? Huh? Christ, what a waste of time. It's an endless parade of hopes being dashed to the ground, from game to game, from pitch to pitch.

What will it mean, if I am wrong? What if the Cubs win the World Series one day, huh? Think about it. You have devoted your entire life, 35 years so far, of allegiance to a sports team. Do you know any of these people personally? Does it affect your life directly, in a positive way, when they win?

Think about this: for all the hours, weeks, months and years of actual time you have spent watching TV, listening to internet radio, reading the baseball news... go on, add it all up... what value has that added to your life? This distraction... Okay, if you can possibly add it all up, now do this: IF the Cubs win the World Series, how long will it take? And how will it make you feel?

It will take less than one second for a ball to land in a mitt, or for a foot to touch home plate. Less than one second out of the totality of your life. That is the sum total in Earth-time, devoted to your little personal

victory, which in fact, has nothing to do with you. Will you feel happy? Vindicated for years of dedication? Free?

You will feel happiness, then nothing. Emptiness. This kind of thing is fleeting and impermanent. Nothing lasts. Maybe you won't even feel happy. Maybe you'll realize in that instant, that half of a second, what a complete waste of time it has all been.

I suppose you can apply this kind of thinking to just about anything you happen to be doing. What gives your life any real value? Are you helping anyone? Anything? What fulfills you? What can you DO that you or anybody else might consider precious and meaningful in your short time here on Earth? Or Mars...

I'm sorry. (Jesus Christ, I'm apologizing to myself. What the fuck does that mean?) I know there is something special that stirs in the soul when it comes to the intangibles. Things you enjoy. Things you remember. That's how I got started on all this. I remembered a spectacular moment. Again, with the sights, the smells the sounds. Wrigley Field was heavy and rich with the combined smells of freshly watered grass, stale beer, and something oddly reminiscent of a subway station. The crowd mumble and the crowd roar sounded different in that place than in any other large venue. The cheers, the Lowry organ, the sound of Friedman's voice booming over a night game crowd in the late 90's, or the ancient sound of Pat Piper's voice covering a day game in the 70's, hard-edged and raspy: "Bill... Buckner!" The ivy, the brick and the steel I-beams criss-crossing above your head in the grandstands — you considered Wrigley Field your home in Chicago after your mom and dad sold their house in Oak Park and moved out that condo in Wheaton.

Wrigley was home.

Anyway...

This is interesting — I don't actually need to tell you stories — I can describe feelings about things that you cherish, and that could be authentication enough. Things you KNOW, like the bird that starts singing right when the rain is about to stop. Or the shadows of clouds over rolling green hills. Nobody knows that shit like you.

Love it.

So... I suppose it's okay to delight in the wasteful and lovely things in life, as long as they don't take you over. Gotta have some reason to live. But seconds count, everything in moderation — and try to give yourself a little more time to MATTER, and enjoy that too, because nothing makes you feel better and you know it. You know what I'm talking about. Get your lazy ass in gear, right?

All right. I'll get off your case.

I've lost my train of thought. Third day in this can. "Planet Earth is blue, and..." you know. There is a constant blowing sound that makes the back of my neck hurt. Some crappy music, people mumbling. Nobody has spoken out loud since we left Earth. It kind of stinks, an antiseptic smell covering up the natural stench of the human animal — kind of like a room at Motel 6.

Like I said before, we all long for the past, we revel in it, we dream about it, but that past is lost to us. Nobody writes about it anymore, nobody talks about it, we just move on. It's an unwritten rule, a code of conduct, like a family that lost a child to suicide. What can you do but move on and bury the pain forever?

Speaking of which, I met this kid. I don't know, maybe he's not a kid really — he's probably 30 or 32. His name is Pain. Not a nickname, but his given name at birth. Pain. No last name. No middle name.

In many ancient, well-respected cultures, people named their children after animals or human qualities or significant things that were happening around them. This is how Pain got his name some 30 years ago.

Pain is a pretty level-headed dude though. Strong, peaceful, friendly. We exchanged pleasantries, but I hope to get to know him a little better later on.

God. I don't know what the fuck I'm supposed to be writing. Maybe it's the zero-G. Old guys don't handle this kind of thing too well. The body is pretty trashed, and the mind is heading out the door soon.

I'm gonna take a nap.

G

It's getting pretty fucking hard to work or write or do just about anything right now. Just what the fuck is it that I'm supposed to do?

I read email #2 four or five times over the last month. You want to know when I saw the old man starting up his LeSabre? YESTERDAY! I saw him fucking yesterday! And I'd been avoiding his street too, because you know what? I know which old man he's talking about. He's the bomb — one of those guys you just want to take out for some eggs and coffee, so you can listen to him tell stories about how the neighborhood used to be in the middle of a cow pasture on a dirt road, and how the hippies used to run naked past his front window in the sixties. So I read this, and I'm like holy shit, I've never seen this guy's car, I don't think — I certainly never saw him driving a car. So this thing, it never happened.

Or maybe it hadn't happened yet. So my ulcer is back, and I avoid taking Cooper to school, and when Michelle absolutely needs me to take him, I just go a different way. But then, yesterday, I fucking forgot, because I'm pretty fucking stressed out and absent-minded right now, and I'm walking toward the park, and bam, there he is, getting into this huge fucking brown car.

I prayed that it wouldn't start.

But fuck if he didn't turn that key and crank that baby over in about 15 seconds, and GOD DAMN, what a beautiful sound like all the angels yelling out at once during a Led Zeppelin concert in 1979. I wanted to strangle him. I wanted to go over and shake his hand and thank him.

My ulcer is raging again, like a cigarette burning and burning in the center of my chest. Back to Tagamet and yogurt for a while.

Has anyone else been getting emails like this? If so, would you please send me a fucking message or something? Am I fucking insane? Does anyone else want this fucking bullshit dumped in their laps?

FUCK!!!

...

I have cooled off a little bit since my last column, having gotten somewhat used to the idea of accepting sage advice from my insane future self. But how can he expect me to act on it? I never listen to myself anyway. How can I pay any kind of attention to my own conscience when it's 54 years away?

I expected to be given some kind of detailed plan regarding what the hell it is, exactly, that I am supposed to do. It's not like I have superpowers or anything. I am largely talent-free, and I have no influence over anyone — not even my own kids. If I am to become an important part of the human race some day in the future, then I would hazard a guess that there will only be about 50 or 60 people left. In that case, I will probably be their cook. Or some kind of village idiot.

He is deliberately vague about the specifics of my life's work, and there is no mention of any events that happen to me between now and then. I understand this now. Just like with the old man in the second email, if I know something about my life and myself, I could jinx myself, or deliberately blow up a bridge along my own personal path. The human mind is weak that way. All I know, is that he seems to think that I am currently falling short of my potential as a human being. Pretty harsh assessment, but I can't say that I could argue with myself there. Coming from anyone other than myself, I might take offense.

There are horrors along this path to the future. My heart goes out to myself. The trip to Mars sounds like a huge pain in the ass, too — like boat people crossing from Vietnam to California in a makeshift raft. After about the third or fourth day of the journey, I think I'm getting pretty exhausted and uncomfortable, because I'm really starting to rant and rage and babble like a lunatic. Now I know that it's me.

July 2003

Selected Emails From the Future — #3

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Subject: III. The Lobster Pot

From: georgewbushexaltedhero@dkjdas7Ky7&&^hdja.com

Date: 17 Apr 2057 16:47:46 -0600

To: gdillon@explodin.com

Hey, Marshmallow!

Hiyadoin?

Me? Oh, great, just great. Achy, disoriented - take a few moments to appreciate gravity, will you? Your body resting comfortably on a mattress. Your head sinking into a pillow. For days and days now, my body has never once come to rest.

And Smith is ruining an otherwise painfully uncomfortable trip.

The Smiths are all over the goddamn place. No, I'm not talking about a whiny new-wave band from the 80's. You remember the guy with the suit in the Matrix movies? Smith became the name for every creepy special agent that we encounter. Cold and soulless. Except these Smiths are not programmed robotic agents, they are willing human participants, with wives or husbands and children. I don't know what makes people want to be a part of something like that. I guess a lot of folks just feel like they need to stick with the winning team.

They put a Smith in every little town, every meeting, every ride on a shuttle. Smith is paying special attention to me. They don't trust people who type a lot, even if it's just an email to a friend back home.

Many, many years ago, as you can imagine, they finally managed to get digital cameras installed to cover every square inch of the globe. Some satellites could even detect the heat of a body through a roof with such precision that they could record finger movements as someone typed. Our encryption is impossible for them, so they don't even try to break it anymore. The visual methods were expensive but effective, and quite a few people got nailed for their opposing views going out by email. A lot of my friends got their asses disappeared. The rest of us anticipated the tactic fairly early and we all customized our keyboards. Relearning to type is a huge pain in the ass. My keyboard changes its key configuration every ten minutes - if you keep the same keyboard config, they will eventually be able to translate what you are typing. You get used to things like this. I know now that I could have been a concert pianist with the head I have for mastering the keyboard rotation.

What an unholy waste of energy.

You might think that my efforts would send up a red flag to the Smiths, but they still have to follow the rules. Nobody gets arrested without solid evidence. They fake nothing. They are sticklers. Very "moral" people. That's why, giving it a second thought, I actually feel pretty secure in my belief that they aren't going to use this email technology against us. They are law-abiding people, very rigid. And this stuff is illegal.

Anyhoo, Smith has been keeping himself awake as much as he possibly can, but I think he is wearing down. I must be his top area of concern, because he only seems to be sleeping when I

sleep. Several times, when I awoke, I found him disturbingly close to my personal space. Of course, I started up a friendly conversation. Smiths are fantastically pleasant and impossibly boring. Smalltalk 101. You would think they would be instructed to occasionally mix in a realistic topic of conversation, like complaining about how fucked up everything is.

I don't care what equipment he thinks he has, he'll never get a read on my drive. This shit is Alcatraz.

Ow. I feel like I just belched up a cue ball. Your digestive system doesn't handle stress too well does it?

So, the deal is that I can only type when I wake up and find that Smith is still sleeping, so no further attention is drawn to me. I keep my back to the wall and my eyes on all these other people too. I don't trust anybody anymore. No monitor for me. And no typos allowed. (I hope.)

Whoops - 2 quick pieces of authentication before I move on. I should keep them a tad shorter this time.

You stole a live lobster once. Took a one-and-a-half-pounder right out of the tank by the front door of the Lobster Pot Family Restaurant in Provincetown, Massachusetts, the tip of the Cape in November.

Moron.

Townies sacked your "friend", Sullivan, as he stood there laughing, ruining your sure-fire escape plan, which had Fournier's van waiting for you with the doors open and the engine running. You flew out the door, across the street, and into the van, tossed the lobster into the filthy back seat, and drove around the block looking for your idiot "friend", thinking you might find him hiding behind a bush or something. Townies met you at every corner, pounding on the side of your van, gnashing their teeth and cursing at you. Around a sharp right turn, you slammed into something, cutting a big gouge in the side of the van - two days later you would lie to Fournier about that. You high-tailed it out of town, and finally got arrested while calling the local police station from a hotel down the road, in an effort to locate your "friend". Squad pulled up to the van outside. Busted.

How many times I should have died...

Between the ages of 13 and 25, the angels intervened on your behalf well over 200 times. I counted. Every situation was of your own making. You were fuckin' nuts.

Of course, plenty of people know the lobster story, but not all the details. You both spent the night in adjacent cells, with thick concrete walls between you. You were charged with a misdemeanor for "shoplifting". How degrading was that? I would have preferred "attempted liberation of an animal in danger of being boiled alive".

Sullivan was being detained for public intoxication. I could have left him there. I should have left

him there.

No blanket, no mattress, just a cold hard bench, a toilet and a sink. Beige walls and a thick glass (plexi?) door instead of bars. Sleep was impossible. We could converse if we yelled really loud, but the sound reverberated something terrible, so it was difficult to hear. Sullivan's sink wasn't working, and I could almost hear the hangover crushing him gradually like a steamroller moving at 2 miles an hour. Every ten minutes or so, I took a nice drink of water, and recommended to him that he drink out of the toilet.

I apologized a lot, even though I blamed him for his negative influence on me that day. None of this would have happened without Sullivan.

Eventually, we broke into song. I was never much for performing myself, so I would imitate someone else's voice to overcome any shyness. Sammy Davis Jr. sang "Walk on the Wild Side" that night at about 3 a.m.

In the morning, they gave us back our socks and our belts, and told us to be back in court the next day. We had to sleep in the van at a rest stop, where we were awakened at 4 a.m. by some more cops, and told to leave. We were the first citizens to arrive at the courthouse the next day, because we had nowhere to go, and no money left to spend.

My case came up rather quickly, and I had the good fortune of following another shoplifting incident, which was equally absurd. This huge, HUGE man with wild hair and a long tangled beard had stolen a can of linguica (Portuguese sausage) from a grocery store. He was arrested while trying to make his getaway on a bicycle. The image of this big hairy guy pedaling away from the storekeeper and the cops on a tiny bicycle had the entire courtroom in hysterics. Even the judge was laughing at him. He must have appreciated the break in the monotony, because he just let the guy go.

I pleaded guilty and threw myself on the mercy of the court, mumbling something about a first offense, a stupid prank, and I'm sorry, bla bla bla. I paid a \$35 dollar fine with a check from an account that was empty, and then I walked away with a misdemeanor, a black spot on my criminal record, which meant that I had to grow up and be more careful to avoid ridiculous situations like this. I heard somewhere that a second offense could earn you some serious jail time. Well, one night in prison was all I could take. It's not the loneliness - it's the boredom. Nobody should live in boredom like that. It's worse than being dead, I assure you.

Jesus, I gotta take a piss. It can wait. Zero gravity is fun for a couple of hours. After that it's just one huge pain in the ass after another. I'm exhausted and my head feels like it's in a vice. Taking care of your "personal business" in Zero G is about as pleasant as a visit to the proctologist. Just about everybody on board is avoiding food and drink as much as possible, despite the warnings, so they don't have to deal with the process of peeing into the vacuum thing. You don't even want to think about number two.

What valuable information I am sending you!

God dammit. Gotta get back on track, Smith is starting to move a little.

Here's a big problem you people have back there. In high school, all of your liberal English teachers made you read Orwell's 1984, which was cool, because it was a really interesting book. People took heed of the warnings there, but, I don't know, maybe when the actual year of 1984 passed us by, we all figured that we were out of the woods.

Is that it? Is that why Orwell's nightmare went ahead and flattened us anyway?

So what happened after 1984? Of course, art can predict, and sometimes shape, the future, but it would be silly to picture any kind of exact replica of the book. No. There was no totalitarian regime holding our feet to the fire. Most of our recent history was shaped by Ignorance and Apathy, in the face of a monster that nobody imagined they could control.

It seems like people gradually became very accepting of invasions to their privacy. Surveillance cameras over cash registers - to catch criminals. GPS - to help you get where you want to go. What was that other thing called when it came out - I-Pass, or something? Where you don't have to slow down for toll booths? They just read your pass so you can get through fast. All humans present and accounted for.

What else... The eye in the sky - satellites could see just about everything on the ground by the end of the millennium. People started turning digital cameras on each other everywhere. Corporations used them in their office buildings, aiming them at the cubicles. Email received at the office was routinely monitored. Personal email at home was supposed to be private - but come on, you don't believe that, do you?

Peeing in a cup for your boss. Fun.

How about reality-based TV shows? How dark and pervasive do you think those things are going to get one day?

How about this one - people Lojacked their children, in case they ever got kidnapped. People will really Lojack their kids. I'm not kidding.

Face, iris and fingerprint scanning of all people. For our own protection. I'll never understand how people managed to approve all of this. Probably a result of 9/11, to weed out terrorists. That event was used and abused to take a lot of freedoms and rights away from us.

Big Brother is being sold to you people as protection, convenience and entertainment.

Gradually. Very gradually.

I don't know if I'm explaining this very well.

Sometimes, maybe every time, a wonderful dream nears its fruition and then falls flat on its face. Democracy failed, because the idealists were not creative or insightful enough to prevent its eventual corruption. Capitalism obliterated any kind of real Democracy. Don't get me wrong, I love Capitalism. It's a wonderful thing to be able to work towards a dream and to enjoy the fruits of your successes. But Capitalism gone unchecked in its influence over a Democracy brought on the final demolition of the American Dream.

Your country, in your time, is the lone superpower, and the last "great empire". With its cultural and monetary influence, it is also the most far-reaching superpower in history. Therefore... the demise of the American Dream would be devastating for the entire world.

In the past, it was always possible to influence the people, to control the masses, and it was conversely true that the masses could also exert their influence when they needed to change things that were not working. But how does one control and exert influence over an entity? Despite the fact that large corporations and powerful governments are composed of human beings, on the whole, they are like unstoppable machines. No, maybe that's the wrong way to put it - what they are, is a very different kind of animal. They thrive on the ugliest of emotions, because they are ultimately fueled by greed and survival.

In a large corporation, where is the motivation to be generous and content? These are very human emotions, very personal motivations that result from personal interactions and experiences. Even in a cutthroat corporate environment, there is plenty of room for friendships, morals and ethics. There is a fundamental goodness inside each and every human being. But in the case of a large organization, there is no place to hold this sort of thing. That goodness is greatly diminished and watered down to suit the needs of the beast that feeds its people.

The beast has no soul.

What does the corporate entity know of ethics and handshakes and the feelings or concerns of an immigrant worker making \$5.50 an hour?

Unfortunately, this environment can also exert an influence over the hearts and minds of the people who exist within it. So you have an ever-increasing, self-perpetuating terribleness that will continue to grow, and to divide and isolate your fellow human beings.

Is there hope? Yes. Every workplace within every company is a community, with a culture that can be righted and fixed. That's where it all starts - with individuals and small communities.

But not in the history that I know. Our corporations became truly sick creatures. And the corporations called most of the shots for the government, because they funded most of the campaigns and put most of the people in power. (Effective campaign-finance reform NEVER happened for us.) Therefore, our government became mostly inhuman, and tended to make mostly inhuman decisions.

This is the direction in which your world is headed. Have fun.

"But we can still vote, can't we?"

I'm glad you asked that question, me. Well... What are your choices, really? You are given very little to choose from. Not very democratic, is it? Money is power, and nobody gets elected without a LOT of it, and they don't get a lot of it without sucking their way to the top.

Knowledge is power, too. So, they also do a very good job of controlling what you know.

In your lifetime, huge multinational conglomerates have been buying up television networks, movie studios, newspapers and radio stations. And these aren't just media moguls, these companies had interests in appliances, hardware, oil, tobacco, weapons, fast food - you name it. These very powerful corporations lobbied hard for things like the Telecommunications Act, which allowed fewer and fewer companies to buy up media outlets. For example, one news corporation could provide the news for 6 radio stations, 3 TV stations and 2 newspapers in your area. There's no competition, and the voices of opposition are very faint. Politicians managed to cut funding for public television and radio. Journalism became a huge joke over time. News was driven more and more by the bottom line, so in order to compete, they needed to become more entertaining. Sex, horror, oddities, and the personal affairs of famous people were what brought in advertising dollars. Furthermore, if gargantuan corporations and their trading partners owned 98% of the media, do you think it could have been possible for you or anyone else to effectively criticize them or publicize any wrongdoing? To question their ethics on a grand scale? Couldn't they have a pretty strong influence over what we see and hear? And couldn't they very easily keep certain politicians in power, and their policies intact, by not only influencing public opinion, but generating support, and utilizing some very effective methods of distraction?

Most of you never see or hear or read much of the real news.

I'm getting boring. Sorry. We rant a lot these days. We rue the mistakes of the past. We rue the shit out of them.

But this is central to the struggle, and if you need to know more, just go read some fucking books by Chomsky or watch Frontline or rent a documentary by Michael Moore - WHILE YOU STILL CAN. There's plenty of information out there, handed to you by so-called Commies and Anarchist crackpots, but guess what, they were right, and nobody bothered to listen, or if they listened, they sure didn't do anything about it. People sat back and watched things happen, just one thing after another.

Imagine you are sitting there in a comfy chair, drinking some cold beer. Mmmmm. In front of you, on your television, they are building a robot that will be sent to kill you. It's a very large robot, with a lot of parts, so if they add a couple of pieces every day, it should be finished in, oh, 15 or 20 years. Not to worry, that's a long way off. Maybe I'll be dead by then. Maybe I'll be able to outrun it. What else is on? My kids will be smarter than me. They can destroy it.

And they keep building the robot, and you change the channel, because the Cubs are on, and you

don't want to think right now. Life is hard enough, without more worries and frustrations coming at me through my almighty television, the drug that can take all the pain away, by allowing you to get distracted for hours on end, each and every day of your life.

Robots. Don't get me started.

The abuse of technology over the years was so subtle. People have busy lives. They choose to ignore things that are annoying and move on. Take spam, for instance. Instead of fighting and lobbying your government to outlaw spam, everybody chose to filter it out, ignoring the problem. If it doesn't affect you directly, it is not your problem, right?

Another example - there is marketing information about you being stored in databases which are shared and sold. You go to the grocery store and use your Sooper Card to get discounts. You use credit cards. Every purchase you make is documented. At some point, every movement you make on the internet will be tracked. Your behaviors and interests are well-documented in your file. Added to that file are some of the behaviors and interests of other Gene Dillons. What do they do with the info? They market you. Heavily. One day in the very near future, your Mac will become your entertainment center - email, movies, music, everything - you'll get sucked in, and you'll be fed a steady diet of what interests you. Being targeted specifically and individually, advertisers will make more money off of you.

Most people don't mind this kind of thing. If you like sports and country-western music, then that's all you need to see coming from your machine. This will make people a lot more narrow and introverted, more specialized and antisocial, even within their own households. People will begin having more and more trouble relating to each other and understanding each other.

All in the name of money. We let Capitalism guide our culture and our values. We let it stifle our voices.

Please, don't hang yourself now.

Did I tell you about the Clown Bank? Back in the Teens, the Clown Bank opened its doors. Clown tellers, clown bankers and clown security guards with guns. People actually put their savings into the Clown Bank, because it was fun to do your banking with clowns.

You know, initially, I brought that up as a bad thing, but looking back, the Clown Bank may have been one of the few bright spots of the 21st century.

And... Smith just opened his eyes and trained them on ME immediately, goddammit. Looks unhappy. The shits, maybe. Yep, there he goes.

Gotta finish this one up, um um um, what was I talking about? Can't...

How 'bout Genetics? That's a good one.

Can you imagine being subjected to DNA assessments by your insurance company? What do you think happens next? How about high-tech discrimination and segregation?

Time and time again, how many innovations in science were eventually adopted for some conveniently sinister use? Think about it - genetic scientists spend years striving to find a cure for cancer, and most of what they have done is being used to discriminate against homosexuals, fat people and people who are predetermined to be at risk of getting a disease.

But they still can't cure anybody, if you can believe that.

They can GIVE you cancer though, you know. If I'm not mistaken, there are companies that can do that right now. They know what causes cancer, so they can pump up a mouse with carcinogens, or whatever, and induce a tumor. Since they know exactly how the cancer was created, they can cure it. But that's the only kind of cancer they can cure.

They can give somebody cancer, and then take it away. Mass biological blackmail. That's a long, dark chapter of our history that I'll save for a day when I am not so queasy.

A lot of biotech firms have just opened for business in your time. Their scientists are driven to do good things. But their investors are driven to make serious wads of cash out of the deal. Once the research leaves the universities and ends up in the hands of people staring at a bottom line, the technology is infinitely corruptible. I wish I could give you more details. Perhaps you'll read them elsewhere.

Anyway, get ready for the next phase of human evolution.

Ah, science. I can't wait to get confirmation that Sender has smashed and melted every ounce of equipment he used to send you this message. Only then will I breathe easy and feel like I'm finally ready to die. I doubt there will be anything left to live for at that point anyway. Not on my path.

And... Here he comes. And fuck if I haven't given you your second piece of authentication yet. Oh, this is great:

Smith: "Watcha typin'?"

Me: "Poetry." (smiling)

Smith: "Really? What language is that? It doesn't look like - "

Me: "It's a combination of Latin and Klingon."

Smith: "Ha ha. That is hilarious! Can I hear some?"

And I am actually speaking to him in a very grand demonstration of what a Klingon may have sounded like while giving an eloquent oration in ancient Rome as I finish this:

One time... Once... You saw your mother cry. You were about three years old, near the Christmas tree. You know why.

A lesser woman would have raised the oceans with her tears.

Go find Number Four. This one is done.

G

None of your business.

As for the rest of information here, some if it's really starting to sound like a lot of sci-fi drivel. I should call my dad and ask him if any of this stuff has been lifted from books - he's read it all. I can't say any of it sounds particularly unrealistic though. Alarmist, sure... but not far-fetched.

I am tending to believe it now, because the authentications I am giving myself here are 100% factual. The evidence is just there for me. What else could this be? Somebody channeling into my brain and making up the rest? Why? I don't believe that crap anyhow. As for the rest of it, I guess I don't see any reason why I would lie to myself.

I guess you don't have to believe any of it, if you don't want to. In fact, there's no reason to believe anything anybody tells you.

Wow, where the fuck does that leave you?

Lately, I sure feel like we're living in a "Trust No One" society. Our leaders lie, co-workers stab each other in the back, families gossip, spouses cheat, and children stockpile weapons in their bedrooms.

Who or what is left to have faith in, or to depend on? Memories of any kind of real quality in our lives have been completely paved over or digitized poorly. And of course, traditional "Faith" has absolutely no place in our rational, scientific world. The absence of any kind of real faith makes every moment of our lives seem empty and fleeting. Life is just a cheap thrill, like some drug that will someday wear off. No wonder so many of us have become so sick and fat and hateful. And I tell myself it will only get much, much worse?

So again, who or what is left to depend on? A lot of us would just say "I, Me, Myself.

Numero Uno."

I guess that's right. And I guess that's why I've decided I have to believe what I'm reading. Because it's me, and I can depend on myself.

I think.

Am I reliable?

Anyway, I'm giving a lot of thought to my purpose in life. I don't know if I'm ready for this.

Maybe I have been putting too much pressure on myself. Maybe I'm not supposed to do anything. I suppose it doesn't hurt to publish these letters. Perhaps it is YOUR job to read this stuff and then go on to do something marvelous - something which I am woefully incapable of accomplishing myself.

Yeah. That actually makes a hell of a lot more sense to me.

So YOU can go ahead and shoulder as much of this burden as YOU want.

I'll just post the shit and let you figure it out. That's all I can think of at the moment.

August 2003

Selected Emails From the Future — #4

Here's number four. I'm a little busy with other things right now. Thank God I don't have to write my own column any more.

Not for 57 years, anyway.

Subject: Fore. Hay Bales in East Boulder
From: cj787\$56663h^^7kkh000fuy@fjffuuo0opu8.com
Date: 17 Apr 2057 16:48:20 -0600
To: gdillon@explodin.com

G -

I'm not gonna get caught short this time, so I'll hit you with 2 short quick ones right away.

How about this - no stories this time. Just a couple things I thought about doing, but never did.

Every summer, when driving around near open space farmland in East Boulder, you would be fascinated by the image of hay bales at sunset. The farmers would bale them and leave them to dry or something. So they would be spaced out about twenty feet apart, these nearly perfect rectangles, hundreds of them, scattered all over a field, with the light hitting them from low on the horizon. Each side of the hay bale is a different shade of color. That moment when the sun is about to dip behind the jagged tops of the Flatirons, and the clouds above you are glowing pink and orange. Perfection. Geometric shapes resting atop the rolling expanse of natural, raw beauty.

You always wanted to capture that scene in a photograph. But you never took that picture. Take it. That's just one simple shift in your universe, and something beautiful from your past that you'll be able to look at one day.

Number two: Mom and Dad could use a little help right about now.

Okay, that's out of the way, so let's get down to business. Smith has been awake for... Cripes, I dunno. I haven't been keeping track of time. The shuttle spins like a rotisserie, so technically, on this ship, the days last about 45 minutes. They spin it to evenly distribute the heat of the sun. My guess is that Smith hadn't slept in about 4 days. He'd been popping pills. What a jackass. Now, he's

out cold.

I decided to just rest in my mind, and listen to music and teachings and lectures. I've been sleeping better. And we've all been having a lot more fun. I've been talking to my buddy, Pain, quite a bit. He's really funny - kind of self-deprecating.

Oh, crap, I can't let it go. Listen. You and your brothers and sisters know how stubborn your father is. It doesn't mean you shouldn't say anything, or do anything, just because you think he won't listen. Then maybe you can go through life knowing that you tried your hardest. Who knows? Maybe he will even listen. Change his ways.

I don't know if there's anything I could have done. But it bothers me that I didn't put forth the effort. You know what the issues are. That's all I have to say.

Anyway, back to Pain. Nobody's more in touch with the discomfort of this trip than Pain. He's made it more bearable by drawing attention to it. Screams from the bathroom, that kind of thing.

Anyway, we all realized it was time to make the best of things, and just try to let ourselves laugh a little bit more. A lot more. The pilot's getting pissed, but we've been having a lot of fun. You don't get too many chances in zero gravity, so you might as well have some fun with it.

I think of the original astronauts. Every minute of their time was mapped out, doing experiments, taking measurements and pictures - they hardly had any time to enjoy the clearest view of space they had ever seen. But with us - we're just passengers. We don't gotta do shit.

Blind Man's Bluff in zero-G is a classic. And my personal favorite, "Be the Ball". We take turns being the ball - you know like a cannonball, you scrunch yourself up, and there are teams, and you have to shoot the "ball" through a goal. It goes soooo slow, and you spend most of your time giggling. Then there's this thing we do that's kind of like the guy from Bozo's Circus who used to spin all the plates at once, on top of poles. It's more like performance art, really - you try to get as many things spinning in front of you as you can, but they can't hit anything, and they can't hit each other. Pain is really good at it - he had seventeen items going at once, all in the same basic direction. Pens, pdas, shoes. As soon as we got bored with scoring by number, we started giving out points for form - spinning things in opposite directions, perpendicular, intersecting radii, liquids...

Smith looks like he's running a temperature, all pale and sweaty. I moved in for a closer look. The sweat doesn't roll off of you up here. It just kind beads up and stays there. His whole head looks like it's covered in a thin layer of slime, and somehow, a four-inch strand of drool hangs upward, suspended from the corner of his mouth.

As long as I am feeling disgusted, I guess I'll tell you about the Bio-Terror Wars.

The "leaders" of a certain government got it in their heads that they could get what they wanted from a certain other group of people through the peaceful means of giving a cancer to a large portion of their population. They did this through subtle means, using an agent that was not on any

list of chemical or biological weaponry. It was a dense carcinogen that took effect over a long period of time. They insisted that their techniques were not in violation of international law, because they also had the means to remove the cancer. An antidote.

Hundreds of thousands of people started showing symptoms within a year. Why? Because they drank milk, that's why.

One people, a culture, a race, spends several generations in conflict with another people, another culture, another race. They have been fighting for so long that they can't even remember what they are fighting about anymore. They do it out of habit. They do it for a revenge that never dies, until everyone decides to just embrace and forgive and walk away... which never happens. No, they fight until the last man is standing.

So, the "leaders" of the victimized people came to the decision, backed by the mighty deity of their choosing, that they will not give in to such blackmail. Hundreds of thousands of people begin the reluctant march to a slow and gruesome martyrdom.

When the death toll reached four figures, the aggressors gave in. The antidote was offered to the victimized people, under a scaled-down set of conditions. Their "leaders" of the victimized people refused to give in to their demands.

The death toll climbed to five figures. The antidote was unconditionally shipped to the "leaders" of the victimized people.

The antidote was again refused.

And do you think things got any better in the world after that?

Oh, how we longed for the human race to evolve!

To a large extent, a great many individuals did evolve. People have become more intelligent, more understanding, more aware, more adaptable... But the strides taken by human beings on a personal level were never any match for the devolution that has taken place on the larger scale, on the group level, on the cultural and structural level. These are beasts run amok.

How can humans BEINGS evolve, while the human RACE continues to wallow in barbarism? How can human beings overcome what is happening on the larger scale, to bring about REAL human evolution?

Fix that little problem for us, will ya?

I gotta go. We're gonna go sew Smith to his chair.

G

September 2003

Selected Emails From the Future — #9

I decided to skip ahead to the ninth email, as they make their final approach to Mars. There's so much information here, and obviously it would take about 10 years to present it all, at this pace.

I've been in space for about five months. That brings to mind a couple of things. One - life on Earth must suck pretty hard for them to want to set up a colony on Mars. Two - the people on that shuttle have to be going nuts. I doubt that I'll be helping any, in that regard.

Subject: Number Nine. The Rise and Fall of Lake Michigan.
From: fusp09wUUm@99*7Yyu%4nn_Ppol33.com
Date: 17 Apr 2057 16:52:01 -0600
To: gdillon@explodin.com

G -

I'm tired of announcing these stupid little anecdotes. Why can't you just trust me, for chrissakes? Look, I'll just make sure that my correspondences are dotted with plenty of little thoughts and stories from our past, and you can sort it all out. Okay? Jesus.

OUR past? How can I pluralize myself like that?

Wait a minute. If your life begins to follow a different path in time and space, does that make you a different person now? Or am I drawing and quartering myself? Flaying out my soul to be torn into a million pieces? What if the universe splits in half and I can only take one half of my soul onto each path? I haven't been feeling "whole" lately. What if I'm snuffing myself out, gradually? And you, in your time. What good will you be, if only one half of your self continues down a different path after you read these messages? And that half is cut in half, and so on?

Jesus H! You would think that with the limited space on an important mission to Mars that the passengers would not be allowed to bring along so much horseshit. The human mind is infinitely capable of storing up landfills worth of horseshit. There is really no end to it. Worries, wants, fantasies, bad memories.

At times, I regret being a part of this project. I'm happy to help, of course, if it's at all possible. But from a personal standpoint, here I am, 88 years old, facing the final curtain, and I spend most of my waking hours dredging up the past and writing about it. To be honest, I'd much rather shed all this crap and just exist in the moment. It's all I have.

You left your hometown for good, once. So you sort of know what it's like. But at least you could go back and visit Chicago a couple times a year. I just left my home planet. And I will live the rest of my life under a bubble, 49 million miles from that tiny blue and green jewel.

Mars is dry and dusty and cold. Did you know that Mars was the Roman god of war? Isn't that nice? Mars has 2 moons, which is kind of nice also. Their names are Phobos & Deimos. In English - fear and panic.

We float away from our beautiful, lush home planet, in search of war, fear and panic. It makes me long to stand on the shores of Lake Michigan, and just soak up the radiation until my hair and teeth fall out.

Some fun times on Lake Michigan over the years. You spent time on a couple of islands, at very different times in your life. Washington Island? Off the coast of Northern Wisconsin. What's that - Door County? I can't remember. Fish boils. Green Bay and Sturgeon Bay. And I remember a restaurant that grew grass on its roof, and there were goats up there, just eating it. They had lingonberry sauce for the pancakes, and I swear to God I still don't know what a lingonberry is, but your girlfriend told you that you had to have the pancakes with lingonberries on them or you haven't lived, and they just tasted okay. I wondered if some old lady just grew them in her back yard or something. You were about 19. Laura was about 22, and enjoyed a drink now and then, every single day. You took a ferry to Washington Island, where she had spent summers in high school, and she knew a bunch of people there. People on the island enjoyed a drink now and then, every single day. On this island, people filled up 32-ounce cups with screw drivers at 10 in the morning, and drove around in pickup trucks and Camaros until the drinks were empty, at which point they would return to the bar and get another. They did this until it became dark, at which point they remained at the bar until it closed. Then they all drove to someone's house and had some drinks, and then drove home. You drank and drank and drank for days, and thought it was the greatest thing ever, except for the fact that some of the island's residents were pretty creepy.

On the other side of the lake, later in life, you discovered the best camping of your life, backpacking on North Manitou. Or South Manitou. Can't remember. I think it was the bigger of the two islands. Or the smaller one. No cars. A ferry took you and Michelle out there, and then you hiked for five miles and found a perfect spot overlooking a beach on the West side of the island. Several days went by before you saw any people at all. Ideal weather. Dazzling sunsets. Paradise.

That was the one.

One day, you will look back on the moments of your life that were strung together to wind around the world ten thousand times, and you will remember the most peaceful and wonderful times, and that was one of them. Watching the sun setting on Lake Michigan from that campsite. When feel you have lost everything, you'll always be able to close your eyes and get there. I still go there all the time.

When I open my eyes right now, I open them to war, fear and panic, growing ever larger in my little porthole. I thought we had left them behind for good. No. In this life, they never leave us. In six hours, we will orbit the god of war, a cycle that has trapped the human race since they crawled out of the oceans and jumped down from the trees.

Heading off to this bubble, the seed of human civilization, I bring with me all of my fear and panic, and a planet's worth of horseshit. With great pain and effort, I could attempt to wipe clean the slate of my own heart, mind and soul, but what is the potential of the rest of this new civilization? We've seen what seemingly intelligent human beings are capable of, and it has become a teensy, bluish dot in our rearview mirror. Did they slap up a nice Utopia for us in this bubble? Is the bubble teeming with enlightened beings? Or is the human animal destined to live in conflict and suffering as long as babies are born, as long as people continue to spend their lives struggling to survive?

What's the point?

What's your plan, Gene?

What are you going to do? What's your "battleground"? I've been puzzling all these months over how the fuck you can possibly make a difference in THIS life.

I guess you can always start with yourself. You're a sick bastard. I'm a sick bastard. It's damn near impossible to change the way anybody else thinks out there. Plenty of men and women have tried. Ideas get snuffed out, or fade away with time. As the population grew to well over 6 billion, the insignificance of the power of the individual mind was pretty damn close to insurmountable. The power of the group mind in the structures of power, and even in the circles of idealistic thought, would always become susceptible to corruption.

Oh, well. If you can manage to fix your own self, then at least that's one less sick bastard left. That's where it starts. Individuals can change. Individuals can influence others, and bring about change. Be contagious. I think that's the best advice I can think of.

Just know that a majority of human beings alive in your time are wishing, just BEGGING, for some kind of guidance.

But, LORD, we've been in this stinking can a long time. I'm gonna kill somebody, if I can find something blunt and heavy. No... zero gravity. It won't work. I'll need something sharp.

But I joke with you! Ha ha! Nobody understands the dark humor any more. In my time, death and murder carry absolutely no humor value. When the loss of one life can change the total size of the human race by .00008%, you tend to get a little bit annoyed by morbid humor. Gallows humor is okay though. Resignation is rather popular in our culture.

So, I told you about the radiation back there, didn't I?

Yep.

I doubt if you're at all surprised.

If you put a hundred alpha male apes from different tribes into a room filled with sticks and stones, what do you think will happen, sooner or later? And then, what if you turn up the heat in that room? Or take away most of the food? What if some apes had the ability to constantly pit other apes against each other? What if one ape becomes dominant, gathers up all the sticks and stones, and maintains order for decades, but then becomes old and weak?

Apes.

Animals animals animals.

We are animals.

I think all the humans will eventually leave Earth. It's just a sick place. Evil storms and pervasive radiation. It will be ten thousand years or more before it's even remotely safe to live above ground again for any length of time. If everything goes as planned, the atmosphere and surface of Mars may be adapted for human life within 6 or 7 generations. Until then, life may very well suck for us Martians. Hard, hard work for a couple of hundred years.

I've been imagining life on Earth in ten thousand years, devoid of human life, populated by the animals that survived the radiation and mutated somewhat. No beast will remain that is capable of mass destruction. Unless a raccoon manages to locate a certain button or a test tube some place. A pure textbook of Darwinism, sped up by the effects of radiation. What will survive? What will be lost forever? Before the Big One, some scientists with foresight actually did manage to cryogenically freeze a large number of embryos of a wide variety of species, but all were lost. Extinction through power outage. How incredibly sad. But Ted Williams can rest in peace.

I predict that omnivorous beasts in mountain regions and near the poles will have the best chance of survival. There should be a number of cracks, crevasses, valleys and caves that may be safe harbors from the worst effects of radiation and harsh weather, and some quantity of untainted water should be available up there. Bugs will be okay. They can live through anything. Imagine how the 17-year cicadas will do, having missed the torrents of flame. They might just decide to come up every year. Some of them are bound to mutate. I bet we'll have huge swarms of gigantic bugs, spiders and bats. And at least one Mothra.

"We'll" have?

Well, I'm still a native Earthling.

I hear tell that the welcoming committee on Mars likes to fuck with people when they get off the shuttle. They put on this elaborate performance, with everybody dressing up like the Roswell aliens, poking and prodding you, and speaking in tongues. Sounds like a fun bunch of people. As long as there's no probing.

Approaching orbit. Freakboy waking up. I hope I never see him again.

This flight has been a lot like prison. Except for the floating. Really boring and claustrophobic. At least in prison you could eat nutmeg and smoke banana peels and take showers. I'm going to recommend it to the Board.

I guess you'll be hearing from a Martian next time.

Later.

G

The rest of the messages were typed out on the surface of Mars, where I will be living out the rest of my days, after which I will be composted.

I'm amazed that I was only able to knock out nine messages in five months, but I assume that the presence of Smith and the mental effects of the lack of gravity had a lot to do with it. From here on out, I'll be typing pretty furiously, just about every day.

It's going to be difficult, choosing the most important and interesting entries, but I'll do my best. Number 10 is a doozy.

October 2003

Selected Emails From the Future — #10

This is a nice little entry.

Welcome to Mars.

Subject: Dix: Wow, this place sucks!

From: doidfkkkII75TT54443E@pplIOOkikikki56.com

Date: 17 Apr 2057 16:52:59 -0600

To: gene@genedillon.com

What a shit-hole...

I can't fucking believe I'm stuck in this place.

God, this sucks.

This is like the Donner Party getting lost in space with Dr. Smith.

Fuck.

I'll tell you one thing. It's perfectly clear to me now. This is where they are sending ALL the undesirables. Fill us with hope and get rid of us. Somebody back on Earth is giggling with delight in his little underground fortress. This place is so joyless — it has almost everyone wondering if Hell could provide a better living situation.

After floating and spinning through the vast expanse of nothingness for what seemed like seven and a half years, we were all pretty excited about getting our feet on the ground. 38% gravity is plenty good enough. We were sick of everything floating. Nothing rests in space. We simply needed to lie down.

We all congratulated each other after landing softly upon the surface of the war-god planet. We promised millions of precious Martian jewels to our pilot for getting us there safely. What a relief! The landing was not too difficult. The atmosphere is pretty thin, mostly carbon dioxide, but there's a lot of dust, so the descent was pretty turbulent. If a dust storm had been whipping through the area, we could have been stuck in orbit for days, so we got pretty lucky there.

They have constructed a pretty nice landing strip for the shuttles. Right before landing, they send out a team of robotic rovers to sweep the dust off the runway. This is the only road on Mars. "The Strip" they call it, in memory of Las Vegas, Nevada.

With much grunting and difficulty, we donned our space suits, and gingerly emerged from our shuttle under hazy pink skies. I needed a lot of help. We did some exercises on the shuttle, but for the most part, our muscles have been taking a long break.

The dust, the rocks, the mountains, everything is the same color. Some weird combination of pale yellow and pink. Like the clouds back on Earth at a particular brief moment during sunset. The land is not quite glowing. It is somewhat dull. I realized within seconds that my visor had a thin film of dust on it already. We are forbidden to wipe off the dust — it scratches the surface of the visors, and space suits are not exactly plentiful.

We thudded, one by one, off the metal-grate last step of the shuttle ladder, and onto the surface of the fourth planet from the sun.

It was cold out there. Really cold. And quiet. We were rushed along, uneventfully, from the exterior surface of this foreign and mysterious new planet, into the soon-to-be-familiar innards of a human-made, uniquely Earthling structure. Kind of a bummer, but you have to conserve your resources.

We entered the airlock. Airtight, it filled with breathable oxygen. And that was it.

We live in this bubble now.

Each of us were issued goggles and breathing masks to wear beneath our helmets. The dust that we dragged along with us into this room would have given us fits without the added barriers. We removed our helmets. I detected a metallic smell in the thin air of the tiny space. The coughing fits began for most of the group. A woman spoke to us through an intercom with monotone instructions. We bumped and nudged and elbowed each other as we removed our cumbersome suits and stored them in a trunk to our left. We were ordered to move very slowly, to keep from stirring up the dust. When everyone had finished, we were told to line up in front of the door, again, very still, where we waited for 20 minutes. They proceeded to let us in, but just one at a time, every 10 minutes or so.

Finally, it was my turn. On the other side of the door was another enclosed space, this time, about the size of a closet. Here, I was told to remain very still again. Beneath my feet there was a sucking rush of air — a vacuum mechanism. Wow. They must really hate dust around here. She told me it was okay to remove my goggles and mask. My eyes stung a little bit, and I couldn't stop coughing. We had climate control for 8 months of our lives, before and during the flight. So even this little bit of remaining dust was quite a shock.

The air was thicker in this little antechamber, giving sustenance to a dense and far more offensive smell. The tiny room looked sterile — it didn't seem possible for such a foul odor to exist in this neat and perfect little space. My eyes were watering. It was like riding next to a homeless guy on the subway, but there was nowhere I could turn my head that would help.

At last, the final door opened.

Expecting some relief, I was instead overcome by a unseen wall of something sinister and grotesque. It was the truly unique feeling of having each and every one of my sense organs simultaneously flayed open and salted. Pure, unadulterated Disgust. If I had even a morsel of food left in my stomach, I would have

puked it outward in a long, high arc, but things being the way they were, I could only gag a little bit and bug out my eyes, which were now flowing with tears.

It felt like somebody gave me an eyewash with onion juice. I fumbled for my mask and goggles, but it didn't help me at all. There was no way to keep the stink off. This place is fucking volatile — stagnant air, pungent and stifling. But it's cold and the air is bone-dry. It doesn't make sense. Like an ill-kept slaughterhouse in Antarctica or something. How could it be so ripe in here?

The "welcoming committee" stands there waiting for me to compose myself. Actually, it's just this one guy, Bob. I can make out a few other figures in the periphery, milling about amongst tangles of dark green foliage and structures made of white plastic sheets. Looking upon me — what? Do they mirror my disgust? Perhaps my clean and sterile presence offends them? What is this? People wander by, glance in our general direction, and move along. No excitement, no pranks, no party. No fanfare. Nobody really cares that we are here. No, I take that back. They DO care that we are here. They just wish we weren't. Bob is politely asking me if I'm okay. I respond with all that I can think of. "This place smells like a fucking outhouse that hasn't been cleaned in ten years. Do you have any nose-plugs? How about handful of barf-bags to get me through the night? The least you could have done was lit a match or something, before you let us in. Jesus H. Christ!" and that was all I could muster before a fit of uncontrollable coughing took over my body, followed by no less than five minutes of the dry heaves. They told me that I passed out, but I don't remember.

Bob stood over me, calm. Pleasant. "We do our best," was about all he could muster, and I struggled to my feet and stood with the others, to wait for the rest of our party. We found no other joy left in our lives but the humorous delight in witnessing the pained expressions on each and every face of the members of our landing party as they emerged, once every ten minutes, from the tiny room.

This is my new home.

I cannot fucking BELIEVE this!

I'm trying to reach back into your past to try and come up with something comparable — a hideous encounter — like a week-long Gigi Allin concert inside a prison. Hell on Earth, or some such. You find yourself forced into something, and you just have to ride it out. I'd like to think that back on Earth, you could always have made a decision, and gotten away from it all. Back in the day, you could always run away and join the circus, or follow the Grateful Dead, or quit your job, or get drunk. You were a regular Houdini for a while there. Dropped out of college twice. Remember that restaurant job, when your girlfriend at work cheated on you with the bartender, and then all three of you were supposed to continue working together? Ten months of "true love", followed by an intense display of betrayal and public embarrassment. You ditched that situation. Quit a decent job, and left all those people behind. Drove to Yellowstone Park through a long night of pounding mid-western rain, listening to Tea for the Tillerman endlessly on auto-reverse in your powder-blue Buick.

First time you ever saw a mountain.

Escape...

Peering through the buffed and blurry plexiglas, I strain to get a good look at the last mountains I will ever see. I will never, ever be able to touch them.

There's only one escape from this place. A short walk down a dusty landing strip.

I don't know what else I can compare this to — certainly nothing I ever experienced before 2014. Nothing comes close to this. I'm stuck here. This is it. It's our home, our giant holding cell. Everyone is absolutely miserable here.

Here's a frame of reference for you: I'm reminded of the caddy-shack at Riverside Golf Club, where you worked for four summers as a teenager. Now — think about the dumpster shed BEHIND the caddy-shack. Yeah. A shed that held 2 dumpsters, baking in the sun all day. Gnawed bones and empty liquor bottles from the clubhouse. Remember the kangaroo courts? If a B-jock stepped out of line, the A-caddies and "honor" caddies would hold court, wearing filthy towels on their heads as traditional trial wigs. 13 year-old kids would be sentenced to hard time in the festering confines of the dumpster shed, accompanied by

a multitude of flies and maggots, and yes, rats. A kid would scream bloody murder to be let out of there, and at the end of the day, his Mom would come and pick him up, and he'd never come back. Remember that glum little kid from Berwyn? He decided to stand his ground and mouth off to the older caddies one day, and they sentenced him to a "pole job". One caddy on each leg, and another holding him from behind. They rammed his balls repeatedly into a wooden pole. Nobody knew about his previous hernia operation. The stitches came open, and his nuts were bleeding. His Mom picked him up, and he never came back.

There were no arrests.

Yeah. Mars is like the dumpster behind the caddy-shack. Just take away the vermin, and add a bit of diffused, pink light.

One other major difference: our Moms are NEVER going to pick us up.

You'd love it here.

Encourage everyone you know to continue living life just the way they are, ignoring the consequences of their actions and the consequences of the actions of their leaders. Just ignore everything. It doesn't matter. Do NOTHING! Yes, one day, you too, and your children, and your children's children, can join us in this unforgettable, irreplaceable experience of a lifetime.

I'm so tired. Let me finish up.

Before we were allowed to fucking lay down and rest, we all got slammed with a briefing that probably lasted 5 hours. I'll just try to make it short. Adequate water has been obtained from beneath Mars' crust, through various methods of drilling and condensation, and methods of recycling liquids have worked extremely well — surprisingly, there has been no problem with regards to water. There is a nuclear reactor supplying a fair amount of power in conjunction with windmills and solar panels outside. But there are problems. The reactor is touch and go. It's offline more often than not. Also, it is the job of our abundant plant life to generate enough oxygen for everyone. However, too many of the plants are struggling. The bubble is currently experiencing dangerously low levels of oxygen, and we are looking at some very strict

rationing coming up. The presence of new arrivals equals the further depletion of this, their most valuable resource. I guess that explains why they hate us already. We have been ordered to limit our movement and control our breathing. All residents of the bubble are required to stop everything and meditate 3 times a day. It's a technique that has proven successful over the span of a day — air consumption rates are down. We are encouraged to remain calm at all times. Nobody here gets excited.

It's a good thing there is nothing here to get excited about.

They seem to have enough soil, but the combination of cold air and sandstorms has really stunted the plants. The sand blots out the sun pretty well. They are like eclipses that last for days, or even weeks. Artificial lighting doesn't do the plants as well, especially when it's not working right. Composting is a necessity to nourish our plants, and everything is composted. That's probably what the big stink is all about. The composting hogs up oxygen too, but we have no choice.

You're probably wondering why we don't just use hydroponics and blast our excrement out into the dust. Well... The plan is to terra-form this entire planet. We have to start now. A process has been laid out, and although it has evolved slightly, and will continue to evolve, we are sticking with the overall plan, because it's a pretty good one. The only one, really. They have recently begun to supplement the soil-dwelling plants with hydroponics. There are plants covering just about every inch of ground, and the hydroponic stuff is lined up on shelves and on top of housing units, and just about everywhere. But those plants have struggled even more than the ones on the ground.

I can't believe I actually typed something remotely optimistic just now. Is this really going to work? I just don't sense an overriding feeling of hope around here. There are odds involved...

The survival of all of us. The survival of some of us. The end of us all. There are enough scientists around here to chalk up each scenario to some percentage of probability. Thankfully, nobody has had time to sit and figure that one out.

Most of these people are staring at me in particular, like "why the fuck is this old man here?" I'm a burden, another mouth to feed, another couple of lungs sucking the life out of the place, while contributing nothing of real value.

Well... None of this is my fault. I didn't ask to come here. They practically begged me.

I forced myself to shut my mouth. I desperately want to ask them what they do with dead bodies, because I am considering donating mine before the week is out.

Will I become compost or food? I'm not sure what I would prefer.

I decided to take a step back and try to take this all in. I'm just too exhausted and miserable right now to contribute anything helpful.

I'd better sleep now. I have a bit of privacy. It's like a 5'x8'x3' tent-like thing. No more watching my back. Perhaps I will find it possible to sleep. I guess I'm getting used to the smell.

I don't have much choice, do I?

See? Wasn't that pleasant?

I think I'm gonna go take a shower.

November 2003

Selected Emails From the Future — #11, #12, #13, #14

I had a real plan for this month. I smelled a fantastic opportunity coming — something Earth-shattering, mind-numbing and sublime. To me, anyhow.

In the second email I received from my future self, I was foretold a fact about the future — that the Cubs would NEVER win the World Series.

Lo and behold, look who was up 3 games to 1, and headed for a legitimate shot at putting down the Yankees or Red Sox in the 2003 World Series!

Why was this of such vital interest to me? First of all, because I'm an idiot. I've been watching this team religiously since I was in diapers. Sitting in a comfy chair watching this infernally slow game unfold over the span of an afternoon has a profound effect on me. Does it fill me with joy? No. Contentment? Somewhat. It's become something more of a need. Like an addiction — a three-hour cigarette. Watching a Cubs game is in no way fulfilling, but it appears to satisfy some sort of need. But that's another story.

My second purpose for becoming so excited about the events this year was the implications it had for me personally. What would it mean if they actually won? To me, it would have meant one of three things:

- 1 The receipt and the publishing of these emails from my future self has had some sort of impact upon this universe.
- 2 The universe from which this future self has written may be a parallel existence that has nothing to do with us. That would be some pretty good news.
- 3 These emails are pure bullshit.

You can imagine what a thrilling and emotional experience it must have been for me, when Steve Bartman, a self-proclaimed Cubs fan, decided to try to grab himself a souvenir in the front row of short left field with 5 outs left to go in game 6 of the League Championship Series.

They were so close...

I don't want to go there, actually. I'm over it. Last week, I went to Gateway Fun Center and hit some balls in the batting cages for about an hour and a half. My hands were bleeding, but I seemed to have expelled just about all of my aggressions. Now, it's just funny. Business as usual for the Cubs.

But proof of nothing.

Let's not pretend here, though. I was pretty pissed. When you invest 36 years of allegiance to a losing cause, the losses pile up inside you, and the pain of this ONE LOSS was more excruciating than any other. The funniest part: I honestly thought that I stood a chance at being liberated from this whole mess. A World Series victory, or even just the idea of the Cubs BEING THERE for the first time in 58 years, earning an honest defeat at the hands of the New York Yankees, would have released me from my attachment to this meaningless endeavor. I'll never know if that would be true, because it will never, EVER happen.

Dominated by my obsession, I was a wreck — from game to game, from pitch to pitch. My wife and kids could only wonder what had gone wrong. Teeth clenched, eyes bulging, I perched on my chair and waited for the one, tiny moment that would set me free, to justify thousands upon thousands of hours spent, WASTED, watching this team play "baseball". A chance to see a ball hitting a glove... A foot touching home plate... The end of a 95-year drought.

Would this moment have brought me to a heightened state of euphoria? Or would it have left me slumped over with a dumbfounded realization of the true meaning of so many valuable moments of this lifetime decimated, gone, irretrievable -- watching a GAME? A game played by millionaires that has nothing to do with me?

No longer will I wait for validation on this long-term investment — a gamble that was never, ever destined to bear any kind of real fruit. Instead, I will devour all these losses, swallow up all the empty calories of precious time poorly spent, and chalk it up to an educational experience. Time to move on.

In short, fuck the Cubs. I don't mean them personally — I'm talking about the entity as a whole. For the players and the coaches, I wish them well in their jobs, as I would wish a janitor well with the workings of his mop. May they enjoy their lives and be fulfilled.

I've got other things to think about.

Did I mention that I had tickets to the World Series? All three games at Wrigley.

Truthfully, I didn't give a shit about the implications of time and space. I just needed them to win.

Never again.

Subject: XI: One-dollar guitar.

From: f5f6fiiiummPqqwqU@drriffK998L002Www1.com

Date: 17 Apr 2057 16:53:20 -0700

To: gene@genedillon.com

A friend of yours died at the age of 23.

He wasn't one of your closest friends. But he was a guy who always made you feel like one of *his* closest friends whenever you had the pleasure of his company. A good person, a great guy.

An unfortunate and improbable occurrence.

One extra whack on the snooze button. Lather, rinse and then choose not to repeat. Stop to speak with a neighbor. Motorcycle. Cold. Breeze. Helmet. Glare. Sedan. Yellow light.

Bump. Skid. Curb.

Pole...

Objects collide, against insurmountable odds. The universe is no longer the same.

Why?

I never heard a sound like the silence that drowned us as we walked away from the fresh dirt in that grave. Impossible! We stumbled around in an iridescent soup, unable to figure out which way we were supposed to be walking. We tiptoed over the flowers of other graves, and bumped into each other, like unborn souls waiting for the next opening to a different world, one that made more sense. It was hard to look into each other's eyes. A well-meaning embrace was a coin tossed down a bottomless well. But at least we had something.

Our friend now had nothing.

Or did he?

I am dying.

I had so much to tell you.

Of course... I seriously doubt that any of this material will ever reach you anyway. Here is the way of things on Mars: The sick and the dying need to die and to be sick without the benefit of supplemental oxygen. The last 3 shuttles were stripped of all oxygen supplies, and returned to Earth on what you might call "auto-pilot". The real pilots remained, unwilling citizens of a new planet. My messages, painfully

incomplete, will have to find their way to you in some other way. I have made our shuttle pilot my closest confidant, so that we are allowed to spend some extra time alone together. He will take what I have today, hide the files, and figure something out.

Oh, well.

Our time here is not infinite, unless you chop it up into smaller and smaller pieces, and try to analyze the tiniest fragments of a moment. Look at it that way, and we are all immortal. Speaking of infinity, I have yet to find an end to the wealth of stupidity that can arise out of "logic" like this.

As I reach a moment when the number of breaths remaining becomes equal to the number of hairs left on my head, you can imagine that there is not much left to think about. People have always spoken of Life flashing before their eyes. I don't need to see that all again. Life is right here, same as it always was.

I should be angry. Sad, frustrated. Horrified. I feel nothing. Everything dies or dissipates eventually. How annoying would it be if we never died? Can you imagine how horrendously sick everyone would be of me after just one thousand years of my bullshit?

What if nothing ever changed, nothing ever moved? The sun would never rise, and if it did, the light would never reach the backs of your eyes — you would be submerged in a stagnant darkness. Music would never bounce off of your eardrums. No face could you touch, no breeze could you feel, no warmth would there be to comfort you. Nothing would ever grow. No one would ever learn.

Change is life. And death is change. Life and death are two sides of the same coin.

What is the coin?

In a sense, the coin is You. And like a coin, you have value. That value is the good in you. That value is infinite.

So don't lock it up in a bank, saving it up for a rainy day.

Okay, I'm sure that I may be losing you here with the cheeseball sentiments — please bear with me. It has become increasingly difficult to breathe, and the pain is excruciating. My pilot is typing for me now.

Change...

During every single one of those infinite portions of each individual moment, something dies, while something else is born. As I lie here, I do recall some of the more precious moments that this life had to offer. It's strange, the things that enter my mind. I think back to a time long before the worst of our troubles began — an evening walk, late in the fall, the smell of it all, powerful and dry. A strong breeze sends a thousand leaves flying from a dozen different trees, each small appendage leaving the bonds with which they had been clinging to the only homes that they have ever known, their mothers, their sustenance, their foundation. You follow the path of one, a substantial, shining brown oak leaf, flipping and sailing on the wave of one tiny gust after another. Three seconds later, it clings to a juniper like a child looking down from the monkey bars, "Mom, are you watching?" — it proudly lets go, jumping at last for a chance to land firmly on the ground, to dance away its final days in newfound freedom. And I got to see that.

And that's just me, standing there, watching something beautiful. But what was I a witness to? The passing of another year, the end of the season, and a decay leading to dormancy. Do these things sound beautiful? The leaf would soon break down into a crumbling dust. It would soon disappear, leaving nothing but a memory and a fair bit of nourishment for the ground.

It's all good.

So what did our friend have left?

One time, not long before you left the U of I and its illusion of education, your friend sold you his first guitar. For a dollar. It was truly a thing of beauty, like it was built by hand and dragged across a thousand miles through wind, rain and sun all the way from Appalachia. I showed a genuine interest in learning to play, and he obliged to help me along by supplying me with an adequate first instrument. My interest eventually gave way to some fifty other pointless pursuits. The guitar fell into other hands. Now, it is

certainly nothing more than splinters or ash, and a knot of twisted strings. I had just one other keepsake. After his death, I had the fortune to obtain a tape of him playing on a twelve-string, a personal journey through songs he taught himself — folk and bluegrass standards, even a cover of a punk rock song. His playing was sloppily urgent, intricate and loose. Perfect. The tape gradually became a muffled hiss, and was later devoured on an antiquated JC Penney tape deck. What is left of my friend that I am personally aware of in this physical reality is buried below an engraved marble slab in a small town in the Southern tip of what used to be Indiana. As for the purpose of those remains, that is for the animals beneath the ground to decide.

The possessions, the records, the names, the vessels that carry us through this life... They're just things. Things that do not last. Things that don't come along with us when we leave this life.

But is that really all there is?

At the funeral, in the church, among the sniffing and the coughing and the choking and the sobbing of young, beautiful people frozen there in the most wrong of all moments, a feeling pervaded and penetrated us all. We had our memories of him, positive and strong. The best in him, the goodness that he showed us — that essence wrapped around us all, like a massive warm blanket, big enough for everyone, with folds to fit every size and shape. In our sorrow, we were awestruck by what he had given us.

As I lie here this day, this day that may be my last — I still carry that feeling inside me. Maybe I passed it along to one or two people along the way during my own lifetime. And in them, it lives on. In that sense, may we all be immortal.

Get to know that part of yourself. Become that part of yourself.

As for what moves on into the next realm, well... That's all a faith and discovery issue. I could tell you what I've come to believe — that the goodness I'm speaking of is what continues on beyond death. But it won't make any difference to you.

I know you have doubts. Fears that you might even think incomparable to anyone else's. I assure you, this is the struggle of every one of us. You have a lot to learn, and plenty more to understand, so I won't just lie here, propped up on pillows and blankets to keep a thin air passage open, and try to convince you that everything is going to be all right. That's your path, and it's up to you to realize each and every new discovery about how to live your life, and how to face your death. Just think of these supposed opposites as inseparable. Don't forget — you have a future that can be far different from mine. Yours is another universe. While that sounds like it could be good news, you have to remember that there is no guarantee that you will live to the ripe old age of 87 or 89, or whatever the hell I am right now. You could get bitten by a West Nile mosquito tomorrow, or find your sternum wedged in between somebody's hood ornament and a brick wall, a week from Tuesday. Knowing that death may be standing out front, getting ready to ring your doorbell, makes you think about the importance of your life at this very second — the choices you make, the thoughts you entertain, the urgency with which you act. You don't want to be walking down the street and suddenly look up to see that cartoon piano careening down on top of you, as you whimper to nobody in particular, "*I fucked up.*"

So just like everybody else, you can't really afford to be wasting any more time. Like George Harrison once said, "The search for God is the only thing in life that cannot wait." Or something like that. Perhaps you'll figure it all out. In the meantime, it sure doesn't hurt to be a good person, to strive to accomplish great things. It's logical. It makes life more pleasant for others, and in turn, it makes life more pleasant for you. And if nothing else, you leave behind a positive legacy that may live on in the hearts of others.

You weren't even 2 years old when your oldest sister died. You don't remember her face. You wouldn't recognize the sound of her voice. Strange when you come to realize how much you miss her. You KNOW her. She's been with you every day of your life.

That's what I'm talking about.

I'm spent. There was so much more to tell you. Fifty years of history. Well-formed recipes for lasting peace. Advice and instruction in the shaping of *your* future, and in the thwarting of *this* one. Hopefully I've laid down enough of a foundation. You can figure out the rest. And you are not alone.

I'm too old. After 6 months of weightlessness and a pure, sterile environment, you can't stick a man this old in such a situation. Adjusting to gravity alone may have been enough to do me in. Combine that with low oxygen levels and a stench as pungent as the innards of a beached whale, and you have a recipe for shock and system shutdown. Too much for a broken down body like this, 30 years older than that of any other resident of this planet.

It was nice knowing you. Be good to yourself — you don't need any more enemies. And if you never receive this, well, I'll just lay here dreaming that maybe there are an infinite number of parallel universes anyway, and I'm just stuck in the worst one, while the rest of you are having the time of your lives.

To answer a question from my last email — out of necessity, all the inhabitants of this bubble are vegetarians, so I will indeed be composted. Tastefully and respectfully. I'm happy that I am able to have one last opportunity to help out.

Remember when you and Kathleen used to play-act all the time when you were kids? When we chose a violent game, like cops and robbers, and somebody got killed, we would always play it up, gasping with eyes bulging, like they do in TV movies, then finishing with the head dropping down to the side, eyes closed, and a melodramatic, "*Ehhhhhh...*"

The dead person would lie there and pretend to be dead, but they would never be able to keep from laughing and laughing and laughing.

So I leave you with this final word:

"*Ehhhhhh...*"

I guess this puts things in perspective. I do regret exhausting so much precious time in this life, but there is nothing to do but move on.

I'm sorry!

There, I said it. May there be just enough moments left to redeem myself, before I get hit by that bus. Time to empty out my brain of useless clutter. Start fresh. Step outside, find some clarity, and see things for what they are, instead of sinking into the belly of frustration and confusion, where our minds are consumed, digested and shat out into shallow graves.

Death to opacity!

Let this be a wake-up call, not just another blip on the radar. As a gesture of good faith, I have this one thing to say:

I forgive you, Steve Bartman.

It's only a game. Life is full of surprises.

Subject: Twelve: Just read it.

From: 5ff0K7764j8Y@1101009009IIoFggbv.com

Date: 17 Apr 2057 16:53:44 -0500

To: gene@genedillon.com

G —

I'm not dead yet.

I'm lying here, concerned that perhaps my advice to you in the last message was not entirely clear. Maybe some of what I had to say is just plain wrong. For that, I apologize. I did my best. It's difficult to focus on things like words.

Besides, if you look to this small chunk of coded information as the only source of inspiration and wisdom for you, then God help you! You're screwed anyway.

Time to just let go now.

Peace.

And there are lessons to be learned in every nook and cranny.

Subject: 13: no

From: p0Ppov4ff5h_99IIuh@bBbbBfg554ft66H6ouu.com

Date: 17 Apr 2057 16:53:46 -0600

To: gene@genedillon.com

I don't want to die.

Apparently, I have a lot of work to do.

Subject: Fourteen: Sorry.

From: cfj77Utxddfz#221@opflkhywii7765Ffers3.com

Date: 17 Apr 2057 16:53:47 -0500

To: gene@genedillon.com

G —

Apparently, I'm not going to die at this particular point in time.

Sorry about all that.

I didn't mean to get all preachy and weird. I just want you to understand that you have every opportunity to live a richer, fuller life than I did.

No sense going back and deleting. Perhaps there is some value in the last words of a dying man.

Things aren't so bad here as I previously thought. I'll tell you about it later. I'm still getting my strength back.

G

How weird is that? What's with the you-me thing going on here? And since when did I become my own Dad?

Anyway, I guess you have to cut him a little slack. Facing death is hard enough, without having to carry the burden of such a monumental stack of unfinished business.

Hmmmm...

Right!!!

December 2003

Selected Emails From the Future — #15

Some days in the Boulder foothills, usually in the morning, a soft crown of puffy white clouds rests upon the tops of the Flatiron Mountains. It's a sight that MOVES you and fills your chest with extra life that is not usually there. Each time I see it happen, I long to be up there, running up the mountain, and diving into the clouds with a big poof. I can imagine the feeling — like a chance to pay a little visit to God.

Such as life is, I can't get up there all that often, and even when I do, it takes a good 90 minutes to get near the top. A three-hour commitment is hard to come by on the spur of the moment when these clouds appear. One time I made the trek, only watch the clouds dissipate before my arrival. I have never made my way up into the clouds on foot.

Until this morning.

The ceiling was low and heavy today. After dropping off the kids, one at each school, for some reason I kept driving, past Broadway, and up Table Mesa Road. It wasn't the awe-inspiring view either. Nothing but white up there. About 50 feet past the final edge of residential, quite suddenly, I was in them. I pulled into the parking lot of the National Center for Atmospheric Research, and began walking up the nature trail behind the lone building on the mesa.

The nature trail winds around, dotted by these little signs that tell you something about weather patterns and precipitation and the brown cloud of Denver. I looked down to catch what is normally a breathtaking view. I saw nothing but blank white. An inch of snow covered everything but the melting footprints of one person, who had long since disappeared into the clouds. A scene like this can sometimes be an assault to the eyes, but the whiteness was calm and subdued, merely wishing to exist and not offend. I came to a fork where the trail descends to wrap around to the West before heading up the mountain to leave civilization behind.

Here, beneath an overhanging pine bough, was a signpost. It was completely covered with snow. I stood for a moment, taking in this vision of a bottomless white abyss, presented to me in descriptive detail by a blank, white sign.

I began my descent.

It was strange to be making my way *down* into the clouds. I thought it might be cool to jump down into them, landing gently in slow motion, like Snuggles the Bear into a pile of clean sheets. But I'm not that cute, nor am I suicidal. I descended the rough stone steps and wound around to that quiet spot on the other side of the mesa, where I decided to stop. The other set of footprints continued on — those of a person wearing decent hiking boots. I had been slipping and sliding in the wrong pair of shoes, and I was kind of short on time. But this was adequate — in this particular spot, the sound from the city is blocked rather well. It was silent and pristine. Looking up, I viewed the next ridge of Austrian pines. Not a blur, but a fog — the whole scene was faded to about ten percent of its usual visual display.

For a split second, there was peace, wonder and perfection — a majestic quiet. Then I began to see these tiny little free-floating specks on the surface of my eyeballs — apparently, they are always there, but you never notice them until they reveal themselves to you, serving only to annoy. And suddenly, I could hear the faint roar of the road, and this pesky little airplane, some wealthy local, no doubt, out on a joyride over the mountains. The pure moment was lost to distraction, and I remembered how difficult it is to find the truth in a fog. It's too confusing — the lack of clear vision.

I was reminded of another time, when I was seeking some kind of a mystical experience up in the mountains. I was 23 or so, and I ventured out, after devouring a quick breakfast in a crappy, crowded car-camping area of Rocky Mountain National Park, to tackle an eight-mile loop with a 2000-foot ascent and descent. I was alone. Michelle had to fly back early to go back to work or something. I completed the strenuous hike up to a truly magnificent ridge. All that exists in creation seemed to be spread out before my eyes, an immense buffet. A mountain stream seemed to be bubbling up from within the mountain — a genuine motherly kind of a scene. The trail hugged the ridge, presenting me with endless delights as I continued on.

And then... there was the blockade. A two-by-four lying across a couple of sawhorses, with a little paper sign that read "Trail Closed".

I was infuriated. The Man again — tryin' to tell me what I can and can't do. I almost went around the little fence, but thought better of it, and sheepishly began trudging back the other way. Over my shoulder I glanced back to see that the trail, and the entire ridge, was completely washed out. All I could think about was the manner in which I would meet my death, if I fell from such a height. I supposed that I would have been impaled on a tree before my head ever managed to get dashed upon the rocks. My eight-mile loop was now transformed into twelve miles of back and forth. I rounded a bend, and then I saw the clouds and realized that I should be concerned about what was causing all that low, rolling thunder. Time to see how fast I could run in hiking boots.

You don't want to standing on top of a treeless ridge by yourself, when the bottom of a thunderhead is only a couple hundred feet above your skull. I didn't make the trailhead in time. I was a human lightning rod, soaking wet, with heavy jolts of electric death coming down on all sides. I couldn't remember what I was supposed to do in such a situation, but I'm pretty sure I wasn't supposed to be running. However, any details of the proper safety precautions to be taken in a lightning storm were probably locked up somewhere in the glove box of my rental car, way down the mountain. All I had was my lizard brain, the fight-or-flight section of the mind which seems to know how to keep a fellow breathing — so I listened to *that* voice, and ran faster and farther than I think I ever had before. The trail back down the mountain revealed itself right about when the storm passed, but I was in no mood to stop. I just had to get off this damn mountain.

There was nobody else around, for about an hour of winding down through the dark reaching pines. I reached an overlook, which I remembered from my past life, four or five hours ago, when I was a happier man. I stopped to grab a token look at the scenic view, without any real interest or appreciation — mostly I just needed to catch my breath.

Suddenly, a gigantic man appeared out of nowhere. He looked like I felt, wide-eyed, sweating and confused. He was about 6'5" and all of 300 pounds. His hair was short, but he looked Native American. We acknowledged each other, and stood side by side, looking out over the cliff, not really admiring the

view, but just trying to get some kind of a grip. As our breathing began to slow down, he looked at me and asked me how to get back down to the parking lot.

Didn't he just come from there?

Suddenly, I was overcome with this feeling that he was going to throw me over the edge of this cliff. As I backed away, tactlessly, I pointed, "it's down this way, take care," and proceeded on, without looking back.

Was he the Spirit of the Mountain? Was he going to *take me* no matter what? Now I was practically running, which is pretty dangerous on a downhill trail. No other humans anywhere to be seen, and still, I did not look back. I could hear the road now. I was getting close. I arrived at what looked a little bit like a fork in the trail, and...

I saw to my right, without a doubt in my mind: *the same scene I had already passed at the halfway point up the mountain...* And the same deranged, sweaty man standing there, staring out at the view.

I froze; turned to my left; and headed down the other path, past a happy energetic family, down to the parking lot, up the road, and back to my tent for dry clothes, matches, a fire and some hot coffee.

I know that this all happened. I have the airline ticket stub to prove I was there. But why do I remember it like it was a dream? Usually such a barrage of supernatural symbolism doesn't manage to find its way into our standard version of reality. Did I really see what I thought I saw? To be honest, the horror of this one thought may possibly have caused me to look away, a brief moment before I could focus my eyes enough to acknowledge the whole scene as real. To this day, I honestly believe that if I took that other turn, I would still be on that mountainside, caught in an infinite loop.

Do such things exist?

They might as well. Human behavior can be a frustrating cycle of repetition. We muddle through life, making the same mistakes over and over and over. We avoid the deeper truths about ourselves and about

life, until we one day find ourselves staring in the mirror, desperate and confused, wondering if we have blown it, or worrying that it's too late, grasping for answers to questions we can't even articulate.

I think of our notion of God sometimes, and wonder what such an all-powerful being must think of so many of us. It must be a lot like watching a car crash taking place in extremely slow motion, spread out over 70 or 80 years — careening toward disaster like a snail crawling 100 miles across highways and deserts, only to end up plunging off the edge of a cliff. If you think about it like that, it must be either the highest form of comedy, or one of the most excruciating displays imaginable.

Thank God we have something pretty to look at now and then.

Anyway, I can't remember why I went up to the mountains this morning. I'm drawing a blank.

Subject: XV: The Flying Dream.

From: fkd kfU76F44rebwq2@lbo999dt5rrr32wWW.com

Date: 17 Apr 2057 16:53:50 -0700

To: gene@genedillon.com

Fatty -

You had a dream once, probably some time between your first and second attempt at being a nice college boy. You were fascinated by the dream, because it was so vivid, and it seemed to be telling you something of vital importance. In the dream, you were out walking with your older brother. You both began jogging as you approached the student mall of your old high school. It was night, and there were some creepy ghouls or something coming towards you from all sides, so you both started running. Your brother was much faster, and was proving himself an obvious metaphor of something more successful that you should be aspiring to. You were in trouble. You looked up to see him riding away on a bicycle that appeared beneath him out of nowhere. He rode off into the distance. In fear and panic of the ghouls who were about to "get" you, you started flying. You couldn't control it very well. You just sort of bucked up and down wildly. Soon enough, you were sailing through the clouds, whether you liked it or not. The town became

a distant grid of yellowish lights fading farther and farther away beneath you. You heard yourself saying, "It's so nice to be up here in the clouds," kind of muffled, sing-songy and happy, but you couldn't see anything but the gray fog of the clouds. You had no idea where you were going, and you didn't care. Suddenly, the clouds evaporated, and you were sitting on a bed in the dorm room of a friend in college. He was studying. He looked up, and said, sternly, "It's better down here."

The dream felt so real that it may have been stronger than any other memory you had during that period of your life. You spent years interpreting and reinterpreting that dream. You even managed to parlay it into a fear of flying. The meaning seems pretty obvious. You were a mess, and you needed to get serious. I think we all feel the same way to some degree or another. They call it insecurity. The nagging feeling that we can always be doing something more. I guess it's healthy.

I just came back to life. It's nice to get second chances — opportunities to do something more.

I'm about to break one of the rules. Since the very idea of doing any of this is a violation of all kinds of supposed ethical standards, I have decided that I do not give a shit.

But this is not some cheap trifle. You OWE me.

On November 1st, 2003, it's going to snow, and the roads will be covered with ice. Don't let your wife leave the house that evening, to take the kids to the mall. Just have everybody stay home.

I have given you a sacred gift. For me to knowingly allow something like that to occur is pure madness. My people back on Earth argued about this particular issue and made a decision. So what? I made another decision. Nobody should have to go through that. As life marches on, the trials of life teach you valuable lessons. An unthinkable tragedy can reach inside you, tear you to pieces, and then put you back together a stronger man than you had ever thought possible. Well, if that is the God's honest truth, then you have to do what I have done. Think, live and breathe every moment with the knowledge inside of you that at any moment, for absolutely no reason, at the height of your greatest contentment, everything you hold dear can be violently ripped away from you, leaving you miserable, tortured and alone. Stand face to face with THAT. Become it. Then, triumph over all the misery, pain and fear, in honor of everyone and anyone

who has ever suffered and died and lost everything they had. When the fog dissipates, you will realize that there is nothing to do but *care*.

So, I've taken the risk and crossed another line. It seems right, and that's the only way I know how to arrive at a decision. I didn't get this far in life by following somebody else's rules.

Our debate centered on the fact that the knowledge of a significant piece of your personal future may change what you may become. We avoid mention of *anybody's* personal future. Let's say a famous leader does some wonderful things, takes a few risks, like any good leader should, and then gets targeted for some kind of a fall, or an assassination, or worse. What if that kid, at the age of 16, reads this thing in 2003, and takes it to heart. Do you think he or she will pursue a career in politics? Maybe. But would he or she take the same risks? Or try too hard?

Then another point came up — can we tell our past selves how they or their loved ones may avoid a meaningless tragedy? It was decided that these events are part of what makes us who we are, and that our pains have been every bit as sacred as our triumphs. It's horseshit, really. The shift in the universe will change the arrangement of moments and events anyway. Perhaps this event was already negated, or another equally terrible event was made possible. I'm not gonna take that chance. Keep them home. Play some Yahtzee.

Relish this gift, if you think you can truly understand it, but keep a promise to yourself. Life is a struggle for happiness. We get content. We protect and nurture what we have. We forget so much. It's natural. But why hug so tightly to a tiny little speck of reality when you can embrace something far greater? See — your tiny little speck is inside a vast expanse. Tend to the universe, and everything will be taken care of anyway — perhaps even more so.

Anyway, I'm feeling a lot better. I'm not exactly sure if they sent me here as a guinea pig or what. Six months of weightlessness for a man my age is pretty intense. An old body has a limited capacity to spring back. Now I'm a sack of mush that spends half of the day in occupational therapy.

As you can imagine, it's possible to get used to just about any smell. I mean, people of your time live near stockyards and landfills. They can't just be waking up every morning gagging from the stench. This is not to say that I don't notice an odor anymore. They've given me a unit pretty far from the compost heaps, which was very thoughtful.

The people here are great. My first impressions were pretty accurate. They *were* annoyed at the burden of 21 or 22 more people arriving to suck up more valuable oxygen. But that was before they took a head-count to realize we were only 14. Less people means more equipment. We brought four more windmills with us, some fixtures and bulbs, plants, seeds — all kinds of great stuff. Their favorite item is the new 300 square-foot annex for the bubble, which was strapped to the top of the shuttle in big flat sheets. These guys were in pretty sad shape, and for some reason, nobody told them what we were bringing, so they were pleasantly surprised. Ecstatic, even. The second to last shuttle was loaded up pretty heavily with some things they needed. That particular spacecraft is still floating. Irretrievable. Communication with the craft was lost, and it's believed that the inhabitants are now all dead. Sad. So, the last 4 shuttles that actually landed on Mars were filled with nothing but people, and it was getting a little scary. Nobody speaks of it, but I have a feeling they were beginning discussions of turning the next transport of people back to Earth. They were downtrodden, and any kind of concentration was becoming difficult in their current environment. Now, there is optimism.

They built the new annex with blazing speed, working outside in their bulky suits with amazing precision. The short tunnel was attached, the hole was cut, and a small crowd of seasoned Martians emptied into the room, jumping up and down, singing "New Room, New Room," over and over and over. People are taking turns just sitting in there, or lying down. A new space, a new smell, a small chunk of progress.

I think we're going to make it, but it's a hell of a struggle. Growing up, we didn't have too much trouble conceiving of what it might be like to survive in a desert or in a lifeboat, desperate for food, water and shelter. We never thought that we might have to struggle to find enough air to breathe.

I expected such a grim situation to be terribly destructive to the morale here, but I'm finding the exact opposite. So far, anyway. I get the general feeling that there is no time to be pessimistic, or that there is

no extra energy available to be wasted on negativity. Why is it that such a concept never took hold during our Golden Hour?

Oop — wave of nausea. They told me to take this as a signal to rest, so I have to stop now. I'm pretty far from feeling "well", and I'm still not certain if I'll ever see better days. I'll finish up.

I don't know why I'm struggling to come up with interesting stories from your past right now. All I can think of are dreams. It just goes to show you how real dreams can be. They exist as memories. And therefore life, after you've lived it, isn't much different from a dream then, is it? Except that you can't really fly so good.

Right before you moved away from your home town of Chicago, you had a particularly vicious nightmare. You and your sister were waiting out in back of your old house for your mother to come out. You were in the car, and as usual, you had to wait for Mom to get all her things ready and come out, which tended to take exactly 15 minutes from the moment you went out and sat in the car. She emerged from the house, and as she was walking along the sidewalk towards the car, a massive bolt of lightning came down upon her head. She ran around the yard, stunned and confused, her hair giving off smoke. I ran to help her. She looked as if she didn't recognize me. My sister thought it was funny for some reason.

You woke up feeling like you were abandoning her. Abandoning your home, your family — everything.

This is how I feel out here — almost every single day. I don't know what we're doing here that we couldn't be figuring out back home, somehow or another. I suppose that's all a lot of pointless thought and wasted energy.

At the time of that dream, you saw the lightning as an act of God. But lightning is a force of nature. We all pay some kind of price in this life, because we are exposed to the forces of nature and circumstance and cause and effect. Why? We don't know. But I'm pretty sure we're here to learn and understand and to figure out how to *know*. Life is not easy. We have to take care of each other. I can't think of any other reason for us to exist.

— Because this is all so very hard.

On November 1st, it snowed in Boulder, and there was ice on the sidewalk out front. I dreaded this day, but I kept it to myself. Michelle has been too freaked out to dive in and read all of these messages, and we don't even really talk about them too much. It's hard enough to just be raising these kids and making enough money to pay our mortgage. So this is my own burden, basically.

After dinner, she decided, for no apparent reason, to take the kids to Flatirons Crossing, so they could play on the dinosaurs there. It had been cold for days and they needed to get out of the house and expend some of their crazed energy. I had to talk her out of it, and she kept arguing, not understanding, so I had to show her this email, and she started calling me nuts, and we had this huge fight after I told her to leave the kids with me and go out by herself. I didn't mean it, of course, but you can't just erase a couple of words out of somebody's memory.

Anyway... We made up. Everything's fine. But she wouldn't play Yahtzee. We played Junior Monopoly instead.

...03h

It's the middle of December and I'm seeing nothing but red. And it ain't Santy Claus.

All I can see is blood. Rage. Rage. Rage.

This warm and fuzzy feeling has stained the snows of each December for pretty much my entire adulthood. It's my grown-up holiday tradition, I guess. Now give me some figgy pudding.

I feel no sense of hope. Year after year, I get a little charge out of a good-sized handful of people who are willing to embrace and spread the message of peace on Earth and good will to all. However, while the ideas hold a warm place in the hearts of so many individuals, I see none of this being painted into the bigger picture. Just when was the umbilical cord severed? How can this betrayal be so complete? The human *being* longs to coexist and thrive in harmony with others on a safe and healthy planet. Why then, is the human *race* so hell-bent on suicide?

I'm worn out from reading all this stuff — not just these messages from the future, but the messages I'm getting each and every day, through my radio, newspaper and television. It's heavy. A knot has formed in my gut, and it seems to have taken on a rock-hard physical form, about the size of a boxer's fist. I'm not used to this. In the not-too-distant past, I regularly skimmed the front page, and tossed it aside in disgust before I would let it affect my mood.

I know that a hell of a lot of people spend a hell of a lot of time saturating themselves with a multitude of diversions — whatever takes time away from having to be faced with the NEWS. If only ALL of us could absorb even 10% of the information available to us on a daily basis, and genuinely take all this news personally, it would be like starring in our own personal horror movie. No umbrella could be made strong enough to withstand the rain of bodies flung from the tops of buildings. No earplugs could muffle the sound of the collective, penetrating THUD of millions of simultaneous heart attacks. No drug could possibly free you from the haunting, twisted expressions of panic and terror on every face that you see.

Perhaps the broader reality is not for everyone. Maybe that reality has been made pretty damn near impossible to digest. And we have so many pressing concerns — an infinite number of things to command our attention. At the current moment, I worry that perhaps I don't have enough insurance, and that the mailman could slip on the ice in front of my house and sue me for a million dollars. I have to fix that hinge on the door of my kitchen cupboard and convince my daughter that it is imperative that she urinates before bedtime. I need to buy more RAM and to take my wife out to dinner more often. I need to do sit-ups and go see that new movie that just came out. I have to go to the fucking mall again. That's just a couple of flakes in one man's blizzard.

We *do* reject the overall state of affairs, and deplore the direction in which the world is heading. Yet, we begrudgingly accept it all as "the way of things" — a bleak future that feels as inevitable as our own death. This push and pull can only lead in two directions for most of us regular folk — madness or apathy. We ignore most of what's going on in the world because we feel we have to — just in order to get by. And because we can. We have that choice. Today, there is no emergency for most of us, no direct threat to our survival.

What else is on? How about something from the future?

I am struggling for a logical way to present the information that I received in messages 16 through 109. Christ, there's a LOT of text here. I feel that it is essential to present a great deal of this material, but much of it needs to be extracted from the mundane mutterings of an old man living in this biosphere bubble. The everyday experience is pretty limited, and the surplus of free time up there has enabled my future self to lapse into "dear diary" mode. I am well versed in the intricate personal details and habits of several dozen regular schmoes who were lucky enough to have all of their moves documented by the crazy old fart in Compartment 23E. And oh, the repetition! Forgive me for any redundancies. I obviously won't have time to edit my entries before I send them off on a shuttle in 2056. I have to muddle through and edit them right here and now.

In honor of these most anguished of times, (the holidays) I thought it would be appropriate to hack my way through this ugly forest and unearth something positive, before I crack up and start running naked down the middle of Highway 36, screaming for help until my vocal cords bleed. It didn't take too long. Number 39 — only about 120,000 words into the stacks. If you think it is too difficult to look around and find something lovely in this world right now, just imagine what these people will have been through.

Subject: 39: Rudolph, the Tip of the Radio Tower.

From: iKKo98873Klyyh@p0o22yUUjbgT667ey.com

Date: 17 Apr 2057 16:54:48 -0600

To: gene@genedillon.com

What if you could go back in time and relive one of the most wonderful Christmases of your childhood? The one when your sister took you upstairs and pointed to the radio tower through the window and told you that the red light was Rudolph. And your Dad rang the jingle bells in the middle of the night and gave a "HO, HO, HO," and you believed it. And in the morning, everybody was happy, and the fire was lit with the real wood — oak, birch and strips of kindling — several years before the Duraflame logs disgraced our home. You opened your gifts and found Rufus, the brown and white dog with the red felt tongue. You guzzled eggnog sprinkled with nutmeg and devoured too many warm tollhouse cookies with the M&M's in them. You danced around to your parents' Herb Alpert Christmas records. Maybe that was the year that your Dad brought home the family's first color television. We christened that TV by watching the Christmas Carol — in black and white.

No, it's not Christmas. It would be pointless for me to write this on the traditional Earth date of Christmas, because by that time, it will be too late. I have to get my files onto a shuttle by October of this year. Otherwise, this has been a complete waste of my time. The Earth day at this moment is March 12, 2056.

Of course, we don't celebrate the traditional Earth holiday of Christmas anymore.

All holidays in the New World Order were restructured about 30 years ago, and condensed into a grand 3-day festival unlike any other. The sweeping changes to our calendar were signed into law by our president of that time — a rather young Southern lady who was a descendant of some guy who died at the Alamo. Included in the bill was a provision to remove Saturdays from the weekend. All told, the bill was said to have boosted the GWP (Gross World Product) by 22% annually with one stroke of the electronic pen. Old holidays were to be observed but not celebrated, meaning that you had to go to work, no matter what your faith demanded. It was weird, working on Christmas, but we got used to it. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Agnostics, and even Unitarians were all invited to lay down their tired, old customs and bask in the glory of a newer, stronger tradition, one that would bring all peoples together, all ages, colors and creeds. The old-world conservatives and religious fundamentalists would stand hand in hand with the capitalists and the free thinkers of the future. There was something for everyone, and the spectacle was unsurpassed.

Pinwheel Daze, they called it.

Each celebration was held near the major urban centers of each region. Caravans of vehicles adorned with lights, windsocks and pinwheels poured into each city from far and wide, making the slow but festive crawl along the interstates, passing hot drinks and freshly baked treats between open windows along the way. Immense, 30-story parking structures were constructed, from which families would climb into blazing-red Humvee limousine shuttles to take them to the local Pinwheel Speedway for the big event. VIP's on the top floor of the garage could head up to the roof to be choppered in by Black Hawk, piloted by a genuine Army Ranger.

The Pinwheel Speedways were generally located on the bleeding edge of the suburban sprawl. "Where there is corn, there is room to grow!" Forests were cleared, and farmland was paved over to make way for the construction of the most enormous, domed, multipurpose coliseums ever forged by the hands of man. Each dome comprised an area of three to five thousand acres, and dominated the landscape like a self-contained mountain range. Detroit boasted the largest stadium of all, having razed the remainder of its downtown business center a dozen years previous, leaving it to revert back to nature as a sort of an unofficial wildlife refuge for packs of wild, abandoned pets and oceanic swarms of pigeons. It is said that on any given Saturday, every college football game in the former United States could be played within its walls, together at one time. Each Speedway Coliseum could hold up to 12 million people. It was the biggest public works project since FDR, reducing unemployment temporarily by almost 10%. And with the gambling revenues, the endeavor was guaranteed to pay for itself before the decade was out!

Upon their arrival, each participant — men, women and children, the young and the old — were strip-searched and bio-tested, before they were allowed to enter the arena. Beyond Security Bay One, the crowds would then enter in total darkness, adorned in elaborate suits of dazzling light displays and EPA-approved pyrotechnics. This was where the people would really check each other out while waiting in line to pay — a thousand bucks per head. After breaching the final bottleneck of metal-detectors, the most prominent families in the region would make a mad dash for one of the 100,000 decent-sized pieces of real estate on the artificial turf at the center of the speedway. Each parcel was auctioned off at an alarming rate by any of the hundred or so barkers on stilts. A family that was lucky enough to land a spot on the turf could then begin erecting a fence around the perimeter and let their dogs out. Each plot came equipped with 220 electric for running portable kitchens, fireplaces and entertainment centers, as well as robotics

and light displays. The rest of us jockeyed for bleacher seats or standing room around the outside of the tracks, and slept in our cars at night.

Wide, glass-bottomed foot-bridges crossed over the quadruple speedway every 100 yards, to enable the best viewing of an unending spectacle of Monster Trucks, Nascar, Formula One, Supercross and Roller Derby. For all of Day One and Day Three, the races raged on and on.

Mobile Starbucks' and McDonalds' units were suspended by monorail, and traveled in loops, stopping at increments above each bridge to dispense the coffees, burgers, fries and McDonaldLand Liquor products to people ordering online from their PDA's. Once you had placed your order, you could expect a delivery within ten minutes. The units would locate you via Lojack and GPS. We all have location chips beneath our skin now — for our own safety. A sort of electronic dumbwaiter would come down to scan your iris, debit your account, and deliver the desired products.

Within the inner supercross track was a canal wide enough for several casino cruise ships to navigate, making frequent stops to let people on and off. Craps, Blackjack, Roulette, Russian Roulette, Cock Fights — if there was something to gamble on, you could place your bets here, with no limitations. The Pinwheel of Fortune paid \$200,000,000 to one lucky worldwide winner per year.

And finally, hoisted up above the vast area of artificial turf, stood a half-dozen roller coasters and a couple of water-slides. I'm sure there were a lot of other things going on that I missed. I had friends who went below to the underground movie theatres and firing ranges. One guy that I know insists that there was a whorehouse available to those in the know, if they required such a thing. If it could be defined as entertainment, this was the time and the place to find it.

All time stood still within the steel and concrete of the Pinwheel Speedway. It was 72 hours of nonstop action. At precisely noon of the first day, (Conception Day) the lights came on and stayed on. Every square foot of the ceiling, the bleachers, the turf, the racetracks, the bridges, the railings — even the forks from McDonald's and the cup-holders from Starbucks — were embedded with dazzling displays of artificial light. There were laser shows, smoke-machines, fireworks — you name it! This was a day for showing up and having fun. Video games, laser tag and virtual wrestling, Broadway shows and circuses... The flood

of luminosity never did let up, and no natural light ever entered the arena, so the only way of really knowing the correct time without looking was by the dwindling numbers of people remaining on their feet, milling about.

Day Two, or Receiving Day, was generally favored the most by all. Again, at the stroke of Noon, the festivities began. An enormous 400-foot robotic Santa-like figure emerged from a massive cloud of thick, purple smoke. It had 13 heads, each of a different ethnicity, and a thousand snake-like arms reaching out in every direction. The bridges were raised, and the races were halted, as the benevolent creature made its 40 laps around the track. Each head swiveled this way and that, calling out Pinwheel Greetings in a different language for each go-around, first English, then Spanish, Russian, Farsi, and on and on, finishing in Latin and finally, Ancient Aramaic. Each of the one thousand arms dispensed an unending bounty of cakes, pies, fudge, pizzas and lasagna, catapulting them gently into the anticipating arms of the people. No soul was left behind. Everybody got a cake.

The glorious beast had no name.

This was a celebration of Getting. Nobody had to go shopping, nobody had to buy anything, wrap anything, or send out a stack of token holiday cards to anyone, not even their Grandmothers. We sat around, and ate and ate and ate. What about presents, you ask? Well, that was easy. In the gathering years previous to Pinwheel Daze, a great many people became so disillusioned with the concept of giving out gift-hints or getting people exactly what they wanted, that eventually the holidays became nothing more than a vast exchange of online gift certificates. Some people began holding special holiday events during which all the partygoers would empty out their bank accounts, and show up at the house with briefcases loaded with cash. They would spend the next several hours passing money back and forth, until everyone left the party with exactly the same amount of money that they brought. The Pinwheel Daze Planning Committee was inspired by this concept, and launched the idea of passing around a huge sack of money with a big green dollar sign on it. The bag held one billion dollars worth of currency. Every single person in the arena would get to hold this bag of money for about 5 or 6 seconds before passing it along. The people were absolutely delighted, and the Sack of Cash became the highlight of everyone's Receiving Day.

Day Three was Giving Day!

This was not your typical "good will toward men" kind of thing. It wasn't about helping the needy, nor was it a time for showing your appreciation to loved ones with thoughtful gifts. It was purely about the representation of one's unique appreciation — a grand display of thanks that evolved over a generation into something rather grotesque — a spectacle that my fellow citizens had come to embrace as a sublime expression of beautiful gratitude.

In the midst of another day of noise, lights and fun, it was a day for the crowning of our Pinwheel King and Queen. Closed-circuit transmissions displayed the contest on television monitors all around the arena. The contestants had to be willing to "TAKE IT ALL IN" — gorging themselves with food and drink until they had reached the point of severe illness. I am speaking of two and a half days of non-stop consumption, packing one's body to a point far beyond its normal capacity, leaving not a single moment for sleep. A contestant would prepare for this event all year long, training the body to cease all of its usual involuntary digestive function until the time was exactly right. Some participants were said to have consumed the "Hallowed 100,000 Calories" during those fun-filled 60 hours, without once sitting on a toilet.

Dizzy, confused, horribly bloated, and overloaded by the sights and sounds that swirled around them, each potential candidate for Pinwheel Royalty was led into a special room, stripped down, shaved, and painted pure white, before donning elaborate, dazzling robes of jewel-studded gold and platinum. At the very center of the arena, lay an enormous, greased, teflon cookie sheet, about the size of a basketball court.

What happened next might seem terribly repulsive to you. The term "pinwheel" was derived from this contest. To provide you with a frame of reference, think back to Roman times, when sophisticated men would lie around, pleasurably gorging themselves, after which they would vomit into troughs, and then go back again and again for more. In other cultures, a long, sustained belch after a meal is the highest compliment one could pay their host. Our own society had glorified consumption as something practically sacred for years and years. Pinwheel Daze was spawned as nothing more than a product of what our society held so dear. Kind of like Las Vegas. The Pinwheel Challenge typified that spirit, and to the citizens of this modern world, the display was far from revolting. This was a demonstration of clear, unchallenged victory over hunger and want. It was highly noble. It was *glorious!*

Local celebrities and politicians sat on the panel of judges. Points were awarded for rotational speed, number of revolutions, and most importantly, the tightness and uniformity of the spin. The two winners would be announced in a very posh ceremony, during which they were lovingly cleaned up by a team of geishas, led up onto tall thrones, and crowned the Pinwheel King and Queen! After the coronation, they were both allowed to reach into the huge Sack of Cash and take out as much money as they could grab with two hands. For the following year, the pair were highly revered and cherished by all, appearing at local charity events, fundraisers and superstore openings.

The losers were hosed off and angrily ridiculed. They were returned to their families in the dull, brown, Peasant Robes of Shame, and were ritualistically beaten with long glowing sticks by their spouses and children as they made their way quickly out of the arena.

Oh, wait. I am forgetting something... What was the nature of the contest, you ask?

The Pinwheel Challenge:

One by one, each contestant stepped out into the very center of the slippery teflon surface, under shockingly bright lights. He or she would dramatically throw off the robe, and lie down, sideways, in the fetal position, in preparation for the inevitable next moment to come. Here, they would begin their entry into a visible rotational spin.

How?

Powered by the spoils of an expansive 60-hour feast. Their bodies were propelled at either end by the sheer force of the materials being simultaneously blasted out of...

All right, all right, I'm kidding!

Do you have any idea how sick I am of writing all this historical nonfiction? It's like not having any dreams. That can be good and bad, apparently.

I am truly, and deeply, sorry.

I was just being reminded of Christmas, because yesterday was a special day here. The Feast of the Bubble, it's called. We just hauled in the biggest harvest in Mars' history. It was great to indulge a little and enjoy a little relaxation.

There's one Bubble Feast per Mars year, which lasts 687 days. Each day here lasts the Earth equivalent of 24 hours and 37 minutes. So we get almost 2 Christmases for every Bubble Feast. But the Feast of the Bubble is much more fun. It's unique to the Mars culture, and it's a new tradition for everyone, no matter what part of the Earth somebody hails from.

Yes, we still celebrate Christmas, but... There are a lot of things we don't have — not that those things really matter so much. In fact, it might have been nice, somewhere along the way, to separate Christmas into two holidays. One would be a heartwarming celebration of giving and caring about each other. The peace on the Earth and the good will toward the men — and heck, why not the women too? Remembering the birth of a saintly man, a teacher who did a lot of good things... This one could be about love. I guess you could still call that holiday Christmas.

The second holiday, to be extracted from the first, could be for lying to your children about a fat stranger who breaks into your house in the middle of the night to eat your cookies and leave behind a pile of toys. *This* holiday can be about getting what you want, and about hurriedly purchasing huge quantities of gifts in hot crowded malls. It can be a time for repetitive songs about somewhat meaningful legends and fictional characters. It can be a season for the release of newer, better movies about Ebenezer Scrooge, Santa Claus, and a magic flying caribou with a phosphorescent nose. It can be about the rekindling of age-old family problems. It can be a time for frantically sending out obligatory greeting cards with your family photo on them. It can be about absorbing as much stress as you can handle — a perfect time of the year for ulcers and heart attacks. It can be about eating and drinking way too much, going to too many parties, and buying a temporary pair of pants to get you through the season. It can be about cutting down pine trees, bringing them inside, and then throwing them in the garbage after three weeks. It can be a time for doubling your electric bill in order to power fantastic displays of lights, the expense of which could equal

the cost of feeding and clothing a dozen third-world families for one year. It would be exhilarating and exhausting, mind-blowing and mind-numbing. We could call it Pinwheel Day.

That would be nice, but the human race never did figure out how to pull off a sub-holiday extraction. So, how are we to celebrate now? We have no conifers here in the bubble — pine trees grow slowly, take up space, and fail to generate enough oxygen. Nobody thought to bring along any holly or mistletoe plants, either. We have no wrapping paper or bows... Of course, we have no presents to give each other, either. We have no money and no possessions, other than our personal effects. Christmas with nothing to give! It kind of takes the wind out of things. We still have the songs and the stories, and best of all, our memories, so that makes things okay. But over time, Christmas has sort of taken a back seat to the Feast of the Bubble. Besides, Mars is not uniquely Euro-American, or entirely Christian, so Christmas was not a holiday for everyone. We prefer an all-inclusive celebration.

I forgot to mention — even the Smiths have been brought into the fold. Matthew, Bill, Jenna, Chuck and Mara. Last week, during a big meeting we were having, (menu planning and some other stuff,) my good buddy, Pain, just broke down and started dragging it all out into the open. These people had jobs, they were spies, but let's face it, they were stranded here with us, and they each had a decision to make. It was time to abandon a life that wasn't real anymore, and to dive into life as a Martian. They all seemed pretty relieved, after they got over the shock that every single resident of Mars knew what they were up to. I was stunned to discover that none of them knew each other, or had any idea what the other ones were doing. So, for much of the time, they were actually spying on each other, because nobody else bothered to act suspicious enough. Their game was tired and pointless. Earth is millions of miles away. The influence of a paranoid government on perpetual red alert is fading into obscurity here. But that's a longer story for another day.

The ex-Smiths have been accepted and forgiven for the most part. Now the only guy documenting anybody's moves in secrecy is yours truly.

As I mentioned earlier, Bubble Day is the only day of the year upon which we are allowed to go ahead and eat to our heart's content. Some people prefer to fast for the entire day. Others call upon their ethnic heritage, and whip up some truly extravagant dishes — within the realm of what we grow, anyway. We

are lacking in the area of spices and herbs. For instance, a tomato is often used as a spice up here. We have gotten used to the subtleties of flavor combinations. Something we may have considered bland in the past can be rather exciting to us now. I guess it's like eating pub food in merry old England, from what I've heard.

In the spirit of the old, familiar holidays, we do exchange gifts on Bubble Day, but not in the concrete sense. Again, we have no possessions, and we lack the raw materials to create any kinds of gifts, even cards or drawings. This may sound like a bummer, but think of it: if you have something to give, it has to be something that everyone can share. It belongs to anyone. Nobody can bogart the gifts or lock them up somewhere — it's impossible. Why? Because of the nature of the gifts. We offer each other stories, poetry, songs, plays... Things like that. Some people choreograph dances or other kinds of performance art.

One year on Mars is a long time to prepare, for the residents who have been here that long. This year was extremely interesting, because of the fact that the oxygen levels are now so high, that some of the vocal and movement restrictions have been lifted. Much of Martian music, for instance, has developed over time into an extremely subtle form of ambient electronica — very rich and intricate, while remaining extremely calm and soothing. A strange sort of throat singing had become very popular, because it was actually a form of meditative, controlled breathing that conserved oxygen. Movements were restricted, and gravity is less here — in the past, you would see all these incredibly thin people putting on these pretty amazing performances of slow, controlled movement, like a Tai Chi ballet or something. Building on these influences with more traditional forms of entertainment really produced some fascinating stuff. My favorite piece was a musical dance number — kind of hard to describe, other than to say it was an extremely joyous performance that had a lot of abrupt, incongruous changes. It was like channel surfing, but with each new channel being loosely related to the last — or like snapshots taken of some kind of surrealistic evolution.

The common areas were a little cramped, and the flora is thick, so it was impossible to actually find yourself within a close proximity of every event. We set up an elaborate system of scheduling and broadcasting everything that was happening. There was no pressure to present anything, seeing as not everyone is comfortable with public speaking or any sort of creative endeavors, so there was plenty of

time to fit everything in. The Feast was well documented, so the offerings are now available for everyone to enjoy, any time they want.

I hadn't had much time to prepare, but I wanted to share, so I gave them a story. Perhaps it was more like the feeling of a story.

Our earliest memories are really more like deep impressions. I believe this helps us to understand the nature of the mind of a child — perhaps it is the key to unlocking some of the greatest mysteries in life. There is nothing but openness and pure feeling, wonder and immediacy.

I was barely three years old.

Our home was glowing. My Dad picked up a real tree from the lumberyard on a bitter cold day. It was decorated with our musty old store of ornaments from the attic — the red dog with the gift on his collar, the felt-and-wire elves, and the dirty-faced angel. There was too much tinsel, and the glow of the colored 10-watt bulbs was intense. Those strings of lights gave off an ethereal, electric odor, overshadowing the scent of pine. My older brothers, David, Tommy and Jimmy, set up the slot-car racetrack, and let me try a few turns. I pushed them too hard, causing the cars to fishtail and roll over 2 or 3 times before hitting the couch. I loved the oily smell of the overheating engines. The smells! The aroma wafting around the house for days on end, tollhouse and peanut butter cookies, enough to keep a family of nine in constant supply. The bells jingled with every opening and closing of the front door. The record player spun the holiday tunes of yesterday's favorite bland pop singers and trumpet players. A fire roared in the fireplace each night after supper. I stared at the peaceful dancing flames. I turned to stare at the big, magical tree. I fell asleep right there on the floor, snug between a sister and a brother. I was carried upstairs and placed in my bed by someone. The next day — more of the same. We never left the house. It was warm. Simple. I was so happy. I don't even remember what the presents were...

Today, I cannot understand how this, the earliest Christmas of my memory, could have been such a purely joyous time. During the previous year, my sister, Patty, died of complications during open-heart surgery. She would have been twelve years old.

I was the baby of the family. I don't remember her face. I have no idea what she sounded like. I don't remember how she must have held me and read to me and helped me get dressed. All I know is that she loved me, and that I loved her — I don't remember the specifics, I just feel it. The unchained mind of a toddler commands a rather quick letting go of the past, but I do know that deep within my heart, I sure did miss her. I miss her terribly. I always have.

How could our Christmastime have felt so completely wonderful to me, after all that everyone in my family had been through? Where was all the anger and pain of loss? What of the frustration, and the dwelling on the past?

All that I can recall was the experience of a rare moment of perfection in a long, long struggle for happiness and joy in this life. That moment lasted for days.

What a gift my family had given me!

Yesterday, I looked around at the happy faces of all my new friends here in this tiny, difficult little world. Behind each pair of smiling eyes, I knew there lurked a past that was saturated with horror. The majority of the people who came here from Earth had not suffered the loss of just one family member. They have lost their entire families.

Disease was unleashed upon entire cities, entire *countries*... Nerve agents and poisons... Broad and seemingly random campaigns of nuclear retaliation were cast upon the Earth — cloud, flame, radiation, cancer... Destruction. Madness and Fury.

It all happened so fast.

So much so fast, that it is easy to block it out and to forget that it ever happened. It was our worst nightmare. Families are gone. We miss them. We regret the horrors and wish we could have died along with them. We wonder what more we could have done, and why we failed to do it. Earth is now nothing more than a star in the evening sky.

All we have left to hold onto are the finest of our dreams and the fondest of our memories.

We are fewer. But we exist. And not one of us lacks the intention and the desire to bring about what is the very best for all of us, during every single moment of our struggle for survival up here. The future remains uncertain. The past is no longer here.

We have each other.

Hope you have a nice Christmas, next time it rolls around.
And may you get through Pinwheel Day in one piece.

G

February 2004

Selected Emails From the Future — #111

Future-Me sure has impeccable timing. It was as if somehow, in the year 2067, my crusty, 99 year-old self could actually see me standing there in front of my Mac, at 3:21 p.m. on January 27th, with a fucking aluminum bat in my hands.

I could taste it.

I moved all my shit out of the way — books, files, paperwork — I even dusted off the desk, and wiped down the lovely plastic components of my system with Formula 409 and a tee shirt with a logo on it from the company that laid me off last year. I sat and stared at my little workspace, pristine for perhaps the first time in three years. Everything was perfectly ordered, but for the severely cluttered desktop imagery. I sat there, hunched over, transfixed by its mess until 45 minutes passed, at which point the system dozed off into its heavy mode of slumber.

I witnessed the slaughter of an animal once. From this experience, I learned how to adopt the most humane approach. In sleep mode, it wouldn't see me coming. It may not feel any pain. I had been pretending like everything was normal all throughout the day.

I figured that if I came up from a running start in the bedroom, I could rotate my body to my right as I passed through the door, enabling a wide, healthy backswing for maximum impact. That monitor — my personal window to a thousand burning hells — *it would be the first to pay for all of its sins*. Seeing it rest in peaceful darkness, I was able to notice how filthy the glass was, having cleaned it with the dirty shirt, so I went to fetch some Windex and paper towels. That was *much* better. But...

Seeing my unstained reflection staring back at me from deep within the beast, Panic raised a disturbing chunk of something substantial in my throat — I quickly moved the mouse to bring the desktop fluttering back to life for one final view.

You can forget about mercy. This is ALL your fault. You WILL see me coming. And you WILL feel pain.

I rolled my office chair through the doorway of my wife's studio to get it out of the line of fire. Seeing the side door to the back yard, I thought it would be a good idea to roll it outside onto the ramp, and hurl it over the railing into the yard. The chair bounced clumsily, end over end, kicking up bite-sized hunks of turf before coming to an embarrassing rest on a spot that consisted mostly of mud and melting snow. Nothing humiliates a piece of office furniture like leaving it outside in the mud. This made me feel proud of myself.

Pride nearly gave way to embarrassment at the sight of a shadow lurking and then bolting stage left through the darkened window of a watchful neighbor's home. I had no time to be pissed off, or to stop and recognize some of the shame that I should be feeling. Back at the other end of the office, the baseball bat was waiting for me, leaning in the corner, like the staff of Moses waiting to scare the shit out of the Pharaoh.

God, I was hoping for some kind of miniature explosion, like a white flash, and a ball of smoke — this would be a major life event, like a scene from my kid's play at school. I could ask my wife to videotape it for me, so I could watch it over and over and over. And over. Maybe a little fire would be nice — it could add a sexy element of danger to the proceedings, as I calmly wreaked havoc on the G-4 and all of its peripherals with pliers, a zippo and a can of hair spray. I wondered if the black, molten plastic would ooze downward, and wrap around the motherboard and the drives, taking on the shape of the innards of the computer when it cooled. I wanted to stick my mouse-pad in the Foreman grill, and bake my printer in a pre-heated oven at 375 degrees for 45 minutes.

I was missing something... I know! Cries of pain! I had the sound-effects disc to pull it off. I pressed play, and began listening to the first of 34 unique samples of blood-curdling screams coming forth from that shitty little speaker.

Poised and ready to perform the first truly sane act of my adult life, I froze. I needed one last fix. Maybe I needed to send off some kind of an S.O.S., praying that one day, 53 years in the future, someone would read MY message, and try do a little something to help ME for a change!

No... I needed to check my email. Because I can't help it. And when this machine is gone, I won't be a bit surprised to find myself at Kinko's or the library, doing it again next week.

Standing now, stooped over, my lower back ached. So instead, I took a knee. Inadvertent genuflection. The third scream ended. The fourth one began, a woman's voice, a real classic horror movie shriek. Get Email, I said. And there it was.

A message. One more very, VERY long message.

I read on, to the soundtrack of a few dozen more screams, each one sounding more pointless than the last. After the last sample ended, I vowed to contact each of the people on that sound-effects CD, and tell them that everything was gonna be okay.

It's a shame. I was really looking forward to giving my mouse to that crazy squirrel in the juniper tree. He desperately needs companionship, if you know what I mean. But it looks like I will still be needing it.

The machines will live for at least one more day.

I had spent the previous 6 weeks doing two things. Hacking through the remaining 100 or so messages from 2057, to piece together a timeline for the future destruction of the world, and... hunting for real estate in the most remote regions of Western Canada.

Perhaps there is an end to futility.

Subject: MESSAGE 111. This is the last one, I promise.

From: gdillon@explodin.arc

Date: 27 Jan 2067 15:21:09 -0600

To: gene@genedillon.com

WELL! Hello there, young fella!

Gene Dillon, here. 2067. They thought I should do this again, so what the hell.

Thought you were finished with me, huh? Well, screw you! I ain't done with you yet. Hah!

We still got work to do. You can start by trashing all that crap I sent you 10 years ago. Whotta buncha horseshit!

So why am I telling you this now? Because I'm an idiot, same as you, same as always. Hah!

Just kiddin'. No science to it, or nothin'. I just figured that it would be a good idea for you to get a chance to absorb all that information for yourself. I've come to realize, over the past couple of years, that we probably made some grave errors. Knowledge of the future is not for everyone.

We all worked pretty hard at being vague about the who and the where and the why, but in retrospect, I'm sure it was all painfully obvious as to who did what. And what good can come from that? If the wrong people read it and take it to "heart", they hatch a whole new thread of godawful strategies to thwart the inevitable. Most likely, they'd just make things worse. Make the destruction more complete.

And what good could all this knowledge do YOU? Or a hundred of your closest friends? It's a clusterfuck of confusion. The history of causes and effects that ruined the Earth and led us here to a new life on the red planet is entirely irrelevant. And I mean that. 100%.

I think I used to spew a lot of bullshit about a break between the human race and the individual. Crap. Total crap.

The human race became sick because just about every single human mind on the planet Earth had become violently ill. There is no group mind without the individual mind. And we had all become so selfish, we'd all been fighting for so long, that when it came time for the human race to graduate to the global stage, one people, all connected, it was like one big insane asylum. Everybody took their battles, their desires

and their ideologies up onto that stage, and wanted everybody perform in *their* play, the one that *they* had written. Ego plays the lead.

Meanwhile, in the century leading up to this grand globalization, our twisted minds had managed to deplete our natural resources, without any real plan for substitution or replacement. Then we stuck a gun into everybody's hands, or the mass-destructive equivalent. All the tools were just there. Toss in a worldwide economic downturn, and BOOM! What can stop it? It's like putting a bunch of wild animals in a cage with no food and water.

So, what do you do? Sneak around, campaign, try to pull this, that, and the other stunt to make the world stand up and listen? Who's gonna believe you anyway? What impact can you make in a world gone nuts, ready to explode?

There is only one way to fix that planet of yours.

It's the evolution of the human mind.

Fix the mind, and you fix the human race. Starting with yours.

You're probably sitting there wondering why you should be listening to this crazy old fart instead of the long-winded, inarticulate 89 year-old lunatic of 2056. Well, let me tell you, I'm 99 years old, and I've never felt better!

I'm in the best shape of my life! If I had you here right now, I'd kick you right in the snack-cake!

And don't you forget it...

Just keep reading. Read it a whole bunch of times, and maybe you'll get it.

March 2004

Selected Emails From the Future — #111: Part 2

By Gene Dillon, 2067, presumably

Gene Dillon lives in the United States of America with his wife and 2 kids.

On April 27, 2003, Gene received over a hundred emails from someone claiming to be himself, 54 years in the future. He is about 99.4% certain that these messages are authentic. The messages were sent from a bubble up on Mars, and offered some advice, along with vague documentation of the future decimation of the human race on Earth.

On January 27, 2004, Gene received another message from himself, this time from 2067, ten years further into the future. The message begins by telling him to ignore most of the content in the other 110 messages.

Gene is relieved, and confused.

MESSAGE 111, Continued...

I woke up pretty late today. I know this because I pissed all over myself. You think you got problems. Just wait. If you ever get to be as old as me, you'll be dreaming of the days when a tiny little ulcer and a big fat ass were your only problems. Remember how your daughter wouldn't wear a pull-up to bed? Yeah. One day, you'll be stubborn like her, and you'll be back to doing laundry every day.

Let's see. Last time we spoke... Oh, yeah.

After I handed off the files to my pilot way back when, I was pretty damn relieved to be done with it all. Sure, I spent a lot of time wondering if I should have said this, that, or the other thing, or if I said too much, or said something "wrong". But that's a waste of energy. However confused I was, my intentions were good, so I supposed that some good must have come from it. Maybe you went on a diet. Maybe you showed one message to somebody, and they gave a dollar to a homeless man the next day. In some way, the universe shifted. We'll never know how, and to what extent. Actually, to be honest, I had no idea if the pilot had ever reached the Sender, or if any messages from the group were sent at all. I was cut off, completely. But I did my part. End of story.

To be perfectly honest with you, I expected to just drop dead right then, having done what I needed to do. Much to my surprise, I kept waking up every day, breathing, and doing other stuff. I stopped

writing anything, or reading anything. I stopped thinking, which was a nice change. I didn't feel like I was of much practical help to anyone in the bubble. I'm too feeble and confused to help out with anything back-breaking or technical. I spent most of my time bothering people and sleeping.

When they asked me for my computer, I was a little shocked, but I didn't give it too much thought. They needed hardware, and I was glad to be rid of it. One less burden.

That feeling didn't last long. Especially when I realized how hard it was to find something to write on, or write with! "Just live," they told us. "Simplicity." "Routine." "Community." "Forget the crutch of technological comforts." They were speaking out of necessity. It helped us deal with the have-nots.

This was driving me nuts. Can history be recorded in the "Captain's Log"? No way. Knowledge comes from real life experience, not statistical documentation. I didn't feel like waiting for permission, so I figured out a few ways to keep track of things. I have 3 books with me. The margins are completely filled with scribbling, made possible with innovations such as pieces of wire, pins, raspberries and flower petals.

I can barely read this shit, but now I have a team of people here to help me out. They're also working to fill in the blanks, and help me remember things that I may have missed. I wrote sporadically, whenever I felt the need.

Here's something from the end of our Year 7, I think, which was around 2060 Earth time:

We're fucked! Oh, well...

Yeah, this is a good one.

At least I'm not in the Alpha Bubble.

The Alpha Bubble is on the other end of the Strip. It's the last remaining secret we keep from the stragglers who are still remaining on Earth or are presently careening towards us as I write, hoping to escape a more immediate and certain doom. After six months of floating to a safe landing, the Earthling has to remain on board and give up the blood and the piss to a guy in a space suit. The location of this new arrival's residence and eventual deathbed is determined within the hour, based upon the numbers detected in these fluids.

Alpha Bubble is a leper colony. A shanty, a refugee camp, or maybe something like a converted school gymnasium or cafeteria where people slept in cots after the hurricane destroyed their homes. Except it's not temporary. We called it Alpha Bubble to make it sound like some kind of a beginning, or like something more refined than our own home over on this side. Here in Beta Bubble, we haven't been able to welcome even one new resident in the last 100 days. The arrivals are showing up a lot worse off than they used to. Earth has gotten messy.

We can see each other through the hazy, buffed plastic, moving around, doing mostly the same

things. We talk and communicate by video. There is animosity among the newer residents, but also understanding. We have the same resources in both bubbles. We work on the same things. But they have overcrowding, and serious health issues. We can't even volunteer to go and live among them. No room.

The worst thing that happens is when a guy flunks by 2 parts per million of some contaminant, or his radiation readings just barely graze the red zone. He can't come into the good bubble. Sometimes he has to say a very rushed goodbye to a dear friend. Then he trudges to the West and ends up bunking with some oozing human glow-stick.

I don't know if they'll stop trying to send ships. The impurities are so pervasive back there, and radioactive material seeps into everything. The air. The clouds. The water. There's no escape. We knew this day would come - you see, yes, they have bubbles and underground fortresses for some of the people back on Earth, but once inside the bubble, you are there for good. Out here, in a couple of hundred years, we *hope*, our descendents will be able to step outside of this bubble and walk on the surface of the planet. Once the last remaining human being collapses in a pile on planet Earth, you won't see bare human footsteps outside of the bubbles and caves for thousands and thousands of years. Uninhabitable, a poison world, it has now been determined, unless you are some kind of bug.

The fascist government I spoke of before - it no longer exists for most people. There are about 200 self-governing fortresses - mostly domes and caves, and a few ships. Communities of 50 to 1000 people. They communicate with each other, but exist in autonomous isolation. These units have one thing in common - defense. Nobody gets close, or they will be disintegrated. Angry mobs have attacked and even damaged some of these units, but they are impenetrable for the most part.

These were the people with all the power, and now they turn it all inward, to their claustrophobic little utopias. These were the people who ran the shuttles to Mars, for the friends and family that were desperate to go, and for the idealists and scientists and free thinkers who didn't quite fit in. Somehow, I found myself to be a person of privilege, but I fell into the latter category, thankfully.

Some of the "insiders" wanted to move out to Mars, but the vast majority, the staunch conservatives, wanted to stay. They came to the realization that it wouldn't be any easier for them out here, and after our repeated pleas to end the migration programs, they ceased the shuttle departures. That is when the last of the bubbles on Earth sealed their doors for good. Just in time, for their sake and ours. With only a few dozen *very* weathered shuttles left in commission, each new flight carried exponentially greater risks.

The rest... 96% of the humans left on Earth are living as you might expect. They are desperate. They are resourceful. They too are self-governing, but more in the "government of one" sense. There is worldwide anarchy outside the bubbles, but also a lot of selflessness, brotherhood and sisterhood. They all have common interests.

They commandeered the last of the shuttles. Some of these groups even built their own ships. Amazing, really. They are welcomed, but you can imagine how difficult it has been. In the 13 years

of the government-run program, about one out of nine ships were lost in transit. These days, one in three of these ships will ever land on our surface. But one last desperate hope springs eternal.

I have a new job. A little payback for puking and passing out when I made my grand entrance here. I'm on the welcoming committee. One of the rag-tag ships made it today, which is always exciting. This thing looked like it was built out of a dozen tin shacks in rural Louisiana. It was huge, and we couldn't believe they made it. The vessel was dirty, grungy and packed to the hilt with good people. About forty in all. This is going to be difficult.

Near the back, seemingly in no hurry to stand up and wait, was a thin, disheveled little man with a long beard. After six months and a successful landing, this guy is sitting there, reading a book, with his headphones on. We're in the process of stuffing ourselves on-board in our radiation suits with our Geiger counters, and our "welcome" is most unwelcome. There's a big ruckus around the hatch, and all of a sudden, the little guy looks up from his book and blurts out, "Yeah, yeah, we're UNCLEAN! Just tell us where we can park this fuckin' thing, and leave us alone!"

Sender!

He doesn't know who I am obviously. I shove my way towards him, like a fat lady getting up to go to the bathroom during a movie. But there is no aisle. Just rows of seats to climb over. I'm yelling out, and people are yelling at me, and he's just looking at me like I'm a complete idiot. Fuck it, I'm thinking — I take off my helmet.

It's good to see an old friend.

It's good to see an old friend...

We can't speak, really. Just a lot of tears. I finally manage to contort my face into a kind of a question mark. He gives me the thumbs up.

Our project was a success. So finally, I know that we were heard.

Sender motioned to me to put the helmet back on, which I did begrudgingly. He stepped over the rows and we embraced, and then talked for a long time, mostly about the situation. He knew that his people would be destined for the Alpha Bubble and had already concocted a plan that was most helpful. Not only was their shuttle quite large, but it had a pop-top. It was constructed not just for space flight, but also for the purposes of attaching itself to another unit. So we rolled it over to the Alpha Bubble and hooked it up.

We said our good byes, but this is not so bad. My friend is just a football field away, and we'll get plenty of opportunities to talk.

Friends are good.

To be continued...

April 2004

Selected Emails From the Future — #111

Friends...

We struggled so hard together, our whole lives, watching every last shred of hope fade with each passing moment. The numbers couldn't lie.

We were in trouble.

The harder we worked to grab hold of this glorious existence, the more our dreams for a future of peace and tranquility would continue to dissipate, fade to black, and be stripped bare.

Survival of the human race up here was no longer feasible. Scientific projections, accurate in the "million-to-one" sense, had us ALL pushing up daisies by now. That is, if there were any daisies left growing in the bubble, which I highly doubted. We'd be leaving behind a hell of a lot of good compost, and nobody would be left to enjoy it.

Back in 7, they were giving Alpha Bubble about 3 Martian years, and that was optimistic. In Beta, we had plenty of problems all our own. I'm drawing on memory here. I avoided documenting the bleak predictions, since they were only predictions, and I didn't want to give them any concrete power. From what I recall, the ability to sustain enough power to keep the bubbles alive would spell out our inevitable demise. We lacked the resources to keep the reactors working. Our solar cells failed us, for the most part. On Mars, we're farther from the sun, and there's too much dust. Dust storms would set us way back, keeping us in near darkness. We could harness the wind power, but the ruthlessness of the strong, gritty winds brought some really heavy damage down on the equipment. Some days, we would wake up, look outside, and see nothing but empty space where one of our windmills used to stand. It was like everybody lost a kidney. Nobody knew when the end of human existence on Mars would come, but everybody was fairly certain that it would happen during a month-long dust storm.

You want to know what used to really bum me out, to no end? The source of all my nightmares, really... It was all speculation, of course. What would happen, what would people *do*, as the end approached? I worried most about the Alpha Bubble, because they had to stare across the runway at us, in a comparative paradise here in Betaville. We would outlast them. How would they feel? How would *we* feel? I don't think there's anything much worse in life than these kinds of choices. It's like choosing which of your children... I can't even say it. Alpha Bubble was a huge fucking mistake. We should have all been in this together from the start.

But they're both bubbles anyway. What do bubbles do, exactly? They *pop*, don't they?

Bubbles don't last.

We all go through life feeling so secure. But every precious life is no more than a bubble floating in space. We don't know when, we don't know where, but the bubble meets its end in an instant — of that we can be sure. We wear out, we lose the force that holds us together, or we float into a lovely bush covered with red, red roses... and that's it.

Why do we grab on so tightly? Why do we take so much for granted? What is the point of all these strategies and hopes?

Hundreds of little plans were hatched in the name of Prolongation. After well over a decade of the thrill of the will to survive, the Prolongation Initiative was truly lacking in any thunder. Over half of the projects were focused on how we were going to "vacuum" out the Alpha Bubble and make the best use of it after all those poor people perished over there from the juggernaut of disease that enveloped them.

Faith was beginning to fail us. An entire race of thinking, breathing and loving people were now being shown the door. From a "Master Plan" perspective, it was simply unthinkable, that God would write this final chapter and close the book for good. Not the God we think we know.

I think we all needed something a tad stronger than a frontal lobotomy to keep a sunny disposition around here. Or something on the level of pure, unbridled genius to rise above it somehow. Not everybody wasted their days dreaming of squeezing an extra 100 days of life out of the bubbles.

Did she know what she was hatching?

Friends...

Let me tell you about a close friend, who I shall call Maria. I think I did a pretty good job of recording this part of our history. Takes up the margins of a half of a novel here. I guess this is also from somewhere around the end of Year 7... I don't know. That doesn't matter.

Most people wander around here, going about their business with this unmistakable look on their faces. The closest description that I can give to it is that it's the face of a good friend or relative at a funeral. Sad, friendly, sorry, always reaching out... In a word — *compassionate*. But there's something missing. It can be tough to embrace a compassionate nature when there is so much overwhelming sadness, weaving in and out of every thought, every action and every conversation. Our days our numbered.

On a personal level, I suppose that we have all come to know and understand death to varying degrees throughout our days. But piled on top of this, the most profound riddle of our lives, we are also facing the extinction of our people, the final curtain call for our species... The regrets are unbearable. Wrap all of these thoughts into a tight little ball and cram it into your skull, and you really have something there. Yeah. Once again, we created something new for ourselves to experience, didn't we?

There is Earth. I can see it now, just before the dawn. Hazy dot. Our foundation, or rock... Our *jewel!* An infinite flow of nectar and ambrosia, it was, if we only knew how to take care of it, and how to take care of each other. This was what we had for a home. *Paradise!* It was divine. And here we are now, on our knees, just begging for a few extra meaningless moments, locked up in a stuffy vault on the surface of an arid, airless frozen desert planet, millions of miles further away than we used to be from our warm and wonderfully bright sun.

Yesterday, we officially renamed our new planet. No more will we make mention of Mars, the god of war. Some people were strong in the notion of calling this place "Home", but most of us found that to be far too disrespectful of Mother. The best we could ever, *ever* hope for up here was an environment similar to Antarctica or Mount Everest. I mean, let's be honest. We decided to call our planet "Arctica". A little piece of Earth — even the very worst part of it. We'll take it.

Our funny little moons, Phobos and Deimos, would have to be renamed as well. "Fear" and "Panic" are now "Love" and "Wisdom". Yeah, it's corny, but it sure is nice to have Love passing overhead 3 times a day.

Damned if Maria doesn't ever have "the look". She's a lucky one. I know she's not even pretending, because she doesn't do that. What is her secret? The truly odd thing about it is that she's phenomenally smart, a real intellectual, and usually these kinds of brains bear the burden of the most intense negativity. Driven by logic and practicality, a mind like this can be driven to the brink in a place like this. They understand quite specifically and statistically, just how terrible things are about to become.

But Maria's in a class by herself. She's the best.

Genetics. Maria's thing, from the day of the landing of the second shuttle here on 1.021, has been to improvise and develop in the area of plant life. She has performed admirably, developing flora to keep us breathing and eating well inside the bubbles, working tirelessly to improve on the food and oxygen output of each and every crop. To Maria, this work is only a trifle. Two centuries of knowledge — from Gregor Mendel to Dolly the Sheep and beyond — all this stuff is just second nature to her. Most of her time and energy is focused on building a future for a people whom, by all other accounts, will no longer exist. As the sun begins to rise, I gaze through this curved, opaque wall behind my pillow, out into the fuzzy horizon, where I see deep, dark green vines, reaching out beyond my view. I see blue-black grasses. I see mosses and lichens of burnt orange and crimson, speckling the rocks. The air is thin, the ground is as dry as a bone, but Maria has been getting it done. A fabulous start.

Most days — scratch that — every day, Maria spends between 18 and 20 hours a day working and studying, after which she passes out with her head on the table in the dining hall, and I wake her up and

send her to bed. Then she goes back to work. So when Maria requested the opportunity to make a highly relevant presentation to all of us, toward the end of one of our sickeningly depressing Prolongation Summits, we were all ears and eyes.

Maria confidently took the "soapbox" that serves as our podium. No PDA, no notes, just Maria, in brown coveralls, made to stand now at a regular height, up from her usual four feet and eleven inches. Her thick black hair is almost completely shaved clean upon her head. "I can't be bothered," she once told me. She paused to gaze into the crowd with those deep, dark eyes — she always looked people straight in the eye when she spoke to them, and even now, she wanted to make sure that everyone was accounted for in her immediate view.

She prefaced her presentation with a series of calm, matter-of-fact comments that just shocked us all into helpless oblivion. I don't know why... I don't know what we were expecting...

For those of us who had been hanging on to our last glimmer of hope in the depth of those shining eyes of hers, imagine our devastation upon listening to Maria's admission that she too, held on to no hope for our survival. And she said it with a *smile!*

Is madness the answer?

If so, I'll take some. *Yeah.*

No. Who knows what was lurking in Maria's exquisite mind, but I don't honestly think anyone could have come close to predicting what was about to happen. Not even her.

This was Maria's brainchild:

"If WE can't survive up here, let's create some people who CAN."

When Maria said, "CAN", I had this intense flashback, vivid like a dream, but almost as real as being transported back in time — back inside the mind of a tired old man, floating freely inside this space shuttle,

this *tin can*... I had so much hope inside my head, back then — a genuine vision of some kind of a future. We *can* build a new life. The potential was there, inside each of us.

Suddenly I was back, and I hoped that I didn't miss much.

The rush of ethical puzzles burst forth into all of our minds like a dam just exploded, tossing us helplessly upon the surging whitewater, rapidly downstream over rocks and big branches. So daunting was the onslaught, that nobody could manage to utter even a single word.

Standing like a lighthouse on the shore of a sea of pale, confused faces, Maria held the floor for as long as she was able to shine forth with a steady, sweeping beam of ideas and reasoning — one deeply profound concept on top of the other. This was a clever strategy that kept all possible voices of opposition off-balance and unable to get any kind of footing until she had already completely extinguished all doubts. Her argument was rock-solid. She was mindful of any and all questions of a moral and spiritual nature, leaving practically no issue untouched. When she had finished speaking, not a sound could be heard but the grains of sand pelting the dome by the millions. Several minutes passed. Maria sat down now, on the box, waiting for some kind of a response from someone, *anyone*. About five more minutes passed. Maria stood up slowly.

"So... Shall I go ahead and get started?"

And... Nothing.

A strong gust pummeled the side of the bubble from the West. Our cover was now turning into a dull, reddish-gray lid, closing us in for God knows how long.

"I'm going to go get started."

And she left us there. Footsteps on a metal walkway, brushing past plastic sheeting and thick, lush foliage... The sound of her ordinary movements faded behind the curtain of the Genetics Lab.

Now let me get this straight...

She wants to create a race of "hybrids". Human clones that are able to photosynthesize and survive in a thin carbon dioxide atmosphere, which, by the way, is also very cold. She assures us of her success. We have a dozen species of insects thriving via photosynthesis outside the bubble already. Two weeks ago, she placed the hairless, leathery green mice outside. Yesterday, they were tested. No ill effects. On the contrary, they are doing extremely well.

We are out of time. We have to begin NOW.

I'm dizzy.

I have to ask her more questions, but I don't know what the questions are yet. She seems to have supplied us with all of the answers already. The biggest question is of course:

Why?

"When we are gone, what record do we leave of what has happened here? Will a future civilization find a pile of dust and nothing but questions? How can we be so ignorant as to believe that any future civilization could possibly understand what we have done, and how to avoid it? If we were unable to survive here in peace and harmony, then we owe it to whoever should grace this solar system again one day, at the very least, to pass along the wisdom we have gained from our failures on Earth. I can think of no better way than to let the knowledge survive inside generation after generation of living, thinking minds..."

What an outstanding leap in logic!

I wish I had recorded everything she said today. I think most of us left the meeting having been depleted of any "why" we had left in us, leaving us with nothing but a big "WHY NOT?"

I can't help but wonder — what if we had said *no*? Well, I guess I know what, we'd all be decomposing right about now. Food for a few worms, bugs and plants.

Maria's an angel. She left Guatemala for MIT at the age of 12. No matter where she was working, she always managed to keep her family safe and out of trouble. Her parents died of natural causes — a rarity over the last couple of decades — but she was able to bring her brother and two sisters out here, making them the largest extended Earth family to have made it up to the Arc.

People hate it when I call it the Arc. They think I'm talking about the Ark.

What I'm talking about is an *unbroken piece of a circle*. A bend, a curve...

Unbelievable, what can happen in just one year here. This was written in the beginning of Year 9, about 2062 back on Earth:

We don't really police each other up here. I mean, what's the point? So when Maria told me what she had been up to, I was surprised, but not really. Back on 7.591, she was ready to go. Four days after leaving that meeting, she was already dividing the embryos. Each fertilized egg would be — I don't know the terminology — injected with new DNA, and then split between 3 and 5 times, yielding between 8 and 32 zygotes. Of 96 potentially viable, genetically altered clones, 23 healthy hybrids survived the speedy 134-day incubation period.

This was a true marvel. The hybrids were loaded with so many modifications, it boggles the mind of every scientist I talk to. We simply cannot believe the level of success.

Today is their birthday. One Arctic year old, and what a party! These kids are a real handful. I've lost the rest of my hair trying to keep track of them. It's like herding cats.

Maria sped up their early development. Not just mentally and emotionally, but these children are growing like weeds! That's photosynthesis for you. There is growing concern that we'll soon be living in the land of the jolly green giants, but Maria has assured us that their growth is going to halt in another 20 to 25 days, after which their bodies enter a sort of a basic sustenance phase. They may add several pounds and another inch or two over a 50 Arc-year life span, but very, very gradually.

So I'm a little confused by a number of things. At this stage, they are supposed to have the mental capacity of a child the age of 6 Arc-years, or roughly 12 Earth-years. But they do not speak. This bothers Maria tremendously. They are extremely bright. They learn things, they seem to understand everything that is being told, and they even know how to read, write and do math. They have a rapport with each other that appears to be entirely intuitive, like a very complex language of subtle facial expressions. Maria confided in me about the genetic makeup of their brains. "Part Einstein, part Gandhi, part *me*, and all perfection." The last part confuses me, but I guess she knows what she is doing. It's mostly theory, but Maria feels that she has a pretty good sense of the physical makeup of the perfect human brain. So there you go. They *are* awfully smart. 687 days old, and moving into Algebra. Yeah, I guess she knows her stuff.

Another bizarre issue has surfaced, though, and some folks are pretty pissed off. It's about their appearance. Okay, Maria needed to compensate for life on the surface out there. They aren't quite ready to step outside yet, but they must go out there eventually, and soon. Of course the surface of their skin required an unusual color, in this case it is a bluish green, as a result of the strain of chlorophyll required to transform sunlight into food in their bodies. They are appropriately hairless and their skin is tough. But there were a couple other things. Maria says there are boys and girls, *sort of*, but they look pretty androgynous. I haven't gotten a straight answer there. A Genetic "first run" like this can yield some unusual results, but I'm not sure that I'm getting the whole story. Will they need to clone themselves to perpetuate the race?

But the biggest surprise of all was in the eyes. Maria made efforts to darken and enlarge the eyes to account for the diminished sunlight on Arctica, and strengthen them against the perils of the dust and the sand outside. The eyes looked strangely familiar, upon birth, but now, it's pretty clear what we are looking at.

These kids look like the Roswell Aliens!

Can you imagine having a couple dozen little green aliens running around your house, getting into all kinds of trouble? Mostly, people keep questioning, why she would design them to look like this? As far as I can tell, it was unintentional. Pure coincidence.

Maria is embarrassed as hell, and she feels kind of bad, but she's making a very strong effort now to see to it that this does not affect the way people think or feel about the hybrid children. They are a part of us. They are very much human. In Maria's opinion, they are much more human than most of us.

They *are* wonderfully sweet kids.

May 2004

Selected Emails From the Future

Yeah...

I spoke to a friend of mine in the biotech industry about the feasibility of something like this. He declared, "In 60 years? No fucking way!"

I don't know. Stranger things have happened. Necessity is the driving force behind huge leaps in evolution — both biologically and technologically. Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, the evolution of science merged with the gradual, natural processes, resulting in a transformation that continues to astound, at an exponential rate.

This is technology. Danger lies in waiting, hidden in the brush of good intentions. But here is a case of the best intentions, driven by a lack of alternatives.

You remember the lightning bug contests? Some call them fireflies. We called them lightning bugs. Lightning bugs were really nice little bugs. They were the only insects other than ladybugs that I would let crawl on my hand or my arm.

Lightning bugs also had the unfortunate blessing of illumination. They looked cool when they died. We had contests on summer evenings, Andrew and I. Each of us armed with a yellow wiffle-bat, we would wander around the yard and down the alley, murdering these bugs, and keeping score. When you hit one, it's light would stay on, streaking through the night sky like a shooting star. "COOOOOLLL!" we would exclaim. We would see one struggling on the sidewalk for its last breath of life, and we would stomp and drag our dirty converse sneakers, to make a luminous, yellow stripe on the ground, which would glow like that for about a minute before it faded. The hunt took great skill as the darkness fell more completely. A lightning bug would blink every 8 or 10 seconds, and then disappear. I would see the flash, then run to that spot, waiting for my prey to again compromise its position. Another blink, a quick, mighty swing,

and "THIRTY-EIGHT!" I would call out. Around 9 o'clock, they either stopped searching for their mates, or we had managed to kill them all.

I have boiled live snails, and put them in purple dishwashing liquid. I have stomped out colonies of hundreds of ants. I set fire to a spider. I have swatted mosquitoes, and from time to time, have caught them on my skin, unawares, squeezing my blood into their hungry snouts until they exploded. Countless moths and one small yellow bird have met their untimely end on the windshield of my car. I returned a cat to the Anti-Cruelty Society, because a car accident had apparently left her with bowel-control issues. Did they put her down? You don't think a cat knows what's going on, but the life went out of that cat, and she stared at me blankly as they carried her off. She knew what I was doing, and so did I. Ignorant.

I regret every meaningless death I have caused. Every hamburger, every fish stick, every spider that may have been resting underfoot when I slammed the garage door shut. A society can sometimes emerge that is lacking so much in respect and reverence for Life, that such an uncaring attitude can become commonplace. This is not a culture.

We endeavor to do our best to put an end to thoughtlessness. This really can be a fresh start for a new people.

I loved helping to raise those little babies. So gentle and kind. They also looked so frail — we worried so much about losing one of them, or all of them. This was an experiment, after all. Each of them was incredibly thin, and although they had grown to almost 4 feet in height, they seemed to weigh no more than a cat.

I always found it to be true that we can all learn from our children — that our children are great teachers in some secret, profound way. Untainted innocence. At the very least, any parent is able to learn something by moving beyond his or her own childhood and taking on the responsibility of guiding the next two or three generations. But these kids were special. We really did learn from them. They radiated warmth. They were stable, unshakable. Something in the genes, or... I don't know... Something divine?

More from Year 9:

The hybrid children are being educated quite heavily. It's refreshing to see young people getting such a charge out of learning new things. Although they lack speech, it is clear that they have understood and retained every piece of information that has ever been presented to them. The amazing thing is not just how they have been learning — it is how they assimilate the knowledge and fit it in with everything else that they already know.

And creative! Good God — the other day, five of them approached me with a drawing that they had made together. At a moment's glance at this marvel, the tears were streaming down my face. I looked up, and they just smiled at me and walked away. I'm looking at it right now. It is beyond intricate. Layers upon layers of immaculate geometric patterns, all blending so cohesively into an overall composition which is... yeah... Wow! Seen from a distance, it is an exact likeness of my face. What a treasure — one of the greatest gifts I have ever received.

I have halted my attempts to try and quantify the capacities that the hybrids possess at such a young age. Their approximate mental age in typical human Earth years is around 14 right now, but they are just a great big bunch of Einsteins, Mozarts and da Vincis, so measuring their abilities is kind of pointless and strange. This is a new species — *homo arcticus*, to be exact.

Imagine your own emotional age at this point — yeah, the terrible two's. They haven't been around long enough to experience and understand much of anything. They should be screaming, throwing tantrums and testing the limits of decent behavior. Nope. None of that. These kids make me feel ashamed of my own childhood.

Next month, they will be completing their instruction at the level of a graduate degree at a top university. Up until the end of the high school level of education, which ended — this is so confusing — around 150 days ago, they were kept together, and each and every student excelled at a miraculously equal level. After this, each child began to receive a more specialized instruction. Often their fields of study would overlap, and they could take some classes together. For their spiritual education and training, the entire group remained together.

Spiritual education sparked a long, loud and ugly debate while the hybrids were still floating in their tubes. If there was one thing we could all agree upon, it was the fact that a combination of religious dogma and political power was disastrous for the human race. It was one of the top reasons why we were all dying in a bubble up here right now, rather than sipping piña coladas on some beach in the Caribbean. I raised the simple argument that political power has always been backed by some kind of ideology, whether religious or not. The "opiate of the masses" can be utilized to generate feelings of hatred and self-righteousness toward others, but when this is happening, there are usually a lot of other factors involved that allow this negativity to ripen. In that environment, a twisting of the dogma can occur. The darkest chapters in human history were preceded by eras of economic hardship, or periods during which one race or group of people was suffering and downtrodden, and needed to lash out in some way. In such an atmosphere it was a lot easier to find somebody else to hate, so up rises prejudice. Ruling powers could toy with the concepts of right and wrong, or us and them, in order to move their people in the directions they wanted. So don't blame religion. Blame the manipulators of religion.

At the core of just about every tradition, we found common ground — this ground is the antithesis of all the negative uses of religion. This is what we focused on. We stripped away vengeance, guilt, passion, and any of the "one true religion" nonsense, and boiled everything down to one flavor — Love, of course. One whole spiritual philosophy derived from the best of them all. I suppose you could call it Unitarian, but there is a depth and intensity to the training that is derived mainly from the eastern traditions. There are a lot of special practices and meditation.

Maybe the hybrids will grow to understand something that most of us obviously missed. Walk the walk. This is the whole point. We have millennia of knowledge and wisdom behind us, much of it long forgotten and ignored. Our kids will receive the benefits of all of that deep thinking, hard work and sacrifice. They won't be watching TV, eating a lot of candy, and running around with huge plastic water cannons that can shoot fifty feet.

Imagine a young Isaac Newton. You would probably picture him immersing himself in "rational" scientific thought, even at a young age. We wondered how the kids, with their super-brains, would react to any kind of instruction in things that rely heavily on faith without any concrete proof. Well, they have taken to it like a school of goldfish to a pond.

Most of their lives, they have been doing this now. The day begins in the meditation center. The peace that pervades the atmosphere, not just in the meditation area, but in the entire bubble, makes it feel like a monastery in the far reaches of old Tibet. We were fortunate to have several meditation masters join us up here, so the instruction is exceptional.

Early in their training, the hybrids indicated a desire to allow our natural children to join them. And just recently, they invited their professors, and some of the top scientists like Maria, to join them as well. It's pretty crowded in there, but nobody seems to mind.

I noticed something extraordinary happening yesterday. First, a little about our "system" for keeping track of each kid — this may sound strange to you, but the kids do not have names. It's something that came about rather spontaneously. It seemed right, and nobody really spoke of it. The hybrids are identical in every way, and up until a few months ago, there were absolutely no differences in the way that each of them was treated. There is logic to this. Equality. I have to admit, there were some regrets. We didn't want to create some kind of master race. I suppose there was no time to assign differences to each one. On the bright side... we have this pure equality thing between them, and at the same time, they accept the homo sapiens as their family, just as we accept them as our own children.

Having a lot of scientists around the bubble is a blessing and a bit of a curse. Folks are pretty lax and absent-minded about certain things, because their minds are so focused — we have a lot of clutter, and a lot of people saying, "So what?" to each other. The system we have worked out for the kids, is that they were each assigned a field of study based upon which bed they slept in. "You — Astrophysics. You — Aerospace Engineering. You — Biochemistry and Genetics." Anyway — this is what I just noticed yesterday:

None of the kids went to their assigned classes. They traded places.

Today, I decided to watch them again. Perhaps they are unique after all? Did each of them decide on a different field that was best for them?

No.

They all traded places again. It's like they choose their classes randomly.

What game are they playing? I haven't heard of any lapses in the momentum of their knowledge and learning. How...?

Have they been doing this all along?

I might just keep this to myself. But I'll be keeping an eye on them.

These little ones are full of surprises.

June 2004

Selected Emails From the Future

Since we went to the digital calendar up here, the concept of weekends got kind of screwed up. It's always been work, work, work, anyway — there is no day of rest. Gradually though, the ninth day of every "week" began to evolve into a bit of a recreation day. We still toiled away, but for fewer hours, so there was a lot more joy involved in our regular, mundane activities. Midway through the afternoon, we would take a little time to fool around, play some music, swing on the big swings, or whatever.

I remember how the children would sit together in a group and just watch, with huge grins on their faces. They didn't seem to care much for play, but they certainly enjoyed watching the rest of us having fun. Maybe they didn't get to see us smiling all that often. Our joy was their joy.

Such a different world... I remember my own weekends, growing up. They were always the best — action-packed! You'll never forget this one:

You and Andrew were allowed to spend Saturday mornings watching professional wrestling and monster movies on channel 44. We basked in the radiance of the black and white behemoth in the basement, as it flickered and hissed its way into our lives. Quality programming seeped into our soft, little skulls like red Kool-Aid into a white Sunday shirt. This wasn't just entertainment. No. It was a new frontier of possibilities for our minds.

We had no shortage of heroes and villains — Godzilla, King Kong and Dick the Bruiser were among our favorites. After taking in a fine film or a particularly bloody wrestling match, we would always act out the best parts of what we had seen. We didn't normally bring in any props or foreign objects, but on one particular Saturday afternoon, Mom had just returned from the Jewel with about 50 bags of groceries. Andrew grabbed one of the stiff paper bags and put it on his head.

To a boy of six or seven, this new beast was strange and intimidating. He was too tall, and seeing as my brother had not taken the time to fashion a couple of holes to see through, there was not a face. A monster with no face was really disturbing to me. His head — big, brown and rectangular — crumpled loudly as he moved. These incidental noises compounded the terror induced by the equally frightening sound of a muffled roar that was coming from deep inside the bag.

It came at me, again and again. It wouldn't stop. I couldn't knock it over.

This monster was going to get me! It lunged at me one more time, with a sinister growl! Giant claws whipped through the air to grab at me and tear me apart!

I reached back — he couldn't see me, so this would be easy — and taking careful aim, I punched the monster as hard as I could, right in the middle of his brown paper face. With a loud whack, the monster's head took on a big dent. Several creases fanned outwardly from the point of impact, like a deep, dark sun, shining on nothing.

The monster fell.

Apparently, this was no monster after all. It was my brother, and he was sprawled on the floor against the couch, sobbing. Mom ran into the room and removed the bag. There was a lot of blood coming out of his mouth. I felt bad.

I didn't mean to...

Andrew screamed, "You did that on PURPOSE!"

I did NOT! We were playing monster, and Andrew had the bag on his head, and I didn't know his face was in there, and...

"You're a JERK!"

...and he was grabbing me and hitting me! He wouldn't stop. I didn't do it on purpose. I couldn't see his face! I was just... He...

"Go to your room!"

That was Mom.

This was Andrew's room too. He would get even with me for this, so I had to be really careful for a while. I really did feel terrible. We had never hit each other in the face before. But I was only hitting the monster. He didn't even have a face.

I had never seen so much blood. I shouldn't have punched him. I don't know why I did that. We were only pretending. I wasn't thinking.

It seems like that's when all the trouble would start. Those times when I wasn't thinking. I've got to ask Maria for the statistics — you would always hear a number called out at a party or in a coffee shop, way back when. "People only use 3% of their brain capacity." Sometimes it was 5%. As a child, I am guessing that I made use of about 0.8% of my brain. Those numbers probably slipped a bit when I entered college. Whatever the number, it's a damn shame. We're a bunch of apes.

The hybrid children were sooooo different. I remember, in their formative days, how the kids really knew how to make use of a significant portion of their genetically superior brains, from the very beginning of their lives. What perfect little minds they had! They actually never cried, even as babies. I would say that their potential was absolutely scary, but that just isn't a word that ever applied to them. Even as innocent, developing children, they never harmed anyone or anything. It never entered their thoughts, because they seemed to have been born with the skill to remain in control of themselves before resorting to doing or saying anything harmful, which to them was apparently downright illogical.

In the following entry, the hybrids had fully matured. Secretly, we knew that they had surpassed all of us intellectually, in every way. It was time to let go.

How can I describe their intelligence?

I can't, because I can no longer relate to them on so many different levels. All of the scientific education is fine and good, but they are also getting so much more than this. They are taming their own minds, to get everything they can out of them — and to become good people. They are accomplishing this through their spiritual training, which is comparable to the upbringing of the Dalai Lama — it's an experiential education in wisdom and compassion. They are a peaceful and happy bunch of geniuses, with hearts of gold.

I worry a lot. I don't know why. Maybe I'm just going to miss having them so close. What if they fall prey to an unknown toxin? What if the carbon dioxide levels are just not sufficient enough to keep them going? What if a gust of freezing air or a cloud of sand just overwhelms them all at once?

God, I could go on and on and on. These kids are loved. I can't stop calling them kids. Compared to them, I have the mental capacity of a squirrel monkey. I should have no doubt that they will be able to handle any crisis that comes their way. It's time for them to leave the bubble.

Yesterday, we had a huge meeting, and for the very first time, I almost detected anger among the hybrids. They were told that only two of them would be allowed to step out onto the surface of Arctica in twelve days. The rest of them would stay behind — we could not risk losing all of them at once. It was pretty awful to think that two of them would be taking an unequal risk, but it was the logical thing to do. They protested, and left the meeting all at once. They do everything together, and wished to share every burden together as well.

They really have grown up.

The place is really buzzing. All efforts are now being focused on monitoring the kids... Ugh! There I go again, thinking of them as children. "Hybrids" just doesn't sound right. It makes them sound like pea plants or something. I know what to do — I'll refer them as "People" from now on, with a capital "P" to avoid confusion.

Anyway, everyone is pretty exhausted, getting all the equipment in place, running wires, setting up cameras... I'm terribly exhausted as well, but I can't sleep a wink. The moons are pretty close together tonight, giving the bubble a nice fuzzy glow. I'll be giving my pen light to one of the "People" next week, so I won't be able to read or write in the dark anymore. Perhaps in another 20 or 30 days, I'll be sleeping easier anyway.

I'm hearing a few other people stirring in their beds tonight, too. We've been working pretty hard, so I can't imagine who else might be awake at this hour. Oh — I see... It's not people — it's People! Poor little guys. They must be worried sick about heading out there. I know that they will be especially concerned for their two siblings who have to leave the bubble first.

Wait... They're ALL awake! Amazing. They are barely making a sound. They are definitely up to something.

Now they're heading for the door! Oh, my God! This is beautiful!

Most of them are carrying water. Some of them are carrying drilling and condensation kits, and a few odds and ends...

I had to stop writing just now. They have been gone for about twenty minutes, and I'm just getting over it...

I had been poking my head out through the flap as they passed before me, about 30 feet away. Quite suddenly, all 23 of them at once turned towards me, and looked me straight in the eyes for a long, long time. I opened the flap and sat up. Their gaze penetrated my very being. Remembering my own children, I blew them a kiss. Then, the strangest thing happened. They all reached out into the air, and pretended to catch my kiss, and slap it onto their heads. In unison! Then they all blew me one.

I kept careful count, reaching with both hands in turn, grabbing all 23 of the kisses flying though the air, and slapping them gently onto my big old, bald head. They waved and I waved, and then they walked out into the airlock and left this place, together for good.

I'm so proud...

But wait a minute. How did they know?

The kiss-blowing and catching ritual — this was something that we did with Cooper and Emma when they were very young. Every goodbye and every goodnight, we did this thing. Frankly, it was a little embarrassing when I had to do it in public, but it became a ritual that they absolutely insisted upon. I'm pretty certain that nobody has seen me do that since Emma was in kindergarten.

Maybe I... No. I have no idea how they...

Okay, I'm stunned. I don't know whether or not this confirms some of the suspicions that Maria and I have had — they know and understand far too much for a species that lacks the skills with which to communicate verbally. We wonder about their level of clairvoyance. Are they telepathic? Can they read minds? It certainly would explain a few things. How can we know unless they decide to tell us?

This is a new species. Anything is possible. I'll have to figure that one out later.

I'm so glad I was awake to bid them farewell. All of the worry has left me, for some reason. I trust them.

I do believe I will go to sleep now.

...

I awoke this morning to a hell of a lot of noise. Boy, are people pissed.

They have rigged up a speaker outside, and people are taking turns begging them to come back, for one reason after another. A couple of the more "aggressive" members of the bubble are putting on suits to go out there after them. We managed to pinpoint their location — they're hanging around outside the Alpha Bubble, right next to Sender's Annex. They're on the big screen now.

Wow! There they are, out in the bitter cold, in the thin, carbon dioxide atmosphere of our new home planet, just sitting on the red, dusty ground under the bright morning sun. Naked to the elements! They appear to be meditating. I guess they are okay after all.

The "Rescue Team" is outside now, trudging across the compound, bogged down by their cumbersome gear. They are about halfway there. I cannot imagine what they think they can accomplish.

What's this? HA! Suddenly, all of the People just stood up, and calmly began walking off towards the right. The Rescue Team is attempting to run, which looks absolutely hilarious. Finally, they are giving up. The People are standing out there, about 500 meters away, just staring and waiting. The Rescue Team is returning now. The People have begun to head back.

They have resumed their positions around Sender's Annex.

They're fine. Let them go.

This is the message I'll be trying to spread around here over the next few days.

Let them go... Geez. I guess I had sort of lost sight of the profound nature of this moment. These People are our future. Our future has moved on. Our future has left us, without permission.

Will they come back?

Of course they will.

Let's hope we have raised them well.

July 2004

Selected Emails From the Future

As the days passed, a pile of torment filled the bubble like something you might find inside a gigantic toilet that could never, ever flush again. I cannot describe these times. I would rather not relive them. So — since I'm old and privileged, I'm gonna be an asshole, and let one of my assistants transcribe this entry for me. Take it away, Bill!

I never did benefit from the "luxury" of spending any time in any kind of a retirement community or nursing home. When economies collapse and entire cities shut down, folks tend to consolidate and take care of each other more directly, and with more sincerity. A prevalence of death generates more respect for life, especially for the lives of those closest to the end.

This place IS The End. The kids left us — not as kids, no... They were fast-tracked to adulthood. They have left this shell behind to spread their wings and fly — to find their higher purpose... and all sorts of horseshit like that. A glimmer of hope for the future of a civilization, and all that crap.

They left the egg. We die in it. We were never even born. A robin's egg falling from a maple — we wait for the sickening splatter, a once great and hopeful race, accelerating toward the concrete. A brief twitch, and then we begin to stiffen and rot. As the days pass, our aftermath will evolve from the pungent and grotesque to a condition of ordinary refuse, and eventually to tiny bumps on the landscape of a couple of rocks near a star.

I shake my head, lips flapping, yada-yada-yada, like Bugs Bunny, and try to contact a tiny speck of something positive...

I can't... remember what it is. All I know is how much this sucks.

Some day soon, the calendar will mark a new day... No... There will be nobody to actually write it down. Ummm. Perhaps we can assign it to one of the robots. Yeah. As the last one flat-lines, mark the hour, the

day and the year — because I'm sure that will be important to some alien race that will dig up our fossils one day. Yes! I am sure that one day, an advanced alien race will find it so important to dig up our remains, and figure out when the last one died and how... If not them... Arctica will want to know. This planet. Mars... Whatever it used to be called before that. Whatever it wants to be called in the future. This planet should know about how important we all thought ourselves to be. It should know this and spread our legacy.

What was I... the day! Yeah. Right. The exact moment of our extinction. We are the new Neanderthals. We get to all be dead. What an honor that must be!

Guess what? One of our young men died recently, in an unfortunate accident. You know what's been done? He was carefully preserved, encased in some kind of stuff, and labeled with an engraved metal plate, complete with a drawing, and the words "Homo Sapien, Male" printed after his name. We'll do the same thing if and when a healthy female meets her untimely end.

What a great idea!

Don't look at me like that. Everyone here is lonely and bitter. We miss our children. Yeah. That's kind of a big deal. See, they were everything to us. Everything we have been doing for the last couple of years centered around them. Now, we are back to doing what we had all been up to before this huge and elaborate undertaking had begun. Dying!

With all the negativity permeating all the nooks and crannies, if we actually had nooks and crannies, I can tell that a lot of people secretly resent *their own children* for their freedom and their surplus of remaining days with which they can be allowed to... I don't know — *breathe!* The People stop by, rarely, occasionally, but far too briefly. All the harsh feelings tend to melt away quite completely for those few short moments. "*I see two of them! They're coming! They're here!*" And rapid efforts are made to tidy up and to shave, and this side of the airlock looks like the front doors of that Who concert when all those people got trampled and died, trying to get the best seat in general admission.

Our kids always came calling with long lists in their hands. Any visit generally meant that they needed something. Vital parts and equipment. "Dad, can I borrow the rover for a couple of months?" "Hi Mom! Gosh, it's great to be back from college! Here's my laundry. I'm gonna go out with my friends."

We gave them anything they wanted, no matter what the cost to our own longevity or comfort. GOD, it was good to see them. They were still so sweet... but unfortunately, they never remained for even a second longer than was required, despite our best efforts to stall them.

Then, another special day came and went. 9.509. There was just one little Person standing there, with a pretty short list on his PDA. A couple of tools, a small amount of fuel and water, and a hard drive loaded with obscure volumes of science, scripture and philosophy — basically a library of anything they didn't already have, including a lot of stuff in Tibetan and Sanskrit.

Good kids. Still wanting to learn.

I was on the can.

Had I known, I would gladly have risked an embarrassing accident.

They didn't say goodbye or anything...

Ten days. Twenty. A hundred. Our failing instruments lost track of them after 18 days, as they made their way, far away, some place apparently more hospitable. On the far side of the planet, in the vicinity of the big canyon. It would have been nice to know what they were thinking about doing over there. I bet it's gorgeous, anyway...

I never get to go on vacation anymore.

Shouldn't I be nothing short of ecstatic for them? They're alive! They're okay, and they're making choices, and they seem to have some sort of plan! I expected peace and relief.

I hurt.

We are finished.

Maria wants to start again. That trip won't work on anybody. No way. We lack the resources and time. She argues, admittedly against her own better judgement, that even at the age of 500 days, this new perfected hybrid group could survive us — but that's a departure from the original plan. We didn't just bring them into the world. We gave them education and training for their survival, and a sense of community and history, and all kinds of things — our best. Our best is what we gave them. We simply cannot do this again. Nobody is going to get thrown to the wolves. That kind of Darwinism is past history. Maria just can't think of what else to do with herself.

We have a least one arc-year left here. Two, tops. Where's the big "Oh, Fuck It All" party, huh? If these people want to be dead, then why don't they just step outside and start walking down the Strip? Save me some of the oxygen you're wasting. Slugs. Remember all the scenarios — what would you do if the bomb was coming — you couldn't escape, and you had 30 minutes left? What would you do? Buy the 30 year-old scotch, grab hold of your woman or your man, and have a big blowout party until everything starts burning! This place sucks. Why don't they let me go over to Alpha? Let's just speed this thing up already.

As a high-ranking morale officer, I find myself incredibly busy with my duties. At this point, my job is to keep people from killing each other and themselves. As a high-ranking morale officer, I have to constantly remind myself that it is actually a *good* thing to keep people from killing themselves and each other. Getting along? Please!

Today, I'm going to take a poll of everyone who will let me speak to them. Can you even stand the sight of anybody else anymore?

Unanimous! We all hate each other!

Once, I "had to" put a cat to sleep. That humane little gas-box. She knew what was going on. She looked me straight in the eye. Her normally lively, energetic little body was limp with nothingness. Why did I do that?

That's us, having done it to ourselves — if we had enough mirrors, we could all look ourselves in the eye with sickening resignation. Instead, we look at each other — everyone sharing equal blame for this. And instead of a couple of humane, painless minutes to the big slumber, we have hours and days and months on end, to contemplate the terrible finale, and live in a state of prolonged execution. Death Row, The Green Mile and the Gas Chamber, all at once. The only fun we seem to have these days is when we pass a "friend" in a corridor and call out our new, familiar greeting:

"Dead man walking!"

"Dead man walking!"

Or "dead woman" or "dead kid" — yeah. Humor is at pitch levels. It beats hello and tends to generate a smile, which is an awfully rare sight lately.

I have nothing more to say that's worth saying.

I wrote these words 220 days after they had disappeared.

Happy birthday, kids. The big TWO!!!

Are you okay? Why doesn't this planet have a fucking communications satellite?

Can't see into the Alpha Bubble anymore. That last sandstorm was so brutal. So brutal... I doubt that we'll survive another one. I *know* that the Alpha Bubble will be done for when the next one hits. They composted 140 over the last 20 days. 292 remain. We lost 4, leaving 521. But Damage is the beast that will devour us all.

On the far side, we can only assume that there are 23 left. You are smarter than we are. There's no way you would have been fool enough to fall prey to the elements. We trained you quite heavily on this. Most likely, you are cave dwellers, generating full spectrum lighting off of the wind power.

I wonder if you remembered your own birthdays? Or care? You don't really eat any solids, so the cake thing won't live beyond us here. We floated little candles on bowls of water for you last year. You liked that, didn't you?

No need to drag this out. Without dredging up the memories in too much detail, I'll just tell you that for almost 2 Earth years, I slept a lot, and struggled to find some peace in my soul, and to help others in some small way to do the same. It was hard. It took everything we had. All of the pillows were rough with salt. Efforts to find the kids were abandoned, eventually. We couldn't afford the resources to look for them. We tried to survive for as long as we could. Our numbers dwindled. We checked in with Alpha Bubble for status reports. No communication was coming back from any of the underground settlements on Earth.

I wrote nothing during this period. Zero. Just a lot of thinking. And non-thinking. Working with my mind. Trying to make things better.

Things were plodding and plummeting like all that, until one highly unusual day. It was 10.544.

Maria is pregnant.

She came into my compartment to tell me all about it. She told me plenty of things today.

As long as I've known Maria, she's been a loner. Her manner is extremely off-putting and confrontational. Men are therefore intimidated, and although over half of the geeks in here are secretly in love with her, nobody comes near her with a ten-foot pole. Needless to say, news of the pregnancy was a shock, and before I could vocalize the word "who", she interrupted me quickly, and said, "Oh no, no, no. I did this to myself!"

I just stared at her blankly. I don't get it. No, wait. Yes I do.

"Superkids?" I wondered.

"Yep. Quadruplets. All from different families, so they can breed. Two boys and two girls. They got genitalia!"

"But how are we going to..."

"I don't think you get it. We're not going to die..."

"Wait a minute." If she could put sex organs on these, then why not the others? "Why can't the People out there reproduce without test-tube cloning methods? Why didn't you let them have... Isn't that cruel?"

"NO!" She blared, eyes rolling. "The People aren't just people. They are scientific monks, they are spiritual geniuses — they are masters of both logic and imagination, and best of all... They are equal in every way. They cannot know competition or prejudice against each other. And when they decide to give birth to the next generation, I guarantee they'll know the science better than I ever will, and their children will be exponentially more efficient and well equipped. They just can't have intercourse, I guess. But they don't need to, and probably don't want to. Their minds are beyond the pleasure of that kind of intimacy, which if you think about, only leads to trouble and distraction anyway. This generation needed to be focused, not muddled by divisive emotions. They'll give the next generation what they think it needs. If there is a place in their future for lust and jealousy and protrusions and holes..."

"Okay! I get it!" This woman infuriates me. So many secrets. Nobody gets a chance to argue. Then I remembered, "Wait — what makes you think we're not going to die?"

"Yeah. How crazy is that? None of these inanimate lumps in here have bothered to notice what the hell's going on out *there*." She looked at me coyly, "I've got a secret!"

"I know... What... Another one?"

"Well... Maybe more than one. To put an end to the last topic of conversation, if we had a cat, you couldn't swing one without hitting a pregnant lady around here." She's nuts. How can she get away with this? Who's supposed to be paying attention to what she's doing?

Oh, yeah. We're too busy dying miserably.

Maria flipped her PDA out of her breast pocket and pulled up a photo. "What? I can't really see this. What is it?"

"Taken by a rover out on the surface — I think it's some kind of a cow. Or a giant yucca plant with four legs and an udder."

"WHERE? WHEN?"

"Who cares? It's a fucking cow! There must be more of them. And look at what she's doing! She's grazing! This is some kind of foliage — here, and here, and probably here."

I had no words.

I had no words.

"Gene..."

Maria smiled, bug-eyed. And then she pointed up.

My eyes followed the curve of the bubble to the area that obscures the dull, dusty orange-gray sky, a place I seldom bothered to look anymore. You may as well stare at a toilet seat or at the inside of your own eyelids in the dark. The view never changes. Especially when the sandstorms have been pummeling the view for hundreds of days. I knew things were clearing up, because the sun-blob had been brightening our days and heating up the bubble lately — much-needed relief.

But what are those?

"What are those?"

Maria... What are those?

Random shapes. Floating. Floating in the sky of Arctica.

So huge, they knew that they belonged.

Body limp, I collapsed, and lay on my bed staring through that fuzzy dome for immeasurable moments of blissfulness. My vision blurred beneath clear pools of joy, which were blinked away to make room for more.

For more clouds...

Maria took the place next to me, her head pointing in the opposite direction, and who could resist doing exactly what one is supposed to do? "A duck playing surf guitar." "A grizzly bear with no teeth." "Two nuns on holiday in Rome." "A frog with a beehive hairdo."

A thousand years later, Luther interrupted. "Phone. It's Sender." I reached for it without looking.

"Hey, G. Uhhhh..." Sender sounded confused, for probably the first time in his life. "I got a question for you."

"Did you get a visit from the milkman last night?"

August 2004

Selected Emails From the Future

The milkman took care of the Alpha Bubble first. But we got ours, eventually. A nice thick glass of cold, whole milk. Having been gone from us no more than 687 days, the good People of this planet had already come back to nurture us, the helpless babes stuck here in the incubator. And they have begun to come back into our view, gradually, unceremoniously, just sort of hanging around. They seem to really be working their asses off.

One day, finally, one of our little children came in for a visit. Amazing — he was all business. I figured out why they don't ever bother to visit — I mean, they are friendly, they love us, they look up and wave, but I am guessing that their intelligence prevents them from indulging in anything unnecessary, and we have nothing in here anymore that they require to help them... Or is it to help them help us? I just had to know the purpose of this visit — Maria tells me that "she was taking samples — blood, stool, urine..."

Sure sounds medical. I got to spend a few short moments with him... or her. We need a new pronoun. They appear to be holding up very well — their skin is a bit darker and very tough. Their personalities have changed very little — they are playful and serious, thoughtful and dedicated, open and creative. Very wise, obviously — you can just sense it. I am beginning to feel truly awe-stricken in their presence... but at the same time, so comfortable and so connected.

(Some 160 days later.)

Today, I rise, the smell of eggs frying in a skillet. They bring us these gray-green eggs, from who knows what or where, and good God — we're lighting fires in here, torching our precious oxygen! We've been informed that we can do things like this now. They have hooked us up, somehow, with a seemingly endless supply of oxygen tanks. *Clean air!* I'm not exactly sure what we had gotten ourselves used to — I guess anyone could live in a port-a-potty if they absolutely had to, but now, when I wake up bright and early, I sit up and I take a nice deep sniff of morning air. When I draw back the curtain of my compartment, I find

a lush and wonderful greenhouse, not some oppressively skanky prison, overgrown with sickly gray weeds. It no longer smells like the inside of somebody's ass in here. I look forward now to the first morning light of each and every day.

The pregnant women in the bubble have outgrown their standard-issue clothing, and lacking in an adequate supply of maternity clothes around here, they have taken to wandering around barefoot, in makeshift white togas — like some grandiose fertility goddesses, strutting around on some cloud above ancient Greece. Maria is gigantic, being the only one carrying quadruplets. She's letting her hair grow, and cannot keep from fashioning herself a fresh green laurel for her head every morning.

This is a different place now.

The eggs are for the goddesses — still a luxury. They need the extra nourishment, and there's nothing better than eggs. But, OH... Maria gave me a bite this morning. Over easy, with a sprinkling of ancient Arctican sea salt.

Mother!

Slightly runny, still hot. The smell of a Sunday morning in 1974. The taste of the entire family, all nine of us sitting there at the table before church, windows raised, the breeze drifting in through the screens from the thicket of lilacs on a perfect day in spring. Not corny enough? Okay — The Carpenters are playing on the radio. A loaf of toast, mine with creamy Jif. Seven glasses of milk and two cups of steaming hot coffee. Mom could make the most perfect eggs. Sunny side up, exquisite. I never saw her break a yolk, not even once in my entire life.

I do so like green eggs. And ham? No, they haven't dropped off any ham. Nobody has spotted any swine-like creatures out there. Not that such a thing would be offered anyway. This is still a vegetarian planet. But we're happy to break from the vegan diet — our bodies have benefited from the protein and the calcium in our milk rations immensely. Even the cholesterol, and believe it or not, the trace amounts of e. coli, and other impurities. We had all been growing pretty weak and thin, and our bodies lacked any and all of the helpful microorganisms that had helped to sustain us throughout our biological history. Heavy

doses of strong antibiotics were required to escape the stampeding diseases on Earth, and to get up to this new planet safe and clean. The result was a whole new set of maladies, sores and digestive inefficiencies.

I think we can be certain that our little geniuses knew what our bodies needed the very most. Where they located materials for the breeding of these cows and phantom chickens is anybody's guess. No sense speculating. We'll find out soon enough. But there is one hard fact that we can be sure of:

They have saved our lives.

The Alpha Bubble has been getting regular visits from a group of three "doctors". Sender calls them Dr. Howard, Dr. Fine and Dr. Howard. They have worked wonders, and have brought the sickest residents back from the very edge. It was very sad, the hit they took during the last wave of storms, but they're out of the woods now. For the first time since that bubble was taking occupants, there are no longer any deathbeds set up in there.

Our little People have come back now with far more regularity, hanging around all the time, watching us, and caring for us. It almost seems like they are on some kind of alert, ready for something big. They've also been tending heavily to the plants right outside, in our area — some of the most extraordinary plants that we have yet to see out there — I daresay that these plants are actually *lush*, some with wide, dark green leaves, and extraordinary bulbous blossoms of indigo and magenta. We are dying to get outside in our suits and look around, but we no longer have the means to send out a team — just a couple of solar-powered rovers on the ground with cameras. The rovers have been rolling through some of the fields, along sculpted winding paths through the crops — I bet it's gorgeous from the sky. There is so much foliage now, that the rovers aren't getting very good views.

Yes, I said crops.

How can they be doing all of this? We've been trying to keep track of The People as individuals, but it's just too difficult — they are still quite identical, and they move too fast. We realize how special they are, but to be doing all that they are doing... There aren't enough of them out there. It's impossible. Isn't it?

Something is happening. More tomorrow.

(Tomorrow...)

Yesterday was a whirlwind. I was in the dining area, talking with Maria. She looked kind of crappy, and said that the babies were kicking like maniacs, and she couldn't keep anything down. Quite suddenly, we realized that we were surrounded by five of the little People from outside. This was strange — we hadn't gotten all that many visits in our bubble, and certainly not from this many. They looked up at Maria, and guided her calmly and quickly to Sick Bay. It wasn't long before we knew what was happening. Maria was in danger, or one of the babies was in danger — with quadruplets, women never go to full-term, and Maria was close to seven and a half months, in traditional Earth terms. We have a medical team in here, but the emergency c-section was performed artfully and flawlessly by these five medical professionals. Their skills were so magnificent, that our team eventually knew that it would be best to simply step back. Maria was frightened and worried — yes, the first time I had ever seen these expressions on her face — but they soon calmed her down, way down. One child after another, blood-smeared and perfect, was raised up to meet face to face with their mother. The first was struggling from the cord wrapping around her neck two times, but she suffered no damage, amazingly.

How the five little doctors knew... Well, I think we know the answer to that, even if we can't quite comprehend it.

YEAH! Two identical boys and two identical girls — odd... Four brand new, bouncing baby humans. Human beings...

That was a shocker, but it explains the gestation period... Maria impregnated herself with regular old human beings. I decided to wait a few days for her explanation.

She had some babies to get to know.

(More passing of happier days...)

I'm not spending much time writing now. I'm helping out with the little infants. There is little else for the residents of the bubble to do inside here anymore. We are being well cared for. The People even concocted some formula out of lord knows what, but I'm sure it's some kind of perfect nectar for the growing babies. Breast-feeding four babies is a lot to ask, even for Maria, but she still gives each of them a chance throughout the day. Everyone is sharing the responsibilities, and Maria genuinely considers these to be *our* children, rather than hers. They are to be raised by the community — much in the same way the People were raised. With one major difference, though — it will take a lot longer.

Yes, these kids are regular homo sapiens. When I asked Maria so long ago if this was another batch of superkids, she replied with a yes, but that was just her way of saying that these children are perfect just the way they are. Most of the other women employed the age-old method of pulling their goalies — halting their birth control. Maria and two others were artificially inseminated. They chose from "good stock" — that's all she would admit to me. Maria never expected quadruplets, actually — that happened quite naturally.

One by one, the women are going into labor. Some have had tough deliveries, and others were natural and uncomplicated. All the babies are healthy, and the mothers are doing well. The bubble is teeming with life. Screaming and crying. Quiet music and the singing of lullabies.

But why? Why did they all decide to take such a pointless risk? They all became pregnant long before the first rain clouds appeared. At that point in time, we were living under a dark cloud of dusty death.

Dreams.

Dreams? Surely, she must be joking, I thought. But then Maria told me what was happening back then. All at once, back around 10.400 or thereabouts, quite suddenly all the young women in the bubble began having vivid and powerful dreams. They began to confide in each other. Each of them was having the exact same visions, right before waking up every day. Was this to be considered something of a *divine* nature? Or was it something of a nature that we all suspected — the extraordinary telepathic abilities of

our children? We hadn't seen any of the People in so long, but it seemed that they were communicating from afar.

This might sound a touch disturbing, but the dreams were wonderful. The women were filled with secret optimism — I remember this. I recall the mood. And I remember this happening, right about the same time when I had started letting go myself, and accepting our fate as something that was just going to have to be okay — wait a minute... I remember having dreams then too. Maybe not so vivid and strong. I can't even remember the content. I just remember feeling at peace. I was waking up feeling a bit more content, without knowing why. I chalked it up to a resignation and an acceptance of our fate.

But the women... They had visions of paradise. The most common theme was one of gushing water — a powerful geyser surging forth, straight out of a hole in the middle of nothing, like the mother of all things giving life to the world, where there was previously none. All around them, as far as they could see, was a fragrant and luminescent garden. In the dream, they would find heaping cornucopias to the left and to the right, filled with mysterious and exotic foods, and they would gently reach their hands into these, and eat, and eat, and eat — *ambrosia* was the only word they could use to describe it. And they drank from cold, clear pools, and swam naked beneath the water, coming up for a deep breath of air that was so rich and so sweet that it would jolt them clear out of their slumber. And at this very moment, sitting up in bed, they could all feel within them a deep, indescribable urge to bring a child into the world — a world where their children would not only survive, but also thrive.

The visions were so powerful, that within only four or five days, the women had all made up their minds, conspiring to agree that they now had a golden future ahead of them, and that it was time to procreate.

And now that I think of it... Weren't there more than a few happy and contented faces on some of the husbands around here during those days? Yeah. Lucky bastards.

Oh, what's the use of documenting any of this, any more? We are alive, and we are living! I spend every moment, thanking every individual, every deity, every saint and enlightened being — for bringing us to this amazing point in time.

Every day, it seems that there are new surprises. The People have supplied us with corn and green beans, and a great many more eggs — enough for everyone. Some of them are almost the size of ostrich eggs. And now, we no longer have to wonder where the mysterious fowl may be located, or what they might look like. The eggs are being harvested from the plants just outside the bubble. Some sort of fruit? No. This is something entirely different. These plants are part bird, or perhaps even lizard.

Of course!

The People are made up partly of plant components... So it's logical that they would connect with an idea such as this. To them, life is life. A carrot is like mother's milk. An apple is like an egg. We consume only what is given to us, and respect all living things, both flora and fauna.

I'll never eat alfalfa sprouts again.

In other news: *Oxygen levels have been rising exponentially.* Will they level off? This was supposed to take 200 years, at least, if it did in fact happen at all.

Any day now. Soon, I really think we may be able to leave this place. And it won't feel like climbing Mount Everest, or holing up at the South Pole. I hope I live that long.

That was the last entry in my notes. I became very busy, delightedly busy, holding babies in my arms and feeding them bottles, and watching them smile at me.

Then one day, I received an invitation.

September 2004

Selected Emails From the Future

*The People of Arctica Cordially Invite You
To Attend a Planet-Warming Party
On the Date of 11.111
At 5.00.00.*

Directions:

Exit the Bubble.

An Escort Will Be Provided.

Dress Casual. Expect Cool Weather.

Supplemental Oxygen Is Not Required.

This invitation was sent to me. Me, alone. Why, I don't really know.

All right! I get to be the guinea pig!

Not really... We had been monitoring the conditions out there like day-traders watching their stocks in the late 90's. There was stuff out there to breathe, but the levels still tended to drop on windy days. Things were also heating up. What we had out there was fast approaching the conditions you might find in the alpine tundra back on Earth. Soon, our home planet would become more livable than the top of Mount Everest and warmer than most summer days in Antarctica — but far more lush than you might find in a comparable climate on Earth.

We had 100 days to prepare ourselves, which required no effort whatsoever. They had, in their obvious estimation, just 100 days to stabilize this planet for good. We waited and waited and waited, in a perpetual state of shock, and a wet-your-pants kind of anticipation.

We knew what was happening. A complete transformation was taking place at a dizzying pace. Of course... This was completely illogical. With nothing else to do, we spent the hours wondering... How?

None of this could be possible without a hell of a lot of water — at least a thousand times more water than could possibly be extracted from the ice or from sources beneath the ground. Did they become masters of some sort of alchemy? *Dust goes in, water comes out...* There is no clean water left on Earth. Did they devise a filtering process? Or did they go to the asteroid belt and haul back some ice? And with what? Massive ships? Wouldn't that require years of mining operations, followed by factory construction, and then... See? None of this makes any sense.

The plants and animals could be explained, somewhat — this was an extension of Maria's work. But... where did they get the raw materials? Seeds, plants, animal DNA... Available, perhaps, but on such a grand scale? And what techniques were used to crank out these fantastic mutations in such a short period of time? Theories generally bordered on the ridiculous.

This *was* ridiculous. I didn't waste my time with it — didn't have the energy. We would find out soon enough.

11.111 — an interesting choice of dates. If this were a purely digital number, we'd be looking at 5 positives. I would step outside at noon on the digital clock: 5.00.00 — another 5. The People have always taken more than a passing interest in patterns and numerology. To them, it seems like something beyond suspicion and coincidence. It's all about order. On our calendar, this date would be the 11th year and the 111th day since the first living human beings landed on the fourth rock from the sun. In Earth years, it would be our 21st anniversary up here, precisely. And speaking of Earth-time, the strangest coincidence of all — it would be my 99th birthday.

I don't know what any of this means. Probably nothing. I don't believe in luck. Perhaps the day appeared to be auspicious, and we'll just leave it at that.

My birthday... *Our* birthday! "Let's crack this fuckin' egg," I kept telling everybody.

Time for a new life. May we all get it right this time.

I wanted to record this moment. So I did. I know that we Sapiens are pretty hung up on history and documentation, and so often we neglect our obligation to fully experience the moment. "Capturing memories" — what does that mean? Why not just *have* the memories, and then pass them along to others later? Otherwise, context and feeling is lost, and truth is diminished.

The problem is, I have a terrible memory now, so I decided to tell one of the AV guys to rig up my glasses with a video camera when I wasn't looking — so I could tell *you* about it, without forgetting anything. This would be a big day for you and me.

I actually did forget about the camera, as planned, so it didn't taint my experience. Best of all, I am able to view it again, right now, and connect with these short, precious moments once more. Here's how it all went down — I'll try to put you into the action as best as I can:

Inside the bubble on this morning, I'm terribly nervous and excited. And a little surprised that I didn't croak before the big day, leaving them to find a quick replacement. I'm wearing the same shit I always do — loose-fitting, hopelessly stained white shirt and pants, but with thermal underwear beneath, for the cold — it's about 7 degrees centigrade out there. I don't want gloves or a hat — brisk, I can handle.

Hugs and congratulations all the way to the door — I run the gauntlet, I kiss babies, I hear joyful snuffles — mostly my own. Still a big blubbering idiot, whenever I get the chance.

I had asked for music to be piped into the airlock to calm me down — or to make things worse — I don't know which. I picked the first song on "Clouds Taste Metallic" by the Flaming Lips. It's an old favorite of mine, although I have no idea what the song is called — we don't keep CD's and cases around — it conveys something about how it feels to accomplish a thing that is difficult. And best of all, the second half of the song is this loud instrumental sort of an anthem, with a couple of noisy guitars and chimes — a genuinely fitting soundtrack for stepping back out into the rest of the universe.

So I'm standing here now, inside the airlock, breathing fast, shaking from the nerves and the chill, jumping up and down a bit, waiting...

And now, it's time. My body becomes still, and I hold my breath. Wayne sings:

"and I'm getting over it now..."

Here, the song goes quiet for a few seconds. I shut my eyes tight and yell out, "Open the hatch!" And without delay, I hear the door slide open and I can feel a cold, heavy breeze hit me right in the face. The guitar kicks in, and I take a big, deep breath of this new life. Then I let it out nice and slow, the last of the stale air leaving my lungs forever...

Next, I take a long, calm sniff. It's clean... A faint whiff of iron, mixed the moist, undeniable scent of a lot of things growing out there. Like Spring.

Deciding now that my brain can accommodate input from all five senses at once, I open my eyes to the bright, clear view before me.

A few clinking steps across the metal grate to the threshold, and then... One small step for an old, old man. An audible crunching shuffle of shoes upon the soft, red dirt. I'm living inside a dream. Or maybe this is something more like a hallucinogenic stupor...

I am outside. Breathing!

It seems like it was only yesterday, when we gazed across the compound to see four lonely bodies out there — collapsed into sad, dusty little heaps. This was their bottle of sleeping pills, their revolver in the mouth, their bridge to jump off of. I shake it off.

The unbearable... Is it behind us? Am I really standing here? What do we do? Do we deserve this?

I know that I was prepared for this, but one thing was certain: I was not prepared for *this*. Disbelief... Dumbfounded... How beautiful — a breath received from the world all around me. To be a part of this...

No longer encased in a plastic tomb.

Nor stillborn here in a plexiglass womb.

There are large, purple-gray clouds today, chugging along beneath a vast, clear sky, the mild but rich color of my dear daughter's hair — it's spectacular to look at. The sun warms my face and the top of my bald, wrinkly head. I want to stand here forever, but my car is waiting. My chauffeur sits waiting in the driver seat of a fabulous little rover that he probably built with his own two hands. Not solar — I suppose it runs on sand or something. The little green genius... I climb in and ask him how he's doing. My friend smiles at me, with tremendous warmth. Still no words. I'm always trying to get them to talk. They think it's funny.

We drive off at good speed, and the wind feels so good. The song keeps going in my head, long after it fades out behind me, as we speed diagonally across The Strip.

I do not turn around.

The rover stops at the entrance to a path. There is a bunch of balloons tied to a tall plant — real balloons, apparently filled with helium, or perhaps hydrogen. This is actually the biggest shock yet — where the hell did they find party balloons? And why would they bother?

My thoughts turn suddenly to the silence. Wow. Hoof. I have spent the last 9 earth-years of my life listening to the unending murmur of the voices and bodily disturbances of hundreds of people, day and night, night and day. Even in the darkest hours, a sniff, a cough, and oh, plenty of snoring and ungodly flatulence, especially from the tiny little woman from the chemistry lab who sleeps right next to me. And that muffled echo that dominates every sound...

Not here! Between the breezes, rustling through the crops and whooshing past my ears, I can actually detect silence. I really like this.

My companion takes my hand, and we stroll down the winding path, between thick heavy plants, eight or nine feet tall — these are the egg-layers, even bigger than I expected. They look and smell gorgeous, voluptuous... I'm taking enormous whiffs of the air in here — running the risk of hyperventilating. So sweet... You want to take it in and hold it forever.

The plants have broad, fat leaves, deep, dark-green and fuzzy. Their flowers are a deep purple, up to a foot in diameter, with about a thousand petals — like some kind of ultra-rose. The eggs, some as big as your fist, are harvested from within these blooms. Amazing. My God... I don't know, maybe this is just a feeling, but... Am I walking through a field of crops, or a crowd of...? Something more than plants... And it seems like they're happy to see me. We stop, and I reach up to feel one of these leaves. The plant bends towards me. For some reason, I am not startled. It seems right...

We walk on.

This pathway is definitely part of some vast geometric pattern. We have taken a long swooping curve, first right, and then left. There are smaller tangential pathways on either side, at regular increments that seem to decrease slightly as we are going along. We're rounding the end of the big bend, and I can see another bunch of balloons. An opening. Up a steady incline, there is a platform overlooking a cliff, with a safety railing surrounding it, made of some sort of metal. My friend gently releases his grip and motions me to go on ahead, by myself. I pull myself along the railing on my right, getting a little winded.

Made it!

Here's a view...

Holy Mother of God!

What I'm looking at...

As far as my eyes can travel, they find unfathomable beauty...

Glistening pools of water, deep enough to be blue, spilling over into streams...

How did they...?

I see young forests, sections of conifers, and some kind of cottonwoods or aspens.

Here?

I can see the fields now from this overlook, and yes, they are exquisitely designed. This is a sculpted garden — on the grandest scale imaginable. I'm seeing some kind of corn, perhaps 3 different kinds, of varying heights, some with bluish leaves, some reddish, some dark green, each in separate zones, transected every which way by these light-green pathways, circles and geometric shapes that look strangely familiar...

Crop circles?

Nice! Another fantastic application of both logic and beauty — what's the sense of building something if you don't bother to make it beautiful?

But holy crap! They've landscaped the landscape! Does this just go on and on?

Now that my eyes have adjusted, I notice that the pathways themselves seem to be filled with some other kind of plant, a shorter variety which winds around, interspersed throughout all the fields and even into the forests. They look truly bizarre, with large bulbous tops, and there must be a million of these things, outnumbering everything else.

Unless...

Wait a minute...

Are those *People*...?

The song that was stuck in my head has come to an abrupt end. My mind has gone completely blank.

Winding in and out of everywhere, like a Spring melt-off rushing down from the mountains, overflowing and branching out, I see before me endless throngs of our very own, identical four-foot children. Multiplied... Cloned...? A sea of little green faces, with their big, shining black eyes gazing up at me — it's impossible to count them all, or to comprehend how this cannot be a dream...

I stare out over the landscape of rocks, plants and... *this new civilization*... in absolute, uninterrupted silence... Every pair of eyes — still serenely fixed upon me. Every face has a smile.

As the moments flow through me, the shock of it all melts gradually into oblivion. What treasures! Such love... A great feeling of warmth pervades my being.

I am now a thing of pure bliss.

Then... Quite suddenly, each and every one of Them, in unison, from my companion behind me to the one sitting there in a tree twenty kilometers away, pumps a fist into the air...

And...

A thundering cheer erupts!

I can hear them!

I am momentarily dazed by the overwhelming magnitude of the sound — such an enormous crowd... But then I realize that the noise is in no way deafening...

This is because the voices that I am hearing are not actually audible...

I am hearing them inside my mind.

The voices of millions... Calling out their welcome, to *me*.

And in that sacred moment, a moment that probably lasted about ten or eleven seconds, I lived a thousand lifetimes. For the duration of this ovation, I tasted the infinite — the doors of my mind flung wide. I became a part of them, and they became a part of me. I saw through their eyes. I knew what they know. Through them, I could feel the thoughts and see the dreams of each and every man, woman and child within those two bubbles. Seeing now through the eyes of others, I could know and empathize with all of them intimately, like I was truly living in everyone else's shoes, all at once. And amidst the crowds of hundreds in there, and amongst the crowd of millions out here, I also came to know and understand another person more deeply and with more acceptance than I had ever known before. That person must have been me. But it was actually hard to discern, in that particular moment — I did not feel separate from anyone or anything else.

A second wave washed over me, pummeling. Knowledge... This connection allowed me in on all of the secrets, and in those moments, I was every bit the clairvoyant genius that each of our children has become. I was offered a glimpse of my potential, *our* potential, even in this aged, imperfect form. Infinite... And not so imperfect at all, actually.

But, OH, this was a lot to absorb. In a group mind, the best and the brightest no longer need to specialize, because they have it all. All of the intelligence, and all of the data, powered by an array of some two million biological processors. Every mind is separate, but interconnected. Amazing. I understood their medicine, genetics, cloning... Physics, chemistry, meteorology... Philosophy, theology...

This is too much...

And now I know *how*...

I am in their collective memory...

They've been to Earth?

They pumped all this water here from when?

They duplicated themselves by... time travel?

That was about all I could handle. I crumpled to the ground and passed out.

I regained consciousness in the midst of a big party out there on The Strip. My first thought: "I hope I didn't mess myself." At that point, I knew immediately that I was back to my old self. Partly, anyway.

The doors of the bubbles were open to the world and to each other, calling out a big hello, and the airlocks were unsealed — not a soul left inside. Every human being down to the youngest seven-pound infant was out and about, spilling all over the place. Smiles and laughter were uncontainable. Nobody could remain still — they were strolling, running, sprinting and rolling every which way. Men, women and children explored the pathways that wound through the foliage, getting lost and getting found again. Some of the more adventurous revelers were now returning, completely soaked from a bone-chilling swim in one of the nearby reservoirs.

Our home is much bigger now.

We feasted quietly, did Sender and I, old friends breaking bread together again, grinning from ear to ear. He seemed to know something, same as me. Maria wouldn't let me out of her sight. She knew that I had an explanation for all of this, and she was dying to find out. I looked up from my succulent, buttered ear of corn.

"Maria... Did you know that time travel is possible?"

"I've always assumed so," she jumped to attention, knocking over her drink.

I helped her clean it up. "Did you further know that time travel requires nothing more than the knowledge of how to build the technology?"

She is silent now. Cruel to make her wait.

"For instance... If somebody dreams it up, then that somebody can also build it — the machinery. Sure. But that could take years... What if, in the future, that certain somebody, or group of somebodies, began to deliver the technology back in time, to the exact moment when the plans were originally conceived."

Maria began to guess, "Then they would never have to actually build it?"

"Apparently. How crazy is that?"

"Very," she quietly replied, the wheels turning violently now.

"The plan seemed logical, but it was still a big shock when the first of several machines arrived: sky-born, time-traveling vessels, piloted by their future selves."

"No! You're *shitting* me! Wait. Don't tell me, because I already know. Reproduction on the level that they have achieved would have been highly improbable using any kind of cloning method. Not this fast. So all these little guys are from the future..."

She was stumped again. It was time for me to unveil the grand prize. "Sort of... Actually, these are all duplicates of the original 23. Not clones. Their future selves were working tirelessly for their present selves, all in an effort to help us. They knew and understood that their numbers were insufficient to be of enough help. We were dying in the storms, and they had to act quickly."

"A small portal for time travel was created by the future People, and sent back to the present. Now check this out: the level of concentration required for this maneuver, well... Just thinking about it fried my brain. That's when I passed out."

"If a Person sets this portal for five minutes ago, and walks through it, then he shows up five minutes ago. His present self is sitting there, watching him arrive, five minutes before he is supposed to go in there himself. So, temporarily, we have two of the same Person, in the same universe, at once. One of them is five minutes older. Now... If that person changes his mind, and does not enter the portal five minutes later, then he has doubled his personal population. It required some deep concentration, and they all took turns. Duplicates of themselves marched forth from the portal in long lines, and they all remained in the same time period. They are all roughly the same age, within a span of about a day or so."

Maria was delighted by this stroke of genius. "Strength in numbers... and I suppose they contributed somewhat to the oxygen levels. But how did they all survive? The atmosphere, the water... Where the hell did all this water come from?"

She might have guessed. "From the past... It was pumped here from about 700 million years ago. And —"

"AND," she interrupted, "that's the reason why this planet dried up! *They sucked all the water into the future!*"

"Exactly..."

"What about all these animals. Where-?"

I needed a break, "*Pleeeeee*... Is this your last question, for now?"

"Okay..."

"I'll keep it simple, and you can fill in the blanks. They visited Earth many, many times... No, not in the present — that place is a mess. They were very discrete, and they went mostly unnoticed. You won't read about them in the history books, but there have been plenty of stories told. Their exploits were the stuff of legend..."

"Oh," Maria looked a little pale. *"OH!"*

I nodded. She understood, but this was a lot to absorb.

I still had to figure out most of what had happened, myself. And why? And what will happen next, and what will we do with this gift?

This second chance...

We would have time. Plenty of time...

Sender was listening all the while, still grinning and rocking back and forth — not a shred of surprise in his eyes... I told him to wipe the spaghetti sauce off of his beard, and he ignored me. My experience earlier that day was pretty overwhelming, and I was forgetting all the details at an exponential rate, my neurons scattering like stardust after the big bang. However, there was something, some memory, trying to force its way back into my rattled skull. On a hunch, I just had to ask him: "Your ideas?"

Sender just looked at me, eyes gleaming, like he could hardly believe it himself.

Human beings are all right...

We just needed a lot of help. As for the people who were dining with me there on that fine evening...

*It was **they** who planted the seeds of the divine.*

"DESSERT!"

Yeah...

We abandoned our thoughts for the moment. It was a time for toasting marshmallows.

October 2004

Selected Emails From the Future

I guess I don't really have anything else to say to you. After that day, life has been pretty fuckin' okay, ya know?

Notice that I didn't say "back to normal", because it isn't. We're different. All of us. Quite heavily dedicated to building a future that is far less riddled with mistakes fueled by hatred and selfishness. An attitude that all of 6 billion people could so easily have adopted in your time. Earth was such an extremely beautiful place — and everybody who was living at that time possessed that same beauty within. Unfortunately, too few of them could see it.

I'm sick of preaching to you and babbling on and on an on. You have a conscience. Use it. I'm just you, anyway. Nothing has changed really. Decades of experience, volumes of lessons to be learned, but the fact of the matter is, I'm still you. To be honest, you didn't need to read any of this crap. But at least it kept you from watching that infernal television from time to time.

Now, I have a surprise for you... But wait — first, I suppose I just have to clear up a thing or two, in case you're confused.

It turns out that The People went to work very soon after leaving the bubble. Their first order of business was to hang around the Alpha Bubble and absorb whatever knowledge and information they could. This is how they picked up all of their time-travelling expertise, by hanging around Sender's Annex. They took his ideas and ran with them.

The first of the "time machines" were a tad crude. Sender was able to transmit ordered spurts of energy backward in time, but this was different. To propel actual matter through time, The People needed a hell of a lot of energy on either end of a moment in space and time. Up here, today, they constructed special reactors for traveling back and forth. In the past, they needed a precise time and location — one that was surrounded by a fair amount of space, so that nobody ended up embedded in a wall or something. The 40's

and 50's were a time of many well-documented tests, in the deserts of New Mexico and Nevada. Nuclear blasts. So this is when and where they made their first visits to our past civilization on Earth.

Despite their success, there were a number of problems and tragedies. Four of our good friends met their deaths in Roswell, back in 1947. One of them actually survived the crash, but after being placed in a tent of pure oxygen for 24 hours, he expired. Being unable to speak, he could not make it clear that he required carbon dioxide. He did however manage to explain where he came from. Hence the Martian legend was born.

All of this is pretty well documented. Look it up.

Most visits were uneventful, thankfully. Materials were obtained from plant and animal life. Human beings were anesthetized and studied, in order to help them understand what our people needed to survive. Stories of horrifying abductions were greatly exaggerated — see, when somebody was "borrowed", they were obviously terrified, despite the peaceful nature of the People taking them on board their "flying saucers". When they were put under, their fear tended to magnify their nightmares, and these dreams were often reported as suppressed memories of actual events as they occurred. I suppose most people never took these stories seriously, but the reputation of The People really suffered. The result was an ongoing, annoyingly vigilant pursuit by special units and secret agencies around the world.

That stuff is *not* well documented.

The second round of technology was far more efficient and far less dangerous, making use of specific regions of unusual electromagnetic activity, mainly in Great Britain and Central America. From the point of that development, they were able to move back and forth rather freely, and their work became a lot easier.

Which brings me to my surprise.

My work is done here. I'm just going to sit outside in the sun, sip iced tea, and breathe in some air from now on. I'm almost 100 years old. It's time I retired.

I got this idea for my 100th birthday, if I live that long:

How about we celebrate it together?

Meet me at the following location on October 10th, 2004 at 2100 hours, Greenwich Mean Time:

xxx xxx xxxxx xxx xxx

xxxx xxx xxxxxxx

xxxxxx xx xxx

This invitation is for you alone. If I don't live that long, I'll send along a friend to say hello.

I can't honestly say why I want to do this. It just feels right.

Please come. I have a 37th birthday gift for you.

Don't get *me* anything. I'm all set.

Take care.

--

Love, Gene

No.

No fucking way.

I'm too fucking busy, I can't afford it, this is insane, and I can think of about 50,000 more reasons not to go and meet this guy out in a fucking cornfield, but I can't think of one fucking reason why I should.

Even if he is me.

I need this shit like I need another four years of George W. Bush...

All right...

See, I just... I don't know what to say to him. I haven't done jack-shit since the first message I got from him...

I don't know...

I guess I'll go check out the airfares.

November 2004

Selected Emails From the Future

- *October 6, 2004* —

The fares to London on such short notice are absolutely hideous. I should have booked this flight months ago... But I never thought I'd be going.

What the hell am I doing?

I should be working. I should be volunteering at a homeless shelter. Or volunteering for a crucial political campaign. Or just giving away this money, instead of flying half-way around the world to meet this old man in a fucking cornfield.

Did I mention that he'll be arriving on an alien vessel from the future?

I'm sick to my stomach. I'm not sure how this is important. How can it matter? Why doesn't he touch down in the foothills here somewhere? No! It has to be seven miles from fucking Stonehenge.

At this point I see two possibilities. One — my life is a big fucking joke, and this is the punch line. Or two, this has been an elaborate practical joke played upon me by some insane but brilliant nemesis with too much time on his or her hands. I think I have to rule out the latter — I really don't matter that much to anyone on this world.

That's right. I am nothing, if not innocuous. My life has little or no value, and therefore commands no attention — which leads me towards a fresh understanding of what is going on. With all this talk of time travel and parallel universes — this future self must be contacting me from a parallel universe in which my existence actually matters. Sender fucked up. There are an infinite number of timelines in the future, and therefore, there must be an infinite number of timelines to the past, and Sender fucked up and sent the messages to the wrong fucking past.

Yeah. That's the best I can come up with.

But it's rather difficult to sit here and not imagine a life in which my existence actually does matter, and that here lying before me is an opportunity to make a positive impact on this world. Who wouldn't want that?

Maybe he'll give me lottery numbers and stock tips. That would be sweet. Money is power, and power doesn't necessarily have to corrupt — I can handle it. Now that would be a nice birthday present. Wealth! Never having to design or build another web site as long as I live. Focusing entirely on The Effort. Working towards Truth.

I wish I could send him a message to the future right now.

I have a feeling this isn't how he operates...

One thing is for sure — he's gonna be sorely disappointed in me.

What if this IS all true?

I haven't done shit since these messages arrived...

What did this guy expect? Here I am — a father, husband and homeowner, struggling to make ends meet as a 2-bit freelancer... What else do I do? What else am I able to do? I'm a lousy writer who has never made a dime off of his "craft" — does that count for anything? I haven't even written anything in almost two years. I've got this column, and all I do is copy and paste someone else's words into here. I'm a lazy-ass! I can't even finish painting the goddamn kitchen. The cupboard doors are all falling off. The children's "new" resale bunk beds are sloppily assembled, and in danger of collapse. I can't be bothered to shave more than once a week. And I've gained about thirty pounds...

Now who, *exactly*, is supposed to help save this world?

I can't even be bothered to support a political campaign. I can't even be troubled to make a pot of chili for the potluck at Emma's school. Yeah, I bought some ready-made mac and cheese from the fucking deli. Coaching little league? If you make me. Anti-war rallies? Yeah, I went to one of those once. It didn't work.

I am tired and under-equipped.

I will go to fucking Stonehenge, and meet this nut-case in a fucking crop circle. This is the kind of person I will look to for all the fucking answers. It makes about as much sense as anything else I have ever done. It will cost me about \$1400. He'd better have those fucking Powerball numbers in his hand.

I guess I'm feeling a tad self-conscious...

It's not really a new problem, but... I've never had two fucking selves to be conscious of before now, have I?

What's he going to think of the "work" that I've done since he's risked his life and the lives of others to contact me? Will he be pleased with my half-assed efforts to "get the word out", by publishing his messages gradually over time, so I don't have to do anything myself? Will that have satisfied him enough? Who did he think he was getting in touch with? Why would things be any different for him this time around?

Who *am* I?

Who does he think *he* is?

I'm sick about this.

- October 10, 2004 —

Happy fucking birthday.

I'm sitting in the parking lot alongside Stonehenge right now. Not as crowded as I expected on a Sunday afternoon. I don't even feel like going over and looking at it.

Just called Michelle and the kids. She understands, I guess. Of course, this is the only travelling that I will be allowed to do without her or the family until 2009. I'm serious. It's called "using up your favors".

Let's hope it's not a huge waste of time. Or that he actually shows up, and he isn't dead already.

I don't have much to say. I'm all about anxiety and muddled confusion. I honestly don't know what I'm doing here. Several months ago, I was excited and eager to do this. So I will trust that the Gene back then was wise enough to know what the hell he was doing and thinking. Today's Gene just wants to check into a nice quiet place where nurses come and bring you little paper cups filled with pills every four hours. I could go for some of that right about now.

It's chilly, misty, cloudy... Very typical of what I expected. I have too many hours to wait. God, I would love to put down a Guinness in some warm, cozy pub. Or even better — a hot toddy! Yeah...

Better wait until after. You don't want to get all liquored up before you have to go and meet yourself.

I'll just sit here in this weird little car and shiver with the window rolled down.

I'm pretty sure I haven't been followed. I suppose it's a valid concern, just in case anybody has been reading this shit. Whether it's some government agency, or some fruitcake — I have to admit that I've done a lot of looking over my shoulder this past year. It's fun to feel paranoid and self-important.

Enough!

God. I'm so sick of this. Let's just get it over with...

Whoa, it's dark now — almost slept right through it. I'm on my way...

I never knew they grew corn here, until about 8 or 9 months ago.

Driving stick with my left hand feels weird.

Here's the turn.

And there are the balloons.

Crazy old fart.

Now I'm supposed to walk through the corn, due east, about fifty yards. I have a flashlight. The stalks are really dry.

I think I'm getting lost...

It seems like these things aren't even planted in rows. Of course there's no help from the sky. No cars on the road to listen for...

I'm fucked.

What an absolutely miserable situation! If I could find my way out of here, I'd go home right fucking now.

"FUCK!!!!!"

I drop to my knees and then to my ass, and I just sit here, cross-legged on a mass of tangled, dead corn-things and clumps of mud, with my fucking head in my hands.

Sobbing like a fucking baby. Alone and totally fucking lost. A soul without purpose... A heart without reason...

I hate myself, and I will stay here until I'm dead.

"Over here."

Some old man, barely audible.

"Where the fuck are you?"

I don't know if that's me. Some sort of weird, Martian accent.

Oh well. I came all this fucking way. What's the worst thing that can happen? I can't even stand up... I'll never get out of this mess.

Shit!

"Why couldn't you meet me at the fucking RO--?!" Tripping on some fucking thing, I come flying out into the clearing to fall flat on my face, and now we're in total darkness. Shitty fucking flashlight! Michelle thought I'd have a problem if I tried to bring the good flashlight in my carry-on, so I brought this plastic piece of shit instead, and now I'm banging the thing and it won't fucking work. That's just great!

Foggy nights in England are great for visibility. This'll be wonderful. We can feel each other's faces like a couple of fucking twin Helen Kellers.

Actually, it's not that bad, now that my eyes have adjusted. Sky's glowing. Somebody is out there.

The stalks are bent over here, not cut. I get to my feet carefully, to stand atop the dead plants and avoid making an ass out of myself again. The clearing is about 40 yards wide, and circular, wouldn't you know it. My man is standing right there in the center of it. He's tiny!

I make my way toward this man, high-stepping it slowly. He hasn't moved an inch. I suppose it would be difficult for him, if he's really that old and feeble.

About ten feet to go now.

Five...

I can see his face... Christ...

I stop.

He's just standing there. Pleasant little old-guy smile...

What the hell is there to say? Hiyadoin'? What's up? Frustratingly, my tongue flops and wags, and sits stuffed inside my mouth like an old sock, and I stare, and I have nothing, I can say, "NOTHING", no goddamn words at all, like a big fat, fucking baby who just shat himself and doesn't know what to do about it. Now I know why I shouldn't have come.

He's just standing there. Pleasant little old-guy smile...

I'm overwhelmed by my own guilt. I can't look him in the eye for my own shame, but I can't help it, because he looks so much... Like a shriveled, shrunken me... A scraggly white beard... A shiny, speckled bald head... Droopy jowls, sagging neck, a thousand wrinkles... The mole, bigger than ever. Is that me? Why does he look so content?

He's just standing there. Pleasant little old-guy smile...

He opens his arms wide in welcome...

I approach, careful not to knock him over and crush him into dust.

We embrace.

Four seconds of this is enough for me. I don't deserve it.

Painstakingly, this man described to me, in detail, the failings and the future demise of the human race, and the doom of this beautiful planet. For the human race, I have done nothing. I don't deserve them, and they don't deserve me. For the Earth, I have done nothing. I don't deserve her, and she doesn't deserve me.

I pull away, unable to look him in the eye...

And he won't let me...

He holds on stronger. He grabs me tightly with all the strength he has left. A hundred years old and a hundred pounds, and I can't get loose.

Why does he want to... Why does he care?

He seems to be expending his very last breaths on this effort. This is strange. He is me. Yet I never cared this much about myself, so why am I...?

If I could climb out of my skin, and...

This is awfully generous of him...

I...

I forget myself.

Or...

Whatever that was that held me in a stranglehold all this time...

Moments pass, and something falls away, layer by layer by layer, until I realize finally, that there never were any layers to begin with. And something is revealed. I let go.

And I am free.

The exhaustion of anticipation, the pressure of my own adequacy, the dull freeze of shock that guided me through closets and tunnels and dead ends... Here, it all dissipates...

The air smells good here. Like Halloween. It feels heavy and cool. Breeze moves through my hair, and gently whooshes past my ears. Faint rustling of stalks. Puffs of fog move past. The tears are warm and pleasant.

The embrace between myself and I has gradually eased into one of relaxed comfort. We remain like this, I don't know how long. We're just here. Go outside for a while. Look at the sky, smell the air, feel the wind, and then come back and read the rest later...

Go on...

Perhaps our legs are beginning to tire, as the moment is mutually agreed upon for the gentle back-slapping that signals the end of our moment here together. I hadn't even heard or noticed it landing, but the spaceship is resting there right on the edge of the circle. I give myself one last kindly gaze, right in the eyes, holding a gleam that my mirror has never known before. My elder self then turns away, to head back home.

I am surprisingly agile at the age of 100, stepping over all the little hazards. As my elder self approaches the plank to board the ship, I remember something vital, and call out, "Hey! Where's my gift?!!"

I turn and smile to myself from the top of the little runway. "That was it!"

I ponder this for a moment.

"You cheap **bastard!**"

I bust out laughing, almost losing my balance and falling off the plank, the laughter gradually subsiding into a coughing fit that brings me to my knees.

Oh no. I just killed myself!

A couple of smiling, little green men grab me by either arm and drag me up on board, like two orderlies at a mental hospital. I'm still giggling as the door glides shut.

Sometimes I crack myself up.

December 2004 ??

To Feel Better

My daughter has been a real handful lately.

No. No, you *don't* understand. You haven't been around. Did I say handful? Maybe if you have a very large hand... Large enough to hold a half-dozen godzillas and a pterodactyl.

We've been making some extra efforts toward figuring her out — you know, "making her be good". What we've been learning is that it is not so much her fault. The biggest problem, I think, is that she's smarter than we are. But at the age of four, intelligence takes on the form of subtle manipulation and glorious tantrums. The only thing that works for us is 100% empathy, which requires understanding, and a lack of any emotional involvement — aside from the love, that is, which sort of helps us to rise above everything else and see clear through the rage, to listen for the voice beneath the screams, and to understand a kid's need to be happy behind the inventive pain and frustration.

I'm no master at mustering up the strength to cut through all of her efforts 24-7. Sometimes, I'm sick, I'm tired... Sometimes I've had enough. So I slide my card through, press a button, lift the handle, and start pumping out the anger — I douse the flames with it.

We will destroy this house, she and I.

These episodes make me physically ill. They ruin entire days. My anger never, ever helps, because, as I mentioned earlier, she is smarter than I am. One day she will win huge sums of money in staring contests, she will outlast men twice her size in challenges of stamina. The child is determined. The child is strong.

I drove her to preschool one morning after a particularly evil night, and being the kind of father who can't keep his mouth shut about anything taboo or unmentionable, I began to apologize to her for getting so angry, and letting her have it the previous evening. My intention was to let the conversation roll

around towards some kind of lecture on the long-term results of recidivism, but before I came to that part, I found myself detailing my own confusions and frustrations, as if there were some way a four year-old would understand something that had nothing to do with pop-tarts. "Sometimes a brain can feel a little sick and tired of what's going on around it, and people have to just let it all out, and sometimes that comes out as anger and screaming. Especially when someone has to deal with the same issues and problems over and over and over. And over. Mommies and daddies can get fed up with -"

Emma interrupted me just then, and declared, "Sometimes when your tummy hurts, and you have to throw up, you feel better afterwards."

See?

She is smarter than me. I'm not even sure why. But I've been looking into it.

Speaking of research, I have been fortunate these past few weeks to be handed my first assignment away from this here dusty and cluttered corner of the basement. In fact, it was in this very space, over there, in a teetering pile of filthy, bulging old boxes, that I discovered the subject of this amazing story you are about to read.

We bought this ranch-style, 3-bedroom home from a hack plumber five years ago, but before he and his wife and his crippled dog (the one with the bladder problem) moved in, the place was owned since 1960 by an anthropology professor from CU. Though it was never discussed, it was assumed at the closing that we would inherit this vast "library" — a bottomless well of information about plate-lipped topless women, and men who wore gourds on their genitalia. I never wanted to move any of the boxes, mostly because it just seemed rather well-contained. The sagging, dark brown lumps at the bottom were water-damaged, and I was afraid that if I ever nudged them, that they would start giving off some terrible smell, or else a couple of rats would jump out and leap straight for both of my jugulars. But we need the space. The kids need another place to go and play in the winter months. WE need the kids to have another place to go and play in the winter months.

Gently, carefully, I began lifting down the boxes, one by one. And how could I not go through each one?

I can pretend this is just an unkempt flea market, or a museum of the sixties and seventies — either way, this is kind of fun. Filthy though. I always have to shower after plowing through another box. Dust, spider webs, centipedes, even a couple of silverfish.

I expected to find nothing but old scientific journals, but I discovered a whole lot more. Playboy, Hustler, High Times... Holy shit, I'm glad Cooper's not in Junior High yet — he and his friends would spend their entire summer vacation down here. Nothing is separate, either — just piles and piles of "literature", stacked together chronologically. I'm not looking forward to touching 1960, deep in the darkest corner back there — not without some rubber gloves anyway.

I was delighted when I reached 1975. Such a regurgitant culture, confused and a little bit lost — both sides of our culture had suffered defeat and disdain. There were no champions in the short run, and in the meantime, all taboos had been shattered. With no clear-cut identity, Western culture became a sort of a free-for-all. Just ask Ted Nugent.

I discovered my treasure, my grand prize, underneath a Freak Brothers comic book, and on top of a porno magazine called Knave. It was a yellow folder, the kind I used to have in grade school, just a simple thing that had pockets inside, where you could stuff your notes. Written on the front, in large block letters with black magic marker, were the words "The Moss Men of Blithiti". Fascinating. Why hadn't I heard of these people before?

Their story was mind-boggling. They lived on a very remote island, inside caves that did not seem natural — their dimensions were too perfect, and they were pristinely kept, like the inside of any modern house. The Moss People were diminutive, none of them eclipsing three feet. They never ate or drank in the presence of anyone who visited them. And they were covered head to toe in some sort of orange moss. The articles that interested me most referred to a study that was done by a psychiatrist who was vaguely famous in some circles — his work on the study of hallucinogens is legendary, but his findings have always been called into question because of his insistence on using himself as the test subject. Dr. Torrance O'Livschitz discovered something that had been overlooked by previous expeditions. He discovered a common virus in all of the subjects he tested

— a virus so tiny, so simple and so common, that nobody had noticed it before. He claimed that this virus was most abundant in the spiritual leader of the tribe, and after careful study, he determined that this little germ was the main ingredient in their calm and peaceful demeanor. An infection of happiness.

I decided to do some research on the web. I located the typical useless junk, articles that had nothing to do with anything, message board postings that had nothing to do with anything, a punk rock band... But I did find some gems — a minor cult of sorts — dozens of sites devoted to the legend, complete with drawings, doctored photos and tales of encounters, much like any stories you may have read about Bigfoot, the Yetis, or my favorite mythical creature, the goat-sucking Chupacabra. Buried in the last ten or twenty links, I found something interesting, though. There was good reason why the only people to encounter the Moss Men were Dr. O’Livschitz and a handful of others. Nobody could find Blithiti. It was as if the island was floating — this was the theory back in the late seventies. And then sometime during 1979, it disappeared. It either sank, or the Moss Men jumped off the edge of the thing, and kick-paddled it off the charts.

I felt like it was my destiny to be the one to find these articles in this wonderful hellhole of a basement. A voice began gnawing at me, a voice that grew louder and louder, until it could not be ignored. It was like a pounding, nagging pain, telling me that I had to be the one to go. It went on and on and on, like a public radio pledge drive!

Dear God! How could I fight it?

Five minutes later, I called the director of this magazine, and begged her to let me go. After a long, persuasive argument, Karen finally agreed to send me, as long as I paid for my own airfare and all of my expenses. Three weeks and five thousand dollars later, I have returned to this very cellar where my journey began, to tell you of the Moss People of Blithiti. And here is the journal that I kept:

"How could I succeed where so many others have failed?" I wonder, as I soar above the Pacific Ocean en route to Tahiti. "How can I be such an idiot?" is another common thought. This is a long fucking flight.

I had plenty more time to ponder these very same thoughts, as I rented a sea canoe and paddled my way out to the last known location of the island. I had a plan. Once I reached the coordinates, I would jump out of the canoe, get hold of it somehow, and begin paddling with my feet, to see where I might end up.

I did talk to myself a lot during the time I spent out there by myself in the ocean. These were some of the things I said aloud, when the salt water wasn't pouring down my throat and making me gag:

"I am so, SO stupid."

"Tiger sharks will eat every last piece of me... Bones... Testicles... Probably the testicles first."

"I taste goood. Mmmmmm. Come and get me."

"What was THAT?!"

Those were the prevalent thoughts in my mind for about 9 consecutive hours, until quite suddenly, a current swept me southward. It was all I could do to hang onto the canoe and not be swept beneath the surface, but I managed to cling tightly somehow, for an hour or more, until the canoe began spinning out, and I was quite suddenly coughed up onto a white sandy beach.

No way! Or... No, I shouldn't get my hopes up. People either die on these islands or go insane one day, while pulling out their own teeth.

Nice to be out of the water, anyway.

I crawled up onto dry sand on my hands and knees, exhausted, doing my best to drag the heavy rental sea canoe up as far as I could, and then I collapsed. The last thing I remember seeing was a massive waxing moon rising up — first a single point of impossibly brilliant light, then sliver by sliver until its entire being revealed itself to me. I drank a gallon of water and passed out. The next thing I saw was the creamy white interior of the ceiling of a balmy underground cave.

The chamber was of decent size, with one opening off to the West, leading down a pitch-black tunnel that was only suitable for crawling through. I don't know why I knew that the opening was to the West — I just had this bizarre sense of orientation. The interior walls were beautifully curved, so that the room had no sharp angles or corners, each wall spilling into each other wall, and up to the ceiling and down to the floor, like if there were no gravity, you might just roll all around this thing and have a ball. I saw no visible light source. From the benefit of hindsight, this seemed as normal as everything else, though it defied any kind of logic that I was previously aware of in the gas-and-electric world I left behind some 12 hours or 12 millennia ago. And it was here that I remained for some time, having no desire to crawl though the dark hole over there. To my right I found all my food and water supplies, along with all my notes, so I sat there and ate and drank and read my notes.

Why had I come? I'm no scientist. I'm not even a journalist. I sure as hell couldn't afford it. What did I come here for? What did I expect?

Deep down, I knew the answer. I came to this island to get myself infected.

I reread the articles that fascinated me so. This pestilence, it had really taken over the bodies of some of these people, centering in the nervous and circulatory systems, with the heaviest concentrations in the brain. One virus would team up with another, and so on and so on, until an elaborate structure was formed to assume to places of natural neurotransmitters, and literally fill in all of the gaps upon the surface of some brain cells. By all known scientific study, nobody here should be alive. Attempts were made to collect samples of the virus, but none would survive outside the host body. Lower life forms around the island, such as meerkats, voles and giant sloths, were completely uninfected. In fact, when attempts were made to quickly transfer the virus from one of the humans into any of the local rodents, the virus dissolved into nothingness.

The moss was easier to explain. It just grew on them. That was about it. They never scrubbed themselves. Young children displayed a fine green hair, like peach fuzz.

There was just one photo, utilized in articles over and over again — a group shot. Fourteen people in an extended family, maybe 4 generations, all smiling, all fuzzy. I had my fill of the reading materials, and soon found myself staring at this photo for hours and hours. Feeling tired, but surprisingly at peace with this weird, unexplained solitude, I put the photo back in the folder with everything else and proceeded to entertain thoughts of lying down.

And there they were.

I hadn't heard a sound, not one breath, not one shuffling set of feet. They were all standing there before me, aligned precisely, PRECISELY as I had just viewed them in this 30 year-old photo. I knew, because I had just been staring at this picture for hours and hours — I KNEW that these were the exact same people, and that they *had not aged*...

So I sat there in my place, leaning against the smooth glowing wall, staring. I stared at them directly now, for yet more hours and hours. It did not occur to me to speak. How could they possibly understand me anyway? It was all just fine.

Funny, I would swear that when I looked up from the photograph to see the Moss People before me, the room had become about three times larger. Eventually, as I sat, the people began milling around, sitting here and there, mumbling in a gorgeous little dialect, playing, working on little projects that did not seem to exist — but mostly, they just sat there, like me. I offered them water, but nobody drank. I could hear a running trickle somewhere in the tunnel system that I had not heard before. I offered food — some really tasty snack bars, but those too were refused, even by the little ones. I looked at my food and my water. I didn't want any either. I wasn't tired. I didn't even need to go to the bathroom. I was content. Nice to be content for once.

I am sure that about six hours passed. I looked to the elder of the tribe and asked him, "Come back with me." Not really a question, I know, but seeing as they didn't didn't speak the queen's English, I don't suppose it mattered how I phrased it. I began to work on gestures, becoming more animated and a little bit more desperate with each attempt. My fingers pointing to him, to his family, and back to me, my thumb pointing out the door... I made a drawing in my notebook and showed it to him — with myself and all of them in my sea canoe, paddling toward the mainland, and then flying in an airplane back to the United States of America... How could I describe that? I drew buildings. I actually drew the Statue of Liberty. Soon I began pleading. I was frantically paddling with my arms, begging with my eyes... The chief continued on with the only thing he appeared to ever do, smiling with absolute calm. Except now, he was really peering deep within my own gaze. He was considering my proposal. My arms slowed gradually to a stop, and I waited for my answer.

Quite suddenly, the chief straightened up, took in a deep breath... and burst out laughing. A wheezing, joyful giggle. With his next breath, he launched into a sort of a cackle like a chicken. And further on, each gasp of in-breath led to a more intense fit of uncontrollable belly-laughter, until he was rolling on the floor with tears in his eyes. Just rolling around, holding his stomach in joy and pain, and of course, everybody else in the cave was soon roaring, sprawled out on the floor as well, out of control, kicking and screaming and begging each other for mercy, and dammit... so was I.

It occurred to me — "If I don't die from this... This is my chance... If I can get close enough... Can I bring this contagion back inside my own body, with or without them?"

What contagion? What would happen to me? Could I function in normal society? Would I want to? Would I grow a fine moss, or is that just a local occurrence on the island?

"I don't care. I don't care..."

I crawled over toward the chief. I leaned in, to get close. That's when he really lost it, and I honestly feared he might die. His laughter entered some sort of surreal, blood-curdling scream stage, and he crawled away from me like I was trying to tickle him to death, and I couldn't stop giggling either, I could barely move an inch, and he escaped and hid behind a couple of other people, and I was on

all fours with tears streaming down my face, completely and totally spent. I had to give up — I rolled over on my back, and laid there flat on my back trying to catch my breath. The hardest I have laughed since I was a child, if that... I closed my eyes, and wiped off my face, as the giggling all around the cave gradually dwindled to a quiet.

I can rest now.

When I awoke, I felt myself being tossed up and down and side to side. The sun upon my face. And sea mist. I bolted upright.

I was alone, in my canoe, in the ocean. Within sight of what turned out to be Bora Bora.

Results of all tests for the virus were negative, but... I'm new at this. I got myself a taste. I'll get it eventually.

Emma was right. My head does feel better.

Thanks for listening.

January 2005 ??

I Didn't Ask for Help

Some experiences trail you like three feet of toilet paper on your heel. It's embarrassing. People see it, they smile... Nobody says anything.

I don't feel like talking about one of those experiences. Get your own.

Other experiences follow you like a raven outside the window of a train. Reminders of a flight that you cannot touch... You can only watch — like a movie. You don't own it. You are not there.

I'm talking about the stuff... the stuff you want going through your mind as you exhale for the last time on this Earth. A string of experiences contained within a single moment, the ones where you fly, the ones where you swim, the ones where you race, where you know, where you BE... I want to become that glowing banquet of perfect memories.

I wish I had more time to remember...

My kids have a history that shaped my relationship with them. *Obviously*. That history has also shaped my habitual reactions to anything that happens around the house, or in the car, or at King Soopers. Let me give you a ferinstance. This may sound more horrible than it really is, but Cooper has put Emma into the hospital three times. It's a combination of wild uncontrollable boyhood not knowing its own strength, and the misfortunes of a much younger and somewhat injury-prone little sister. Two dislocated elbows and a broken clavicle. Each time it happened, they were having fun, just playing.

So what is created by such a string of events? Well... Whenever they start having too much fun, I get really stressed out and angry at them. This is a strange reaction for someone to have when two siblings are enjoying each other's company. And it's not like I'm pleased when they're fighting.

This is just one example of what leads families down the road to complete and total insanity. "Stop all that laughing and dancing around — I don't want to drive to the hospital tonight!" What IS this? I'm not saying that this is how things have to be. It's nice to say that I can recognize these things. Someday, I suppose I'll do something about them.

Emma likes to mess with us, and she's really good at it. She likes to get out of bed and come out of her room after the lights are out. It's any of a number of excuses, which she shuffles as effectively as Greg Maddux mixes his pitches. I need a drink of water. I can't find Kitty. I need to go potty. (again) I had a bad dream. (without sleeping?) After several visits to the places where grownups try to be sane, she senses that the anger is rising, and upon her fifth visit to the living room:

"What IS it, Emma!"

"I just want to give you a hug and a kiss."

Fucking brilliant.

She did this to me last week. Yeah, I melted. I always do, and then pretend to be stern, and she goes right to bed, and stays there for good. But this time she stopped, and turned around with this inquisitive look on her face.

"Daddy? How long is my new friend going to be staying with us?"

Amused, I asked, "What new friend?"

"Daddy!" She exclaimed, like I was being too silly. She recognized from my expression that I had no idea what she was talking about. "My *furry* friend!" With an implied "*duh*" in her tone.

"Hmmm. Furry friend. Where is your furry friend right now?"

"I don't know," she shrugged, and she strutted off to bed.

Michelle was at yoga, and I was really tired that night, so I went to sleep before she came home, and forgot all about it.

The next day at breakfast we gathered as usual, I with my coffee and banana, Emma with her Gorilla Munch, Michelle with the rice cakes and tahini and two eggs that her acupuncturist told her to eat, and Cooper with his reliable Cheerios, and I suddenly remembered... "So, Emma. How's your new friend?"

"Oh!" She exclaimed, and jumped down off of her chair and ran to her room. I could hear her little feet dashing back and forth to the closet, and underneath the loft bed, then into Cooper's room and into the bathroom. She returned, smiling and shrugging. "I can't find him."

"So this friend is a furry little boy?"

"No. Not exactly. Actually, he's just a tiny little man. He's *my* size, but he's like a grownup."

The multivitamin became lodged sideways in my throat on its way down. Eyes bulged, I couldn't get it to budge — not up, not down... The kids were actually laughing at me — which was really annoying. I wasn't in any grave danger, but the upper end of my esophagus seemed to have constricted permanently to just hold it there, like a two-by-four clamped in a vice. Coffee. A cup and a half of coffee at the kitchen sink eventually sent it tumbling down.

I dashed into Emma's room, frantically searching around. I never told Michelle about my trip to the South Pacific. I told her that I was going to Vegas with my buddies from Chicago. She doesn't know about the rainy-day savings account at Wells Fargo that I drained in order to go on that, that.... God, I can't even remember what I was thinking.

The basement! No. The shower in the Michelle's office! No. No. No. He's not here.

Wait just a goddamn minute. I'm just overreacting. This is just a coincidence. Those people are floating happily in paradise and have no reason be here, and no *means* by which to arrive.

Nonchalantly, I sat back down, and thankfully, nobody really noticed my little panic. Probably thought I was looking for something for work. Yeah. "So Emma... How long have you had this imaginary friend?"

"What imaginary friend?"

"Your furry blue friend. (Gasp.) Is that him over there?"

"Dad... What are you talking about? He's not here right now, and besides he's not blue, he's ORANGE!"

SHIT!

I sauntered over, checked the cupboards. The pantry! No.

"What are you looking for, honey?"

"Uh... The... have you seen my travel mug?"

I gotta get outa here.

What are they doing here?

I haven't forgotten. I'm doing all right, aren't I? Jesus, what are they going to do? What the hell do they think they're doing?

"So, Emma... What does your orange friend do?" Michelle yanks herself away from the paper and chimes in, "Does he have a name?"

"Noooo!" And she giggled and fell off her chair on purpose, and began pretending to be a kitten, which signals the end of a legitimate conversation with Emma.

Maybe I could set a trap...

I've never had an experience return to me after I walked away from it like this. I mean... I planned on remembering... Keeping it in my heart.... But this isn't some happy tropical island where people get all the sustenance they need from the moss growing on their bodies. This is the United States of Work Until You Die. This is my mortgage. This is my lawn. This is my bottle of Mylanta next to my pot of coffee. This is reality.

I need a plan.

February 2005 ??

By the Train

This train station smells like a church.

Is it from some old-fashioned, tried-and-true wax treatment that the maintenance people rub onto the long wooden benches? It's an earthy sort of smell. Important. Mystical? Where else have I smelled this... a funeral home? I don't know. Maybe I'm just creating memories now.

Ed Cane must have been the guy who rubbed the wax on the pews at our church. Once every year, right after Easter - part of the spring cleaning. At school, we were told to call him Mr. Ed. Which was funny to some people, because he had so much less to say to anyone than even a regular horse would. He was a good man, but he was saddled with brain damage during World War II. The parish gave him a job he could handle okay. His communication skills were reduced to drooly mumblings and limp handshakes. Mr. Nick did most of the fixing, while Ed pushed the brooms and sloshed the heavy mops around on the big-checked linoleum in the halls.

Ed also smelled like this train station. It had to be difficult to maintain any kind of a consistent odor — his hands plunged deeply into one fine mess after another, with the mop water and the disinfectant and what-not. Sometimes kids would come to school and immediately puke on their desks, or all over the carpet near the front of the church at an all-school mass. Ed would have to clean it up. He always arrived at a puddle of vomit within four minutes, especially during the all-school services, because if he didn't, then another kid might catch the wave and launch their breakfast onto another spot, and so on, and so on. This happened many times more than once. Eventually, the stench would go away, and then Ed

and all the rows of pews would go back to smelling like this train station again.

I left that school behind, wondering if it was intentionally established as a breeding ground for hardened criminals, but it wasn't the school's fault. Sometimes kids were sent to Catholic grade school because their mothers and fathers had decided they were bad little people headed down the wrong road, and that they needed this — you know, so they could get the kind of discipline and order that only a gang of angry nuns could dish out. Just like they had when they were kids. But this wasn't really the case anymore - corporal punishment was no longer trendy. The days of turning a blind eye to brutality were over, and even the private schools had to abide by the rules. So, for the extra chunk of change spent on tuition, what were the parents getting that they couldn't get at the public schools? Perhaps their small problem would get a brush with morality, and it would somehow seep in. A reliable institution in place to cover their tracks, erase some of their more serious parental mistakes, and make them look like the good guys. They secretly longed for the days of Sister Mary BrassKnuckles, and a couple of old school smacks in the teeth with a ruler.

My ass is killing me. The pews had a nice curve to them, but these benches are just hard and flat. And it's unusual to be sitting and staring at the people across from me, rather than having all of us face forward in the same direction, toward something that is supposed to be sacred, something to give us some sort of a hint at spiritual truth, as long as we have nothing to do but just sit here and wait. But there is no altar here. Not that I've been to church lately. I just remember...

And I still like the idea of it all. When the truth was told to us, and we were young, and we learned what we were taught, and that was it. Simple... Simple and comforting. Not the struggle that it is now.

Here on the benches, we read shitty magazines about people who don't matter doing all sorts

of things that don't matter, some good, mostly bad. We attend to distractions to pass the time, get lost in their own thoughts and concerns. Nobody talks to anyone they don't know. Why would they? The television gets some attention. The news stand, the ticket window, and of course, the cash station - everyone goes to the cash station. Taking turns, each one of them bows, goes through the little routine, and receives their communion.

I was a lousy altar boy, sort of fumbling and nervous. But I certainly wasn't the worst one. Gunderson... Now Danny Gunderson was out of his fucking mind. Not in a crazy, fun, ridiculous way... The pistons just weren't all firing. He was pear-shaped, with a dirty uniform, red hair and freckles, and at thirteen, he was already a true master of the shit-eating grin. This is the kind of kid who would fall asleep in a puddle of drool on his desk in the eighth grade because he'd been up all night watching soft porn on Cinemax. He was certainly in the throng of a growing number of boys who showed up at school at 8:20 in the morning with the smell of alcohol on their breath. *Oh, was the priest giving out both the body and the blood of Christ this morning?* No. They all relished the opportunity to serve as altar boys for an early weekday shift because they had discovered the location of a large stock of sacrificial wine. At least we didn't have any junkies. Just good old-fashioned, budding alcoholics.

One time I had to work a funeral with Gunderson. The lady in charge of the altar boys knew Gunderson fairly well outside of school, so he got more than his share of these special events. It sounds like a sad thing to be recruited to work a funeral, but no — this got you out of school for an hour, and you usually got between \$3 and \$5 bucks, courtesy of the grave old man from P.M. Smith's Funeral Home.

Being the seasoned veteran, Gunderson demanded that he assume the role of cross-bearer. The cross-bearer didn't have to do anything during the service, while the other two of us had a schedule to meet, doing little things to help the priest. The cross-bearer had one special job

at a funeral, though, which added to the status of his position — he got to go back behind the sacristy and light the charcoal for the incense. Gunderson didn't even wait for the end of the gospel, he just up and walked back there during the first reading. We figured he was going to slug back some rosé for a few minutes, but that would have been a minor infraction compared to what was coming. The next thing we knew, he was standing in the cry room, which was located behind and to the right of the priest's big chair, separated from the rest of the church by a wall of glass. This was where families with small, loud children and babies could attend mass on Sundays, but at this particular moment, it had only one occupant. None of the mourners in the church could see him... But we could.

Gunderson spent the next fifteen minutes making faces at us, jumping up and down like a gorilla on acid, trying to make us laugh. He was relentless, and his faces were good. He was killing us. We couldn't look. We couldn't not look.

A woman had just died, and here we were, red-faced and snickering in front of 40 or 50 sad and lonely people on a heavy Wednesday morning.

What an asshole. Him or me? I don't know.

The rest of the service was a blur. Eventually, he had to stop what he was doing, go light the incense and bring it out to the annoyed but calm Father Paul. We didn't get in trouble. Why? I have no idea. Probably something to do with our impending afterlives. None of us were ever asked to work a funeral again. And Mr. Smith stiffed us on the tip.

I need to get up and walk around. The bench is so hard, my leg fell asleep, so I limp slowly toward the bathroom. I bet it has one of those old cloth towels on a roller, for drying your hands. Yes. Yes, it does.

The person I came with - we're riding the train together - I don't want to let him out of my sight. He's not reliable, and I don't want to miss this train.

After eighth grade, I headed off to the public high school with some of my friends, while over half of my classmates moved on to the local Catholic high schools, where the boys and girls were kept separate. Gunderson and my good friend, Joe, had to ride the bus into the city to attend St. Benedict's. The priests at St. Ben's were genuine hard-asses, which made it a popular destination for parents hoping for one last shot at getting their Danny Gundersons under control. Joe told me about some of the standard punishments, notably the technique of making a kid kneel on pencils.

Danny's brother, Chip, was two years older than him, and I was told that they had a cousin Chip's age whose name was Sean Mahoney. Sean also went to St. Ben's. Somebody told me that one day after school, Sean decided to go back with the Gundersons and hang out at their house. I heard that they had a couple of bricks worth of firecrackers. The newspaper said that the firecrackers were used to fashion a pipe bomb.

Nobody knew precisely what happened or how. But my sister's friend lived across the street from them, and her mom was a nurse, and one afternoon, her mom heard a huge bang, and several minutes later, Danny was pounding on her door, all covered with blood - not his blood, his cousin's blood. Chip was in the back yard trying to stuff his cousin's intestines back in. I heard that Sean's hand was blown off. And Danny wanted my sister's friend's mom to help. Because she was a nurse, and she lived across the street, in a suburb where nothing bad ever happened.

I wonder if, before the incense was lit at the funeral, the smell of the church pews reminded Danny Gunderson of a train station.

I'm frustrated, because the train is due to arrive, and my traveling partner is just sitting there like a lump on one of the long, wooden benches. He is watching television like we have all fucking day to get to the platform. The TV is suspended up near the ceiling, and the Cubs are on. I'm pissed off that he would dare to make me late, to stress me out when this train could come at any minute, but he just sits there. I look up to justify my anger, to observe this idiotic distraction on the television, and I stare, kind of getting sucked in actually, watching the game - it's kind of nice and relaxing, the pace of a baseball game. The pitcher takes his time, the hitter seems to have a leisurely attitude, it's sunny, and Wrigley Field looks pretty full. The sound is turned down, so it's easy to hear the klaxon of the train coming — Aw Shit!

"Come on!"

I reach down and grab my companion, and he's not really human, I don't think. He's a sort of like a bubble, shaped roughly like a man. He's not a very healthy bubble. He's sort of dilapidated, sagging and wrinkled. I can see right through him, but he makes the world on the other side of him look brownish and sort of warped and crinkled. With my baggage slung over my left shoulder, I carry him in my clenched right fist — he weighs almost nothing. We have to walk through a tunnel underneath the tracks to get to our platform. I decide that in order to make this train, we're going to have to get in the car and drive around the block really fast, park the car, and run. I slam the bubble against the side of the car, like I'm flinging a bag of garbage at a dumpster that's too full for it to fit, and I dash around to the other side to hop in and start driving pell-mell around the block.

It's too late. The train is pulling away. I sense that the bubble is depressed. He is slumped down in the passenger seat, leaning against the door, lifeless and forlorn. The train is pulling away, and somehow, some way, I am going to catch up to this train. I'm driving like a

bandit, and I'm starting to catch up. The train is riding on some old-fashioned rails that go right down the middle of the street, and I'm driving alongside of it now, but oh no, it's beginning to pick up speed. It's pulling away, off into the distance.

The car is veering off to the left for some reason. I don't know why. I can't control it. I'm suddenly very groggy, very sleepy... Actually, I'm not driving anymore. I am now slumped down in the passenger seat, looking over at myself, driving. "You idiot," I try to say, and I see the building in front of us, and we are about to smash into it, but I lack the energy to move or to even care. I am sad, lifeless, and transparent now. We missed the train, and on top of it, I think we are about to die.

Such a short visit here to this world... Like a bubble blown by a child, floating on a breeze, it doesn't even need to hit the pavement to pop, just like that.

Will my bags be packed? Will I be ready, standing on the platform? This rare opportunity, to even know where the station is... It's truly amazing.

I think maybe I need to be more kind to my life. We live with the consequences of our mistakes - there is no escaping that. But there is infinite space for forgiveness. If we can't forgive ourselves, how can we expect anybody else to bother?

And outside of our own little sphere of influence, there are all kinds of terrible, unimaginable things going on. Things we couldn't even dare to speak about.

All of them somehow forgivable. Because anyone can change.

Can't they?

DOWN THERE BY THE TRAIN

Written by Tom Waits

Recorded by Johnny Cash

There's a place I know
Where the train goes slow
Where the sinner can be washed
In the blood of the lamb
There's a river by the trestle
Down by sinner's grove
Down where the willow
And the dogwood grow

You can hear the whistle
You can hear the bell
From the halls of heaven
To the gates of hell
And there's room for the forsaken
If you're there on time
You'll be washed of all your sins
And all of your crimes
If you're down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there where the train goes slow

There's a golden moon
That shines up through the mist
And I know that your name
Can be on that list
There's no eye for an eye,
There's no tooth for a tooth
I saw Judas Iscariot
Carrying John Wilkes Booth
He was down there by the train

Down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there by the train
He was down there where the train goes slow

If you've lost all your hope
If you've lost all your faith
I know you can be cared for
And I know you can be safe
And all the shamefuls
And all of the whores
And even the soldier
Who pierced the side of the Lord
Is down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there where the train goes slow

Well, I've never asked forgiveness
And I've never said a prayer
Never given of myself
Never truly cared
I've left the ones who loved me
And I'm still raising Cain
I've taken the low road
And if you've done the same
Meet me down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there where the train goes slow

Meet me down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there where the train goes slow

May 2005

Apparently Not Finished

May 28, 2005

Dear Gene,

Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU!

I'm not nuts! Dude, I've been afraid to tell anybody about this - little furry orange people hanging around my campsite. Well, yeah, they were sweet as hell, but I was trying to be by myself for a while, down in Guatemala. I've been on a personal retreat of sorts for the last 3 years. Shitty world. Sometimes you just gotta get away. From everything, everbody. Live off the land. Enough money to get by, if you do it right. No need to shower and shave every day. And no computer! Yeah! I needed that.

Despite their pleasant demeanor, I was starting to worry about the little furry guys. I mean, they were multiplying exponentially. And like I said, I was trying to be alone. I got the heebie jeebies, so I decided to head up to a place I know near Oaxaca. Nope. They showed up the morning after I pitched my tent. Cooked me breakfast. I went home to my Dad's farm in Wisconsin. They're cool. They don't bother me, they don't tell me what to do.

Shitload of email waiting for me, to be sure. It took me a week and a half just to delete all the spam. There was a year of contact from friends and family, who eventually gave up. Some of them were pretty pissed. Except for one member of my family who never gave up on me - MYSELF!!

Or should I say "my possible future self"?

Do you understand?

So what are the odds that separate Google searches for "emails from my future self" and "3-foot fuzzy orange guys" would both yield the same results?

You are a freak. You're actually telling people? What if the wrong people find out? Won't they come after you?

I think we should meet. You have no reason to trust me. But I have no reason to trust you either. I have friends in Boulder. Let's meet in that diner up on Pearl

Street - it's in a building that used to be a garage, I think.

My name's Will.

May 29, 2005

Will,

Nice to hear from you... I guess.

I thought this was all over with... I suppose it makes absolutely perfect sense that somebody would eventually track me down. If you're making this up, then your email is vaguely entertaining. If you're fucking with me, I'll be bummed out, but I don't care. It's nice to hook up with interesting people who have nothing better to do but send emails to people they don't know.

I guess the only reason that I'm writing you back instead of deleting your email, like I have done with about 20 or 25 other ridiculous, confusing, or pathetic messages that I have already received, is that you have drawn some sort of connection here between things that shouldn't really have anything to do with each other. What do the mossmen have to do with the future? Aren't they an obscure, ancient, simple bloodline, isolated for millennia out there in the Pacific? What are they doing in my house? And Guatemala?

I've had suspicions, ideas, shoved back into some corner in my mind, but... Like I said, I thought this was all over and done.

Dot's isn't open in that location anymore. Some fucking developer purchased that lot, kicked them out, tore down the building, and put some condos in its place. Condos with shitty storefront shops where you can purchase gilded croissants, and wheatgrass-infused organic wines. Fuckin' Boulder. Dot's moved to a strip mall out on 28th, a block south of Valmont on the east side of the street. If you want to meet, I'll be there on June 22nd at 9am, a Wednesday.

And why don't you bring some of that crack you've been smoking.

G

I'll see you then.

No mossmen in Wisconsin. But it's weird seeing all these fat white people again.
No offense.

Sincerely,
Will

None taken, asshole.

I forgot to mention - I don't know how much you have read - go back into the archives over the last 2 years. You don't have to be paranoid or freaked out about this. In short... Don't be a part of the problem.

G

PS I'm publishing your email. I don't feel like writing anything this month.

Gene,
I'd prefer you didn't do that.

If you feel you must, make sure you delete all my messages and compress your inbox folder. And change my name, and all the locations.

Whatever.

G

June 1, 2005

The woodpecker pounds the metallic vent on my roof like a jackhammer, and laughs to his friends. It's 5:55 am, but I'm already awake anyway. Can't really sleep much. Sunrise on the Flatiron Mountains sets them ablaze in a glowing orange-pink, if you ever get up this early. I'm used to it now, and find myself unaffected, waiting for the caffeine to kick in, so that I

can begin thinking again. The squirrel walks a tightrope on the power line, and stops to rest, his tail curled in a tight S-formation. He's just doing what he does, but I can't help feeling that he's showing off. Taunting me.

Another day, whether I like it or not - time to walk that fine line once again. Leading me from yesterday to the day after this one, a tightrope from cradle to grave.

I guess it beats falling.

June 2005

My New Friend

Dear Gene,

That photo of you on the web site — when was it taken?

Will

I dunno. Four years ago, I guess. I held a camera to my head while looking in the mirror.

G

One of your pieces said you put on a lot of weight. How much heavier are you now, compared to when you took this picture of yourself?

Will

Hmmm. I've been up and down. I'm guessing that I'm about fifteen pounds heavier. Why?

G

So I can recognize you at Dot's. Have you lost any hair?

Jesus Christ, dude. What the hell do YOU look like? Dot's won't be that crowded at that time of the day. I'll sit at the counter. There's only about five stools. If the other four people at the counter look exactly like me, then yell out my name. Should I wear a red carnation?

G

I assume by your reaction that you've lost a considerable amount of hair. Did you shave it real close, like so many other web-guys?

Will

Hey, Will. Check your watch. Do you know what time it is? It's time to go fuck yourself.

I look approximately the same as the picture, but fatter. I always wear short sleeve, plaid shirts.

I'll also be the only guy punching you in the face.

See you then.

G

June 22, 2005

I showed up at Dot's a little early. Even though they had to move this place to a little strip mall in the middle of nowhere, it still feels the same. Honest, unspoiled, funky. It's a good place to be. Great biscuits.

Precisely at 9 o'clock, the waitress with the pigtail braids and combat boots came right up to me. Before I could order the coffee, she looked me right in the eye and asked, "Are you Gene?"

"Yeah," I nodded, thinking, oh, brother, after all this, the dude is gonna cancel, and sure enough, she handed me this note. Scotch-taped to the note was a color printout of my photo — the one you see up there at the top-left of the page. But it had been photoshopped... He made me look fatter!!! He even receded my hairline! What the hell?

I ordered my coffee and carefully freed the folded-up note from about a dozen staples. Okay, Kaczynski. What's next?

Hey, Gene!

Glad you could make it!

Take your time. Finish your coffee. This place looks nice. I'll have to come and check it out sometime.

At exactly 9:41, make sure that you have already paid your bill, and then get up and leave abruptly. A yellow Vega will pull up out front. You'll get into this car, and you will be taken directly to me.

Will.

At this point, I was so amused by the freak-who-thinks-he's-James-Bond routine that I decided to go right along with the whole damn thing. I kept careful tabs on my cell phone clock to be sure that I would be ready to go at the precise moment. At 9:40 and 55 seconds, I got up quickly, and bolted out the door.

Screeching around the corner, westbound off of a sidestreet and into the parking lot, there was my ride! I climbed in, and this woman peeled out, and without even thinking to slow down and look, whipped us out onto 28th, right in front of a fucking bus. She floored it — the Vega seemed to have had some custom work done under the hood, because it could really fly. Within 90 seconds, she had taken seven separate turns, and pulled into a ramshackle garage in North Boulder, the door slamming shut behind us the moment she put the car in park. This was not the kind of driving you might

expect from a woman in a patchouli-soaked hemp dress with dreadlocks and hairy armpits, but I hadn't had the time to place upon her the usual pointless judgements, or even to find out her name, for that matter.

The person who's job it was to close the garage door had slipped passed the clutter, and was now peaking at me through the open window of the passenger side door.

"Hi, Gene. I'm Will."

"No shit."

I introduced myself to the driver. She said, "It's nice to meet you," with a kind of a forced, possibly pretend smile on her face, and she shook my hand but didn't tell me her name. God, I hate that. I told her I was impressed with her driving, but she really didn't seem interested in my existence, so I soon gave up on attempting any further conversation.

Will looked pretty much exactly as I expected. Reeeeeeally skinny, with long hair, and a sparse, scraggly beard. Googly eyes behind round wire-rimmed glasses.

"So..." I began, but he stopped me —

"Wait. I need to show you something, but you have to promise me something first."

"What kind of promise?"

"Well..." He looked a tad annoyed or bothered with me, a strange attitude for a guy who doesn't even know me. "You put a lot of information into your column about me. I can't... It's like this — "

"What? I changed your name and the place you live and everything. I made you Will from Wisconsin and said you were living in Guatemala or something."

"It's just.... WAY too many details! Look. The bottom line is, that I'm... sort of dangerous... In the minds of certain people..."

"Why? What do you — or what DID you DO?"

"Maybe I'll tell you later... First you have to promise me that you won't write about this meeting in your column this month. Otherwise, I won't show you what I think you really, really need to see."

"What the hell am I supposed to write about? I don't just sit around making things up! I'm not good at that."

"PROMISE!"

"OKAY, OKAY! Jesus..."

"Cuz if you write about this in your column, they'll come back from the future, they'll bust him out, and we'll be back to square one with NOTHING. I know how these people operate."

"Bust him out of where — wait... Bust WHO out?"

"The Moss Man... I, uh... Caught one."

Several seconds of silence and staring at each other...

Will spoke up, "He's in my trunk."

"What?!!! Oh, come on! Let him out! What good can you do anybody by keeping him in there?"

"DON'T WRITE ABOUT THIS IN YOUR COLUMN! I mean it!"

"Didn't I already promise you that I wouldn't?" I suggested unconvincingly, inching toward the back of the car.

Will rushed over to block me, "I see that look on your face. You're totally pissed that I locked the little guy in my trunk, and you're — "

"Let him out, NOW!" I dodged underneath him, heading toward the back of the Vega, attempting to open the trunk, but I needed a key. I pounded on it, "You all right in there?" pissing off the already-angry woman even more — she rushed over, apparently to prevent me from knocking any more rust off of the thing.

"Not THIS car," Will snarled. "MY car!"

Will stormed out of the door of the garage, grumbling the whole way through the overgrown yard and out to the curb in front of the house, "You'd better not write about this. NO — you'd better not THINK about writing about this — LISTEN! If you even THINK about writing about this, you plant the seeds of the decision to write about it. You can't just say 'I promise.' You have to have the firm conviction in your mind, and when... AHHH, FUCK!!!"

Will looked at me with this "How Could You?" expression on his face, as I gazed back and forth between him and his boxy gray 1980's Buick sedan, which seemed to have had its trunk jimmed open with a crowbar. I must have been smiling a little bit, but I was shrugging my shoulders... How can this guy get mad at me for something I haven't even done yet?

"I'm never showing you, or telling you, anything, ever again," Will mumbled, defeated. "How am I supposed to trust you?"

"I dunno... By not locking innocent, intelligent beings into your dark and filthy trunk?"

He considered my point, arms folded, with a hand to his chin. Seemed to consider it valid, nodding as we walked back to the garage.

"Got time for 9 holes?" I asked him, and he broke into a smile, eyebrows raised.

We rented clubs and played a rather pathetic round of golf over at Haystack Mountain. At least Will and I did. The woman in the hemp-dress and Birkenstocks thrashed us soundly.

I never found out her name.

PLEASE HELP!

Dear Tin Can Readers,

The staff at Mental Contagion is saddened to inform the loyal readers of this column that Gene Dillon has been on the Missing Persons list in Eastern Kansas since last Sunday, July 24th. We have been in contact with his wife, Michelle, and the FBI still has absolutely no information regarding his whereabouts. Gene and his family were on their way to Chicago for a long summer vacation. They stopped along I-70, near the city of Lawrence, to have a little picnic lunch in the 100-degree heat at a rest stop. Gene entered the public restroom at around 11:45 a.m. to "take care of some business" and never came out. After about 30 minutes, Michelle sent their son into the building to check on him. There was nobody left in the men's room.

The police were baffled, not really believing it possible that Gene could just disappear inside this building. They assume that he must have slipped out while Michelle was chasing the kids across the field, and grabbed a ride with some trucker. Michelle insists that the building was within her sights the entire time, and that he never left the building. There was no back door or anything. He just vanished while he was inside the bathroom.

For those of us who know Gene well, we are very strong in our belief that Gene would NEVER abandon his family and disappear like this. If anyone out there has ANY idea of his whereabouts — ANY

INFORMATION WHATSOEVER that may help us... to help his family and his friends to locate Gene, please contact us here at MC.

The police and the FBI seem to be doing their job — if you DO have information, please feel free to contact them, but... for reasons that may be obvious to the readers of Tin Can, we are skeptical of their "dedication to this case". Most of the staff here are NOT paranoid conspiracy theorists, but, in times of crisis, it is best to be careful, and that is all that we have to say. Please, keep us informed, not just with leads and information, but also with any ideas that you may have. Anything at all.

Thanks.

This is the last correspondence that Karen received from Gene:

Karen,

Thank you SO much for letting us stay with you in Minneapolis on the 12th and 13th. I'm psyched to see your new house and to meet Wendy and Brent on their big day. If you don't have a spare bed or futon, don't worry about it — we have sleeping bags and we like sleeping on floors.

I gotta run — lots to do before we get out of town. I'll be reachable while I'm in Chicago. I installed an airport card on my laptop, and I'll be doing a little bit of work in the mornings and evenings, and I'm aiming to get MC up on time, and finish my column and everything. Of course, I haven't started it yet...

I'll touch base with you at launch time.

G

Own Eyes

They put us with this... This *guy*...

The Moss People haven't stopped moving for a second. Highly agile and alert, they are. And serious.

There are 4 females and 2 males. I've never seen naked people work so hard. Quite comfortable in nothing but a thin layer of orange fuzz. All misconceptions about the simple and primitive nature of this diminutive tribe have been eradicated, as I witness their mastery of all this technology.

We're huge in here. What must normally provide a spacious vessel for them, with more than enough room for a miniature game of Mossman bocci ball, has been transformed into a flying Mini-Cooper by our presence. Nobody tells us what to do. I suppose there would be little to prevent us from jumping up and smashing the instruments. But why would we? We're getting the ride of our lives. Millionaires still can't buy a ride like this.

I happen to have a pen. Some scraps of paper. Business cards, receipts. Hoping they don't erase my memory, but just in case, you know. Do the Moss People do that? Nah. What purpose for taking us with them, but to show us something we need to remember?

Will is catatonic over there, sitting upright, propped up against something that looks like a narrow garbage can with an espresso maker sitting on top of it. Sometimes a Mosswoman has to lean way over him to get to the thing, her tiny breast bumping into his forehead, but neither party takes notice. He won't talk to me. I give up. They grabbed him before they picked me up, but I'm not sure how long he has been here.

This other guy... honestly, I have no idea why he's here. For our entertainment maybe? To take the edge off? Or to put one on? Here's a guy who, at first glance, you might avoid while you're walking around downtown, because he'd be bound to ask you for some change, and he'd get really close to you, and maybe smell bad. But after a few minutes, although his brain is pretty fried and sometimes

you wish he would stop talking, he comes off as rather sweet. He even smells sweet. Something on his breath, like he got really hungry and decided to eat some tulips.

His tattered hippy clothes are covered in patches, the most prominent of which looks like some sort of NASA patch which reads "Crewmember — Spaceship Earth". He's sort of gaunt, with hollow cheeks, bulging bloodshot eyes, and a thick bushy sort of handlebar moustache that hangs down to his chin. Looks kind of like Wild Bill Hickock. The moustache is abruptly trimmed straight across his upper lip to make room for his saxophone, which yes, he brought with him.

His "helmet"... He fashioned this hat out of one-half of a cardboard globe of our world — the Northern hemisphere, of course. He covered it in plastic wrap to make it look shiny. Sharing equal prominence upon the front are a "United We Stand" American flag sticker, and a piece of Middle East currency. A beanie rests upon the pinnacle, the tiniest little silver trophy, about an inch high, with the wings sticking straight up to the heavens.

As I was boarded onto the... well, it DOES look like a saucer — I slumped down in the middle of the floor, and the stranger serenaded me with a song that he wrote himself. He blew on his sax a bit, and he was actually pretty good, and he sang right into my face, in a raspy, gravelly twang,

I want YOU

to come DOWN

and invade this world with PEACE

And he blew some more, and he sang some more, and when I seemed to need my space, he eased off and gave me a little. He's all right. Wants to form a band called Weapons of Mass Percussion.

But why am I telling you about him?

Wait. I know why he's here! To make us feel as if WE have not lost our minds. If this guy can keep his cool here in this situation, then I guess we're okay. Yeah. He DOES take the edge off. Maybe he's some kind of special agent, trained precisely for this sort of thing. Or maybe I think far too highly of myself and Will, and he's some sort of bodhisattva that I should be holding in high regard.

As we're hovering out somewhere near the asteroid belt, all of a sudden the stranger yells out to us, shockingly loud, "IF IT'S YELLOW, KEEP IT MELLOW, IF IT'S BROWN, FLUSH IT DOWN!!" And there's this horrendous crunching pop, and I feel like every cell in my body is being sucked into its own nucleus. We are burning now, in ten thousand fires of hell, but thank God this sensation lasts for just a few one-hundredths of a second, after which we seem to be shooting straight up through some cloudy atmosphere, out into space.

"That's the easy way, " the old freak tells me, and I look down below, behind us, to see the cloud of fire and thick black smoke hanging above a world I don't exactly recognize. We can see everything — like in a glass-bottomed boat. We seem to have made some sort of a jump. Is this their world? It looks too much like Earth. The smallest Mossman, perhaps a child, turns on a video screen, but I can't pry my eyes away from what is obviously a mushroom cloud. I look for a desert horizon. No... Is this Hiroshima? No... And I remember something I once heard from a voice in my distant past.

That voice, it came from the future, and now it feels like my past, and as I glance at CNN, the time and date in the banner along the bottom of the screen reads 9:50, April 20, 2044... I can...

I can write to you now from the future, and the moment I write it down, it becomes my past. I would like to tell you about my past, a time way back then, when I received an important and urgent message from further still into the future. And now, time as a real and concrete concept has officially been sucked out of my universe.

Death is very close to me now. When time no longer exists, death sits right next to you, a constant companion. The beginnings are here too. For the first time in my life, I can remember my own birth. Ugly place, not as clean as I expected. Joyless environment, doctor and nurses just do their jobs and clean me up. Mom is all but unconscious, bleeding, waiting... Staring... God, she looks tired.

We enter orbit. We float. Listen. See. I enter my own personal orbit around a small, perfect sphere of clear liquid. One droplet. Not exactly clear, actually — it is slightly opaque with salt. A biological

emission of some sort, from one of the beings inside this vessel. Slowly, I spin off to the side, my head thumping into Will's ass. The little sphere is slowly and gradually sucked outward to the perimeter, into a small gray filter, and jettisoned out into space.

"What's your name?" I ask the stranger, and he kindly and softly tells me that I can just call him "Dude".

"Okay," I say, like it was the most important thing I ever said to anyone.

Pen not work...

Dude gives me a sharpie.

Moss People are floating about passively, tucking into somersaults. Earth on the dark side is... *dark*. I've seen plenty of photographs from space — a world lit up in great clumps of concentration by electric civilization at night. The Sahara was dark, I remember that. And Siberia. Places like that. Now it's almost all dark. I see bursts and flashes of bright light. I see black circles ringed in yellow flame, too spacious to fathom.

I puke in my mouth. Covering tight with hands, out of respect for the only friends I have left at this moment, I force it all back down. Dude is enjoying zero gravity, tumbling and pushing from one side of the cabin to the other. Like maybe he's seen all this before.

I try speaking. "So this is our future?"

The Moss People begin to straighten themselves, one after another, and line up in formation to face me. As we gradually pass around the edge of the world, to bask again in the warm light of the sun, they float and stare at me through intent, blazing eyes for quite some time, as peaceful as ever. Then, in unison, they all shrug, almost apologetically... Each one turns to push off in different directions to get back to work.

Re-entry into the atmosphere is not as uncomfortable as I had expected. This machine is engineered well.

In just a short time, we are speeding along over the Atlantic Ocean toward South America. Inland,

we descend, lower and lower, until we nearly graze the treetops, and cruise at the steady speed of a small airplane over the jungles of a winding, muddy river. The first of the trees are blackened, leafless and dead, and the ground is thick with tangled masses of nothingness. Dead stuff. We pass over several miles of this landscape, to be greeted by several more miles of the same landscape, after which we approach several more miles of the same landscape, and so on and so on and so on... And Will is *balling* now, and literally tearing his hair out, as we sail on and on over the vistas of a vast murdered place.

I think this leg of the journey must have taken roughly 8 or 10 hours, like driving from Boulder to Des Moines, but not one living creature peeked out from behind a charred stump, and we were watching, watching very closely. Will eventually passed out, twitching in his nightmares on the transparent floor, passing along over all of this in a heap. I can't sleep. Dude pulls a C-harp from his pocket and plays it slow and sad, like a prisoner on the green mile.

I hope my family is okay back there. Mostly, I don't want them to worry. At some point this morning, someplace in Kansas or Missouri, I walked into a rest stop bathroom and found myself here, in the company of this crew and its passengers. Come to think of it, I still need to pee... A Mossman shows me how to urinate into this vacuum thingy.

I had been writing my column on the road, speculating about some of the things that Will had to tell me. He didn't trust the Moss People. He seemed a little bit paranoid, but some of it was starting to make sense. A lot of stuff about how the Moss People might never come into existence unless we, in their past, fulfill our obligations in setting in motion the proper conditions that will one day lead to their existence. Will doesn't trust the government, sure, and for plenty of good reasons, but now I realize that he doesn't trust anybody at all, not me, not these nice people, and probably not even the Dude.

So I'm thinking that in truth, the Moss People already exist in their timeline, and what do they care? Obviously, they care about US, because they have paid us a visit, and understanding our horror and our resistance to taking on such obligations in this life... Responsibilities that would require us putting our sorry asses way out on the line... They have come to help. Today, they have decided that knowledge is no longer good enough. We needed experience. We needed to see.

Something Will told me... Well, when I said he doesn't trust anyone, I really meant it. That includes himself. He knows who he is. He knows who he must become. He is an inventor. In the future, he will have so little trust in himself, that he will send all of the specs and calculations back in time, to be certain that his former self gets the technology built correctly. And now, it is up to Will to make all of this possible.

See... Will is The Sender. Will is going to bring out the knowledge and the wisdom that will allow the conscience of the future to communicate with its troubled past. To get through to us in ways like these. Will is our greatest hope.

If he chooses to be, anyway.

Something is happening. Dude pipes up, "INFINITY AND BEYOND!" And this time, I'm pretty sure that my body is turned inside out and stretched out into a vast web of particles as large as our own sun, before shrinking down to the size of a paramecium, and then back up again, when we emerge from a space above a pyramid somewhere in Central America. We proceed to fly low, fast and undetected all the way back to Colorado.

Beautiful lush green thickness, the birds in massive flocks of white, an airplane and some cars, clear blue waters and a man and his boy on a fishing skiff, and baseball fields, and peaks and valleys, and everything is happening peacefully... Look at this place. Just look at it. Look at those cows. Black and white cows! Damn.

"I'm gonna get me a big glass of milk," Will is sitting up now, seeing life again through worn out, baggy eyes, "And a gallon of donuts, and dozen coffees."

"Go easy on that coffee," Dude tells him sternly. "You'll wear out your CHEEE before the day is done."

Dot's Diner is really great. I eat 2 biscuits with butter and honey. Will orders fifty eggs, but we talk him down. We read the Onion and laugh. But what is this? The last week of August? Is that a joke? In hushed tones, we discuss the fact that an entire month has passed, and try to figure out why. Probably something to do with precise moments of time at certain places that allow ease of passage, or...

Oh, God. My family... I gotta get home.

We have our last bites of pie, and say goodbye. Will needs to disappear again. I'll see him someday. Or maybe I won't. The Moss People are sure to turn up when I need them the most. Somehow I have my doubts that I'll run into Dude again. We exchange an elaborate Dude handshake, and all three of us go our separate ways on foot, down straight busy roads.

Perhaps one day I'll be able to fully absorb and understand what I have just witnessed, and do something... Anything... But I just got home, and there is so much joy, I can't even describe it. The smiles on their faces are unceasing. It's disturbing, knowing that so much time has passed for them, wondering where I had gone... I can't imagine what the kids have had to deal with in their little minds. And Michelle! I wish they didn't have to go through all that.

It sort of does feel like I've been gone for a month. I'm really very tired. Plan is to sleep for a week. Gotta replenish that CHEEE.

And then, we'll talk.

Do you have time?

Mr. Sandman, Bring me a Dream

It's the last day of the month on Friday, and I'm scuffling and scrambling to get the boy off to school on time. Showered, I put on my socks that are too hot, and my underwear from Costco, the new ones

that I regretted buying before I even found them, two aisles over from the advanced sale of Christmas gifts. Who wears underwear from Costco?

Shit.

The CD alarm clock on the dresser reads 7:54. Nick Drake woke me up this morning, haunting me with *Black-Eyed Dog*, the only song that ever wakes me up without a snooze. Michelle's neo-traditional alarm clock gives me seizures. It has the rattling bell, which is so fucking loud that I have to make sure I escape to the basement before it goes off, but that's not even the worst of it. One minute before it rings, it has a bright light that flashes on and off. Who creates such things? This clock says it's 8:04.

Tying my boots, a glance at my little half-hockey-puck travel alarm clock — my trusty backup number, which sits right next to my bed. It becomes such a wonderful variety of little objects on a difficult morning as I'm jerked out of REM sleep every five minutes. It's my wallet, my glasses case, a frog, and a pencil case... A giant spider with no legs. It tells me that it's 7:57. I'd better hurry.

Coop has a matching red travel clock, just like mine, which he ignores every morning. His blankets and his giant stuffed duckie create a fortress, impenetrable by sound. It's 7:59 in here, it's 8:02 amidst the dining room panic, it's 7:49 on my basement G4 Mac, and the pink singing alarm clock in Emma's room is always 3:32, and it never sings. My cell phone gets the time from some sort of satellite, or from outer space or something. *It knows "when"*. Where the fuck is my cell phone?

I have no fucking idea what time it is anymore.

I don't know the month. I don't know the year. My hair must be falling off the top of my head in great unholy clumps, but there is nothing on my pillow... Michelle thinks I have cancer. She's making appointments for me.

Wouldn't that be easier to explain?

You think you're tired? You're not tired. You just don't know.

What if the alarm did not ring for you? What if days passed, or a month, or a year, before you could suffer its call again?

I don't know who these people are. They spend all their time trying to convince me that everything is wonderful. But if this were so, why would they bother? The Mossmen were real. They were honest. They were present with me, and all they wanted to do was to show me what was there, in my future. In the future of my kids.

But these people... They are regular humans. White people. I go to bed at night, or I park my car, or I go for a walk, and they just take me. They time-hop me around in their sunny little future, and they talk at me and talk at me and talk at me, and they don't let me sleep too much. Last night, they brought me with them for about 18 months. I had them convinced that they had won me over. Each time out, they wait until they are good and ready before they bring me back to the exact same time and place, and I'm instructed to go on with life as if nothing has happened. So what if I've aged 10 years this month? Who will notice?

Well, fuck them. They're gonna have to kill me.

Their language stunted, their bodies frail, they take me 600 years out, and why, WHY? Did it take them this long? They're so proud, but the Earth still looks pretty sick to me. *They still believe that it was all part of the divine plan!* That it was all necessary and unavoidable. They've interpreted and reinterpreted the Word, and made it all fit into generation after generation of waking nightmares, and this is supposed to be some holy place, where the Garden of Eden is on the highest ground, and you can drink from the bountiful but restricted flow coming forth from designated water sources stored in tanks.

So why are they bothering *me*, for God's sake? Will somebody help me?

This is so unexpected.

We're gonna be late. I gotta go. I don't know if I have much time left with you...

But I defy them.

They will not tear down this world and rebuild it again. I won't let them.

So here's one desperate call to the future:

Moss People! Get your asses back here, immediately. It's September 30, 2005, and I'm about to go outside and walk Cooper to school.

I'm not sure what time it is, exactly.

October 2005

The Last We've Heard...

Subject: Re: MC November
From: Gene Dillon
Date: Mon, 24 Oct 2005 23:17:02 -0600
To: Karen Kopacz

Dear Karen,

This may be it for me. Not sure how much use I will be to you from here on out. It's physically painful just to force myself to send you this short note, but I'll try...

I didn't know what brainwashing was. Always thought school was a form of brainwashing, and television and the other media conglomerations. No. You all have it easy back there. You have more freedom than I can even bother to dream of anymore.

It's no use waking up. It's no use going to sleep. Why bother working? My days are numbered. And I do mean days.

I'm gonna keep typing. I'm not gonna stop. I have to have the last say. Then they can come for me, and it'll be done. They warned me plenty. But what good is this? I can't lie for them. I won't.

I always thought I would do something important with my life, you know. Something really fat and juicy, to make an impact... Right now, the best I can do is to meekly shut my mouth and bow out. I will hit the send button when I have finished this. They will see what I have written, and they will know that I have chosen not to play for their team. They will take me from my home, and that will be that.

I'm at least fifty-three now. Can you believe it? We used to have the same birthday, you and I, but now we are askew. I lost track of the age thing a long time ago. Since my last column went up, they decided to do some work on me - a little bit of plastic surgery, hair implants, some dental... When I refused to eat, they'd just knock me out and feed me intravenously. I think I spent the last six months strapped to a bed, with some sort of electroshock thing keeping my muscles alive. Hooray! I look like I'm 38. What shit.

I suppose they might try to replace me, or something. Hmmm... What do you think about that? Will you be able to recognize an imposter? They already have all of my passwords. Sorry.

Oh, fuck.

QUICK! CHECK THE DATES ON ALL MY ARCHIVES! MAKE SURE THAT NOTHING HAS BEEN UPDATED IN THE LAST FIVE WEEKS!

God dammit. I don't even know if it'll make a difference. They can go back, and...

Uh...

Yeah. I'm... I don't know what's next. They're in control. They gave me an ultimatum. This is my big "fuck you" to them. I don't have a column this month. Maybe you can just slap this up there.

Not much, is it? A lousy email? Shouldn't I say something wise or holy or...? Shouldn't I write some sort of anthem that people can chant and sing for the next sixty years while they're saving this beautiful place, fighting the best fights, and sticking it to the man? Can you write that anthem for me? I'm tired. I'm fifty-three. Did I tell you? I'm not really thirty-eight. While the leaves changed their colors and the air turned chilly for all of you, I've been living out over a fourth of my entire life in some deluded, plastic future where men wear tight pants and hairnets. And the women are forced to lactate and pump their breasts for everyone, because they have no cows or goats. Yeah, and they do it in secret, Karen. Out back in the "maternal" quarters, but all the men call it the barn. God, this place is fucked up, and it's cold, it's bitter cold, all the time. It might be Denali or someplace like that. The cleanest place they could find. I wonder how many of these people have eaten human flesh. I wonder how many of these people have NOT eaten one of their own. Probably just me. Their sacred, holy mountain, it's dead - dead and picked clean and rising up out of the earth like some fossil coughed up in a mudslide. Everything is boiled and filtered, and if you don't eat the ants, you are an ungrateful heathen.

What am I thinking about that for?

I'm sorry. Let me finish.

Listen. If you ever hear from...

Never mind. You'll know what to do.

I sat in the yard Saturday afternoon. The maples in front of my house had dumped half of their load the night before, and the ground was dry. I raked the biggest pile I have ever seen, and I sent Cooper and Emma all over the neighborhood to bring their friends over to jump in it and bury each other. And I sat in my lounge chair and I drank hot cider and I drank in the leaves and I drank in the laughter and I just kissed my wife on her lovely forehead, and she smiled in her sleep.

I hope we all get to see each other again. God... Even the trees out in front of my house know how to say goodbye.

I'm not sorry. I take nothing back.

My kids? Michelle? Everyone? Yes, I'll miss them. You see, I already do. I'm gone from their lives on any given night, I'm gone for months, years... And I'm being transformed into someone I don't want my children to know. Maybe someone can stop them this time. Maybe...

Say hello to everyone for me. Be well, and be good.

G

Gene Dillon disappeared on his way to work on Tuesday, October 25th, and has been missing ever since. His family would like to thank all of you for your kind thoughts and prayers.

We here at Mental Contagion are proud of the work that Gene has done, and we hold out hope for his eventual return, in some form or another. Until then, we can imagine him living out his remaining years at a time in the not-too-distant future, subverting a colony of puritan time-travelers, or dying valiantly in stubborn opposition to some sort of pointless nonsense.

December 2005

Poor Me

Sorry if I'm sounding rushed. They only dropped me off yesterday, and there's too much going on to just be sitting here writing about it.

The Mossmen. They had to come and pick me up again. Not because they wanted to - they had to fix some problems. The situation has been rectified, as well as it could be, anyway. I missed my birthday and Thanksgiving. That sucks.

I love Thanksgiving. I heard that I made a kickass turkey with the age-old family recipe for stuffing, where you mix in pieces of brown 'n' serve sausage, like anybody needs *that* - AND I made a tofurkey for myself, and two gravies, and I put down a half-bottle of 18-year McCallan's in the kitchen before anybody had a chance to say grace. Technically it was me, but I wasn't myself that night, actually. No... Not really... I, as I know myself now, in this body, was picked up on September 23rd, after which I spent about five weeks on Mars, just hanging around really - part vacation, part retreat, with a little bit of debriefing. It was... or will be... 2119 AD. You should see this fucking place - but I'm not supposed to talk about it. And I can't tell you why, so don't ask.

So now I guess I'm about... a month younger than the date on my birth certificate. It doesn't seem right, but it's a hell of a lot better than the way things were. I might be behaving now as if nothing has happened to me. Well, it sort of feels that way. I mean, honestly, I just feel like I've had the longest vacation of my life. I wish I could afford to do that every year - just sit and read, go for long walks. If it weren't for the loves of my life back here, it would have been really difficult to get me back into that machine.

I met myself once before. I guess it's no coincidence that I once again met myself on my birthday. These people have some kind of bizarre affinity for the auspiciousness of times and dates and numbers and patterns. But this time the encounter was really sad. I'm still 38. He's about 55 and a half. Essentially, I, the me in this particular body, didn't have to live through all that hell myself. My other self did. The Gene Dillon who composed the last two columns and suffered through almost two decades of abductions by the idiots - that guy was my duplicate. Not a clone, no. He was the exact same person as I was on September 23rd. The Mossmen took me unconscious that night. They created another me through time travel manipulation. Then they put him back - why, I'll never understand, no matter how many times they explain it. Because history is history, even though they can fuck with it whenever *they* want. Meanwhile, they took me up to Mars to hang out for a while and figure out how to make my reentry appear seamless. They made me shave my head, and they kept me awake for a few days and roughed up my skin a bit. I don't really see the point, but I guess they worry about what regular folks will think if I suddenly look shockingly younger - my boss, other parents at the elementary school, people like that...

I feel really bad for the guy... He looks like shit. He's almost dead. "He". I could say "me" but it wouldn't make any fucking sense. I guess the obvious question one might ask would be "What happens to your soul when you get split into two like that?" Well, I don't feel any different. Technically, from the moment I was copied, we became two unique individuals with the exact same soul and the exact same memories of 37 years, 11 months and 13 days of waking and dreaming life. Now he is Him and I am Me. But we're closer than conjoined twins, and the separation was painless.

To make a long story short, they put Him back in bed that night, and it was HE who endured all of the yearlong abductions and the brainwashing, and the testing of his will, and the missing of his wife and his children and the rest of his family and friends. During his brief moments back at home, he had the strength to speak out against them, and they didn't like it.

The White Man, from an era they refer to as the 600's P.R., (Post-Rapture) kidnapped him a total of 18 times. They wanted him to put a happy face on *their* story, the one where their ancestors encouraged the destruction of a perfect world so that "God" could give them a newer, cleaner one. You can find all the mythology in some very old books. These folks took it all literally, unfortunately.

The Mossmen returned to fix the problem, seeing as everything that transpired may have been their fault, indirectly. They came to visit me a couple of times this year, to help me, to help us... I told their story, and I suppose the White Man was jealous or something.

The Mossmen put an end to their frantic and bland efforts. Non-violently, I'm sure. And then they swapped Me with Him, and that's that.

He was resigned to the plan without putting up much of a fight. He will miss everyone, and that just rips him to shreds. But he had been without them for most of 17 years anyway. He's happy now, I guess. Drinking a fruity drink, swinging in a hammock. Maybe they'll let him come and visit some time, I don't know. The whole space-time thing is obviously pretty fucked up now anyway. So is it insane for me to keep speaking about this? Will it bring more trouble? How the hell should I know? I just felt like people should know what he went through. And that he didn't come back and sit in this very chair and tell lies to anybody, and for that I'm forever grateful. I'm proud of him. I don't know if I could have done it myself...

I wonder how long this has been going on? Mostly, I have to wonder how much the Mossmen and the other folks up there actually know about their past? Are they simply destined to go back to certain places and certain times and fulfill some obligation to do something? Is the universe fixed in that way? Like there's nothing they can really do to change anything, because it was going to happen anyway?

So... Who cares? Well, I guess I do. Otherwise, I have to just sit and watch all of these terrible things happen.

What am I waiting for? Hard evidence? Somebody show me that something I do will have an impact. Shuttle me back and forth in time and show me exactly what I caused, good or bad. Hopefully good...

I don't think it works that way. It's pretty clear that time travel is sacred and serious business. I don't know if I'll ever see them again, or bump into myself at a train station... But what memories! Lovely secrets for my grave.

It's better to be back home though. I'm thinking of starting a new story. I'm tired of talking to myself, and I'm really hoping that all of this is behind me. Thanks to everyone who supported Gene Dillon: Version 2 while I was away. He really appreciated everything you did for him.

I know that I already said goodbye, but... I still feel pretty hollow inside. I'm sorry, but I have to do this.

Dear Gene: Version 2, Mars 2119,

I have to know - are you okay?

G

Subject: Am I Okay?

From: Gene Dillon
Date: Wed, 30 Nov 2119 22:17:02 -0600
To: Gene Dillon

"Dear Gene: Version 2, Mars 2119,

I have to know - are you okay?

G"

Hey, man -

Fuck you, and the horse you rode in on.

Just kiddin'. Don't worry about me. I slept for about ten days straight. I woke up only to go to the toilet and shower and get my massage and eat like a king. Great cooks up here. I am loved. I think I'll cook for them tomorrow.

Honestly, I think we should call this both a Hello and a Goodbye right now. I won't write to you again. I'll know everything about your future, and I just don't see the point. We've already been through that.

Your job from here on out is the same as it's always been. Don't give in.

Pain is temporary. Regret lasts forever, but so do the rewards of endurance for the sake of truth. Truth is love, man. I think you know which of these you want to live with for the rest of your life. In one, you are alone with a cancer that you injected into your own veins. In the other, you are never alone, and you never have to stop living until you die.

I'm not too sure that there's anything more I can say. Truth has a way of finding you, the moment you open your eyes and start looking for it.

Love ya!

G

August 2006

Cry Fowl — Part 1

“Will you knock it off?!! I can barely hear myself think!”

“Well, whaddy need to do that for?”

This fucking guy never lets up. Every day the same thing. It's morning. The light, the sun... It makes me want to fucking scream. So I scream. What's it to him?

He's practically on top of me now. “Look, it's hard enough having to be locked up in this fucking place. I just want some peace. I could sleep through my entire sentence here. Never wake up. Wouldn't you like that? Sleep in, for chrissakes. We aren't going anywhere!”

He has a point there, I have to admit that. But the nightmares are a hell of a lot uglier than this cage. And that's really saying something. There are six sides to this thing, the four directions and the up and the down, and every side looks exactly the same, a grid-work of impenetrable steel. And it reeks like the inside of a pig's ass. I'll never get used to this foul stench in my nostrils.

I'm not even making half as much noise as the dudes in the next cell. It's barely 6 am, and they're practically tearing each other's faces off. The guards don't give a shit. If somebody dies, it could be days before they drag out the carcass. They don't even clean up the daily mess. Just the occasional hose-down on a stifling hot day. Makes you pray for heat stroke, just to know that the rain is coming, to wash some of the stink off.

I haven't seen the sky in I don't know how long.

The walls over there across the way, at the start of each and every day, they turn from an inky black to a lovely sort of darkness adorned with a couple of very faint, gray rectangles. That's the light! It's what I live for, just a glimpse of that. It makes me want to scream with joy and longing, with longing and joy, I scream over and over and over. My cellmate is going to kill me. I might just let him. I'll have that last

memory to take with me, a barely perceptible glimpse of hope for a bright new day when everything might change for the better. You never know.

I've never known any other place. As kids, we didn't have any idea we were living as prisoners. When you're growing up, you have your reality as you find it, and that's it. It doesn't feel good or bad, right or wrong - that crap comes into your mind later. You make the best of what you've got, and you're green enough to be able to enjoy a few laughs. I miss that. That was a freedom of sorts, but I squandered it somehow. I didn't know what to do with it, and I sure as hell didn't know how to hang onto it. It's all in the attitude... Yes! It's exactly the same thing that gets me up out of bed all pumped up every morning, that feeling... But it only lasts a moment now, before somebody tries to shove that bliss right back down my throat. How did we get like this?

They used to let us out in the yard a lot more frequently in the old days. That sure helped. We used to just flail! And smack each other around like lunatics, and run and jump and chew on sunflower seeds all day long in the sun. Why don't they let us out anymore? What did we do wrong?

Just in case... I'll greet every new day the same as always, hoping that one day... One day, I'll look around me, and all of these walls will be gone, and the rest of the world will crow along with me, up to the blue sky and the clouds and the sun.

To be continued...

September 2006

Cry Fowl? Are You Kidding Me?

No, no, no, no, NO! That was a storyboard I created for a cartoon about 6 or 7 lifetimes ago. And you want me to revive it in depressing novel form? No. We can't go backwards. I don't even know what I was thinking about back then.

Remember the scraps of paper tossed in a heap on top of a desk that only got dusted when I decided to rearrange the furniture? I put all those ideas, thoughts and illegible rantings into an unmarked manila folder, and then I put them inside a cardboard box with some Mac-formatted zip discs and a stack of outdated software manuals and the previous generations of unmarked manila folders. Two years ago, I began to actually write dates on the tabs of the manila folders, as a method of organizing my confusion.

But this one particular packet of nonsense was special. If I could only remember which box it was, I could look inside it and be reminded of how I actually made a photocopy of this piece and mailed it to myself. Somebody told me that this is a method of copyright-protecting your work. I think that person made up this fact—this is not the sort of thing that lawyers do—but I did it anyway. Mailed a package to myself, with myself on the return address, and when it finally arrived two days later, (how inefficient!) I took the unopened package and placed it inside of a cardboard box, to be lovingly shoved into a corner of some closet in my basement and buried underneath more non-descript cardboard boxes. I'm not exactly sure what I intended to do with it. The content contained within the crudely illustrated panels of this storyboard added up to the amount of footage presented in a feature-length movie. So... I could have made the animated film myself... Perhaps I could cut corners, and do it at 8 frames per second. About 43,200 panels. Hmmm. I'm a shabby illustrator and my animation skills are even worse. Simple line drawings, in black and white? It could be totally raw and unrefined, man! True artistry! No, that would get awfully tiring to look at, after about 5 minutes. Flash? Oh, hell yeah. I could tween like crazy, let the computer do most of the work.

So there are these chickens, see? And they live in these shitty cages—literally shitty, because they sleep, eat and shit in the same place, every single day. So it's like a prison film, except that one sunny day, the

board of directors has learned that the politically correct thing to do, is to convert their entire flocks of filthy inmates into free-range birds! Obviously, it is also a move that will generate greater profits, but that just distracts from the story, where we follow this couple, you know, a hen and a rooster, down the merry path to their golden future, filled with opportunity. Off to the land of milk and honey, except in this case, they play out the modern version of the American dream, and head off to the big city. But like in *The Grapes of Wrath*, their naïve hopes and dreams crash head-on with reality, and they end up moving into a housing project and take in a veal for a roommate to help pay the rent.

Wait. Does that make any sense? Can a living calf actually be called a veal, or is veal just the type of meat that they become after the slaughter, and after being dipped in egg, coated with flour, browned on both sides, and baked lovingly with marinara and parmesan? Whatever you call him, he lives off of government subsidies, and he never comes out of his box.

To put this into novel form would be an arduous task. Oh, God, the research! Can you imagine? To find out what is and isn't veal, I would have to actually go to a library! Nothing is true on the Internet anymore. Did you know that someone is out there right now, trying to debunk the myth of the 40 year-old twinkie? Yeah, that's right. Somebody out there wants us to stop believing that:

A twinkie is actually baked for ten minutes, rather than created out of a mixture of self-rising chemicals, and

A twinkie actually has a shelf-life of 25 days.

FUH! I am flabbergasted! I eat 25 to 30 year-old twinkies all the time. And they taste great! I've had far worse meals in my lifetime. Take the River Kwai, for example. It was a Thai restaurant on Belmont in Chicago—I think they shut it down. They were open until 5 am, and the place was run by a skeleton-crew made up of either junkies or the living dead—or some combination of the two. Your “entree” always came with a small bowl of “soup” that smelled—and tasted—like underpants. I remember one night, finding a lone hair in my “soup.” and then finding one more lone hair in my “pad see yew”.

And they were both pubic!

So the hen has to shoot herself up with all kinds of hormones to help her lay eggs at an alarming rate, which she sells at a terribly unfair market price in order to make ends meet. Of course this makes her

very unstable. The rooster has trouble finding work. He is poultry, mind you, and all jobs in the city are normally given to humans. So he finds a Luke Skywalker mask, puts it on, and having a beak behind the mask, it becomes very difficult to see as he wanders down the street looking for “help wanted” posters in store windows. So he wanders in and applies at the first place he locates. And he gets the job!

Saigon Chicken is a fair place to work. The General's covert recipe is a little tricky to manage... But apparently, there is a bit of a moral dilemma involved in his choice of careers.

This hen and this rooster find themselves trapped in a world of fear, desperation and hypocrisy, but they are too chicken to do anything about it.

Get it? They are chickens!

But hey, who isn't? Much of the time...

I think everybody dies at the end. I can't remember.

I'm not so sure I can write this book right now. I'm too tired. It's 11:42.

If you want to know how it ends, drop me a line. I'll mail you a package.

October 2006

Haikus of Panic and Realization

Sun not yet risen
Pain and tightness in the chest
I could die today

Trouble with breathing
You've got to be kidding me
I let my wife sleep

Alone in the dark
Is this how a life can end?
How ridiculous

Opportunities
Bodies record ignorance
Coffee and pizza

Ponder what mattered
And what I have accomplished
I am not impressed

I wake up my wife
What is there to say, really?
I apologize

Children are sleeping
Let them finish their good dreams
They don't need to know

They dry-shave my chest
Electrocardiogram
Results abnormal

Come back tomorrow
We have plenty of machines
Just bring more money

Three days I must wait
Have I shortened my own life?
Such a fool I've been

The things we can do
While the moments are wasted
Just think about that

How crazy is this?
Congratulations, you're fine!
I am such an ass

Wait. I'm still okay?
Why should I be so lucky?
Crystal clear message

Final wake-up call
Yes, I will listen this time
Time to live my life

Take care of yourself

Always remember your death
This world does need you

Remember your death
Just like it was yesterday
While you're still breathing

November 2006

Chapter 1: Difficult

Well, what's the hardest part, anyway? The writing? No. Writing isn't difficult. You can write anything you want. It doesn't have to be good. It doesn't even have to be interesting. I happen to be writing right now. See?

To be driven to create—I suppose you need that. But then you have to bother doing it. I decided to dive into this medium about 4 years ago. It just made a lot of sense. I had done some illustration and cartooning and painting, but I was untrained. I was unskilled. Most of all, I lacked the drive. It was the whole “one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration” thing. I liked coming up with the ideas, but the rest of it was so mundane and tedious. Carrying out the ideas took away too much of the time I could have been spending on the generation of more ideas. To me, it was all about the stories and the messages being communicated, anyway.

So I abandoned all efforts at any kind of visual art, and I gave up on all my future plans to learn an instrument and become a rock star. (Glad I didn't sink any time into that.) I can see how the mastering of another skill such as painting, illustration, film or music could one day bring me to a point where I was nailing down what I wanted to accomplish, but it would take so long to get to that point, and I could see how easy it would be to get lost along the way, lost in the craft, in the production, in the refinement or in the collaboration. All excuses, I suppose. Mostly, it just didn't fit. I didn't want a tedious hobby. I wanted something to do with my life. Writing felt a lot closer to the source and the inspiration. I wanted to be closer to the 100%.

There is something different about writing, and I would be delighted to hear a lot of people disagree with me about this: Anyone can do it. This is not to say that just anyone can be “good” at it. But we all have the capability to speak words and to write them down. For some reason, it's something I feel like doing. I have no formal training, and I really don't read that much. But I guess none of that matters. Everybody has to start somewhere, and I have no illusions of future fame, or notoriety, or any kind of developing brilliance—just a bunch of stories and stupid jokes. I enjoy doing this.

But...

I think it's time to do some of that stuff I don't feel like doing. I have to put forth some percentage of perspiration, because it's time, it's something that needs to be done. I want to take a big chunk of what I've been doing these last four years, and put together a collection of my material. Like, in print. You know. A book-thingy. People do that. Serious writers and silly ones, too. Everybody does it.

I don't care about success at this point. But I don't want to waste anybody's time either. Especially mine. So... I have to go back into the archives. Forty-eight installments of the Tin Can, the column I have been forcing out onto the Web every month. I have to look at just what the hell I've been doing.

Good God. I have to read all this crap again.

Can of Worms

Yeah. I started thinking about this thing two years ago. A short novel, featuring a couple dozen of the emails I received from my future self. But I had to go back and sort through over a hundred of them, and pick my favorites, and then go through the notes that I had written along with them, describing my personal experiences during that time, and ... it was all kind of daunting, you know? Okay, maybe not. It's just reading and proofreading, right? Well, let me tell you a little something about my “craft.”

Mental Contagion has always published on the first of every month. This provided me with a valuable opportunity back in 2002, if Karen's offer from the previous year was still open. It's called a deadline. I knew that when I committed myself to writing a column—*this* column—that I would have to come up with something every month, no matter how crappy it felt, or how hurriedly I slopped it together. And that's just what I did! Every 28th or 29th of a month, I would begin to work on my column. In late 2003, I started helping with the production of this online magazine. All that work turned out to be valuable and enlightening, as far my recognition of the craft goes. Since that time, I've been co-producing, knocking out the HTML, “editing” all the staff columns, and launching the magazine, usually on time. At the beginning of 2006, I added an interview/conversation feature to my workload, called The Shovel, another great source of inspiration and experience.

So, you see how a workload can build up. There's also the wife and kids and other interests. My life is about as busy as yours. But I love the writing, and I love MC and the people who are a part of it. Unfortunately, the challenges have caught up with me. Each month has been a scramble to do everything else, and my column, *my work*, was becoming an invisible sort of stepchild, ignored. The work was getting squeezed. I had forgotten why I was doing this. The whole point was for me to be writing, to keep writing, to build up a body of work and perhaps even refine my craft along the way. And it's not like I didn't try to spread it out over the entire month. I've come to learn that anything I compose between the 1st and the 28th is simply lost, scrapped or forgotten. I don't even want to look at what I did two weeks ago. I don't care! I have to launch in a day or two. What I was thinking about a half a month ago is totally irrelevant and can never be unearthed again.

Which brings up this other issue: How am I supposed to go back over the last four years of my life and analyze what I have done, when I can't even stand the thought of reliving what I was up to fourteen days ago? See, that's just stupid. If I can't get motivated enough to churn out any sort of final product during the first 28 days of any month, then why don't I use all of that time to do something else? I started the previous couple of paragraphs with the full intention of describing to you how I haven't had time to work on the book. Because I'm too busy "immersing myself in the creative process." How could I find even a single spare moment of time during which to bother myself with all of this crap that a traditionally published writer is forced into doing against his or her will? This stuff just absolutely ruins their lives, doesn't it? Or does it? What have I been avoiding?

Where was I going with this?

No. Where AM I going with this? That's the question I have to ask. I'm queasy with ambivalence. I feel like Woody Allen bungee-jumping on acid ... with a feral kitten in his pants. I can't explain it. It's just neurosis, for crap's sake. We get worked up about things for no reason. Things like doing our taxes or cleaning the toilet fill us with dread, but they only take a few hours or minutes. But then, there are the things that really mean something to us, like becoming less fat, or learning Spanish, or getting up off our asses and doing something of real value, *anything*... We can get frozen in our tracks.

I don't buy this “fear of failure” or “fear of success” thing. It isn't that. Deep down, I think we all want to be spending ALL of our time doing the meaningful things that fulfill us the most, but there is something—some kind of sickness—that drags us down. We like our couches and our shows and our drinks and our pills and our anger and our fear and our ecstasy and our comfort. We like the quick fixes in our lives that make us take our eyes off the prize. Neurosis? Thank goodness it's all in the mind.

The Can

This is supposed to be about publishing. It can be. I am nobody in particular, and my work may amount to nothing, but if you put me on the witness stand and ask me if I can do this, I have to tell you, “Yes.” Self-publishing a book to be printed on demand is something that anyone can do, with a moderate amount of effort. That's the backup plan. I am going to drag you through this process along with me. I have never been published in print before, unless you count a couple of comix I drew in Chicago about 15 years ago. I can contact agents. I can contact publishers. I can talk with friends and acquaintances. You're gonna hear all about it. I bet a lot of what happens is going to suck, and that I am going to think about quitting several times. You'll hear about that too. But look what I have just done. I have committed to this project, right here in public. I have to do it now. I've tried a trick like this before. It works.

Step One is over and done. I wrote and revised almost 50 columns, and I published them on this site once a month. The next step is to smash everything together into one file. I started doing that a couple of weeks ago. I meant to finish by now, but I didn't. I really wanted to show you some progress. But I had jury duty last week. Civic duty has officially been designated as this month's excuse for falling short of my goals. But I'm over halfway done. Columns from November 2002 through January 2005 have been condensed into one long HTML file. 75,000 words so far, with about 20 more months to put in. I'll finish that task soon enough. Of course, then I have to read every single word. I think I'll save the first draft and post it somewhere. I revise and edit compulsively, so as soon as I begin reading, everything will start to change and take on a new shape. I'm going to try really hard to give it a once-over before I touch it. Make a few lists, catch redundancies and inconsistencies and so forth.

The only issue that puzzles me: I have all of these messages from my future self. Is it ethical to correct punctuation, and perhaps leave out the parts that are boring?

It's not like I would be changing someone else's work. I am still me. One can't really offend one's self.

I think...

December 2006

Chapter 2: Spare a Moment?

It's nice to have made a commitment. Now it's just a matter of how fast I choose to get it done. It would be nice to just get it all over with as quickly as possible, but we all have lives, and mine is unnecessarily complicated. The lives of adults are ruled by strategies of compromise and give-and-take. But mostly, I think we're all just too fucking tired. After work, hobbies, making time for a significant other, taking care of the kids, keeping the home filled with supplies and fixing what is broken—what time is left? Count the hours on your ten fingers, if you still have that many. Chances are you won't be needing all of them.

Why? Why is that? Where the hell is time? Where? It's with us every moment, isn't it? So we don't have to look for it. So why is it money? Why do we have to steal moments of it? Or live on borrowed portions of it? What is this stuff? I need huge blocks of it, and I need it now. An hour here and an hour there just isn't good enough. There's too much fritterization going on. You have to make a plan if you want to do anything in this life. Otherwise, nothing will happen. I don't want nothing to happen. That's an intentional double-negative.

I'm thankful that TV is so crappy these days. It makes it a little bit easier to divvy up the hours left on my last finger-count, which varies from week to week. I can't let the count rest at zero every week. If I do that, I'm a fucking idiot, and I know it. You know those days when you get home from work, and you finish putting the kids to bed, if you have them, and you just want to plop down and relax in front of the thing ... I can't bother doing that anymore. Okay. That helps. TV is out.

November 20, 2006:

Having completely condensed all of about 13 total stories into one long document, I dive into the first paragraph of the first story, “Tenderfoot.”

Whoa. This sucks! Jesus ... wait ... slow down, take a breath ... This is a good thing, right? Because I've had 4 years of experience not only writing my own pieces, but also proofing the work of my

compatriots, I am able now to recognize the kind of writing that ... sucks ... a lot. SO, yes, this is good. Because let's face it, the ideas are there, it's just the execution that is so painful to accept.

See, I thought I'd just be giving all of this work the once over, you know? Just tweak it a little bit. But I was wrong. This is going to be a heavy, heavy chunk of my life here. It's called revision. Revision is nothing like editing. Revision is a total rewrite. Revision is extracting the purpose of a paragraph and completely rebuilding it, like gutting a house for a renovation. Like razing a building on a plot of land to put something much better up, something with better structure and aesthetic, something with a fresh perspective, something with plumbing that actually works. Which reminds me, the original first story in this collection, "Karmic Baptism," is so awful that I'm refusing to look at it. I wrote that one in 2001. It's about the Web, seen as a sort of a sewage system, and an injector pump that explodes in a plumber's face. I plan on giving it a complete rewrite from memory. There's a lot of material there to help explain things that need to be explained, which is why I'm using this device. Everything I see and experience can be utilized to explain everything else I see and experience. The how is in the details. My job is to make the communication of these ideas available to you in great detail, using words impregnated with humor and meaning, which are purely subjective sensibilities, but it is my hope that I'll be able to establish a connection with you, yes YOU, the reader.

But the deeper I delve into this project, the more I understand why I've been putting this off so long. For the next couple of months, I'll be doing battle with two arch-rivals: Old Man Time, and My Own Bad Writing. I just muddled through three paragraphs, which took me 3 hours. One hour per paragraph? I have almost 3,000 left to go, so that's ... not okay.

I hope the later stuff doesn't require so much work.

January 2007

Chapter 3: Shift

My daughter continues to add to her list of new year's *revolutions*. She is going to have more play-dates. And she is determined to make the Cubs a better team this year. (*What have I done?*) Emma also wants to learn the piano, and she wants to do that with me. I'm looking forward to that. Cooper wants to learn how to snowboard, and he too would like me to join him in this new undertaking. I'm sorta looking forward to that. Of course, I have spoken to my doctor about taking ibuprofen intravenously...

Every year I look back on the previous one and I try to remember my last set of resolutions. And every year, I can't remember them. Which is fine... We have to keep moving forward, and shifting to accommodate what is happening right now. This year, I have something big on my plate, and I don't plan to get up from the table until I've eaten the entire meal.

I occasionally receive a Christmas gift from a thoughtful family member that is in some way helpful to my writing career. This year, my in-laws sent me a “writer's block,” which is a cube shaped little book of exercises and ideas to combat the alleged enemy of all writers, where they sit down and stare at a blank page for hours. I was just telling Michelle that I don't have a problem with that. That might cause you to assume that I must be very fortunate, but no, I think there are much worse problems than writer's block. I may be wrong, but I always assumed that if a block existed, then I would probably have nothing to say. So why force it? I could be free to do something else, like re-grout the tile in the bathroom, or stand in a soup-line. But I have a job. Security is not my motivation, thankfully—I don't want this to be a business. I have some things I want to say, and I want to get it all out there.

I can think of two problems that are far more detrimental to a writer and his or her impact on the world. One of those is *trying too hard*. I don't even want to address my struggles with this one, because it is a fundamental issue of content and craft. This is the part of writing that involves your choices, and who you aim to please and why. Scary shit. The second problem is so obvious, and it's the death of me. But will I ever get around to telling you what it is?

Procrastination

It took four years to compose the stories that will be included in this book. Will it take four years to revise and edit them? I didn't want this column to be about procrastination. It's so depressing. But it must be faced. Yes, we just got through the holidays, but I cannot remain at this pace. We have to always be checking up on ourselves to see how we are doing. If not every day, then every week, or at least every month. I need a major shift in the way I have been doing things. I need to write every single day. This HAS to be a priority.

It is January 2nd, 2007, and I have begun today. I woke up, nuked my coffee, quickly checked email, and started writing this column, which until this morning, consisted of only the first sentence about Emma's revolution. Well I'm gonna stage my own revolution. A coup has taken place, and the slug is no longer in charge. Tomorrow, I forbid him from checking his email first. NOTHING happens tomorrow until the writing is done. One hour or more, each and every day, at 5:30 am. The rest of the day cannot start until I am done.

Procrastination is not pure laziness. It's a dominant negative force, spun out of an illusory web of opinions that drag us down. First and foremost, we think that the project before us is too daunting. So, for example, to sit down and work on this book, it feels every time I dive into the process, it's like I am sitting down to take on a thousand hours of labor all at once. The reality is that I just need to get on a roll. I have another resolution to lose fifty pounds this year. I can't do that all at once. Not without liposuction or beheading. When I wake up, I only have this one particular day before me. I can control that. One pound a week. One story a week. Start the day out right, and find at the end of the day that I have finished it well, much better than I have been doing these last four years.

I'm looking forward to that.

January 3rd:

I am late with my column, but I am up at 5:30, and I have yet to check my email. I haven't been this late with a column in four years, but I don't plan on making it a habit.

Other logistics: I have decided that when I complete the revision of my second piece this month, that I will begin sending my two stories out into the world. This way, I can get the ball rolling while I continue my revisions. This is going to get interesting. I have been told that it is difficult and often fruitless to try to do this by the book. By the book, I mean *Writer's Market*. There are other “books” to follow. For a writer to make his or her way into print for the first time, there are some practical means. I need to figure out who I know that can help me.

We'll see how far I get this month.

February 2007

Three Things at Once

The first story in my collection has to be rewritten in its entirety. It was so bad in retrospect that I don't even allow it to appear in the "Tin Can" archives. I plan on knocking it out in the next 30 minutes. But there are a couple of other major things going on, so I'll have to do a bit of juggling.

Karmic Baptism

Do you ever feel like your life has become a toilet that hasn't been flushed in months?

That's disgusting. Is this any way to introduce the reader to my world? Is it funny? Does it provoke deep thought? Just a second—I have to take care of something else.

Dear _____,

I just wanted to clear the air with you, and let you know that I am disgusted with the way I behaved yesterday. I apologize.

This is terrible. I have to write a letter to my neighbor, because I can't even bring myself to meet him face to face. Not after what happened. I haven't yelled like that since my older brother locked me in the coat closet when I was a kid.

I should really be working on that cover letter, though. I'm on to the beginning of the next phase, and I have to mix it into the process, rather than wait until I've revised and edited all of my work. Tenderfoots nearly killed me. But it was only 12,000 words out of 110,000. So much work ahead. Months and months and months. You're just going to have to get used to hearing about it.

Dear Sir or Madam,

How are you?

Oh, crap. That's not going to work.

“Karmic Baptism” was the first story I had ever sent to Karen. I like it because it's a beginning, an initiation, a transition—but I'll be honest—it ain't pretty.

I've learned a thing or two over the last several years. The most important of which is the fact that I am *no* entrepreneur. See? I can't even spell it.

But if I don't deliver this letter to my neighbor by the end of today... No, it wasn't entirely my fault. But I lost my head. I have to take care of this immediately. You can't let something like this fester.

You talked to my kids this week about not walking across your front yard and knocking snow onto the sidewalk where you have already shoveled, and we discussed it with them as well. So when you insinuated that my kids had done it again, I didn't find that fair. After a brief investigation, we now know that I was correct, and that it was someone else's kid. My kids are not perfect, but they generally do as they're told when it comes to rules. They didn't realize that they were doing anything wrong before, but now they do. If you have a problem with them in the future, I ask that you please speak to me first, and I'll get to the bottom of it. They are my responsibility, and I trust them. My anger came out of a feeling that a line was being crossed when they were being accused before the facts were known. So I lost it. I'm only human.

Four months of revision and editing on one story is rather excessive. And I know that the processing of letters and requests will take a hell of a lot of time. There will be rejections. So why not get cracking, and let these two major steps overlap? I may not get an agent anyway. By the time I've plowed through half of this material, I'll know for sure, and then I can either move on to the next backup plan, or find myself working at breakneck speed with an agent.

Um...

Dear Sir or Madam,

My name is Gene Dillon, and I am a writer of personal essays and short stories. My style is rich in humor, and I tend to meander seamlessly from the domain of everyday life into the realm of what might appear to be pure fiction. Occasionally this happens without my full knowledge or consent, and for this reason, the technique has the effect of catching the reader off-guard. By introducing a world that smears the edges of reality rather than submerging readers into it or removing them completely from it, my work has a strong potential to focus the readers' attention and encourage them to stop and wonder if their minds are playing tricks on them, or if the author has just let them in on some sort of secret.

At present, I am sitting on a sizeable compilation of 12-14 stories, and I strongly believe that I would benefit from the representation of a literary agent at this point in time. If the work is worthy of publication, I don't want to make any rookie mistakes. Do I submit each story separately for publication in literary magazines? Do I attempt to put out a book, straight away? Who is the right editor for my style?

Ouch. My stomach hurts. Make it stop. Now what was my story about?

I began contracting in interactive programming and CD-ROM animation back in 1994. My brother in Austin, Texas had me convinced that I could get my ass out of the restaurant business and make some serious money doing something creative with these machines he called “computers.” He led me to believe that I would require no formal training, and I wouldn't even have to go back to college and finish my degree after having dropped out twice. It sounded too good to be true, but if you ever spend eleven years tending bar, waiting tables and sweating profusely behind the line at the sauté station, you might be prone to take on any new endeavor that comes along, as long as it isn't a Ponzi scheme.

Andy paid me five bucks an hour on that first job. It was part training and part charity really—an educational CD for the Texas School for the Deaf. Though I didn't realize it then, I already was an entrepreneur. (I looked up the spelling. It has another r, which I swear I have never heard

spoken by anyone.) Quite suddenly, I was self-employed, and I had to pay my own taxes. This kind of stuff just happened to me, like in the same way that zits happen to a teenager that eats pizza. Now I was starting to meet people around town, at agencies and at trendy loft apartments. Nobody was making any money in educational software, but everybody was following the money. Small companies would pay a guy like me to crank out interactive, animated presentations for their marketing efforts. I discovered the “art” of animating text and logos, rather than cartoon characters. They paid more than five bucks an hour. Twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five... It kept going up. It was like returning a kickoff, except the numbers continued to rise after the fifty. I trained myself gradually, making some good cabbage every step of the way. I worked in Director and Photoshop. And within a few more years, I discovered Flash and HTML. The Web!

Wasn't the Web something that a bunch of dorks used in the computer lab of my college dorm to play Dungeons and Dragons with each other across state lines? Yes. Yes, it was. But since that time, since I had dropped out and discovered the eleven years of wiped memory that defined my restaurant career, computers had become more interesting and useful. I daresay they were even becoming fun to use. I had abandoned Computer Science as a major when I dropped out of college for the first time. I could never imagine sitting in front of that goddamn box every day for the rest of my life staring at words and numbers that were made out of glowing green dots.

Oh, this is getting boring and stupid. Not one line has made me laugh out loud yet. And I've lost the point entirely.

This defines good writing to me: *I'm sitting in a coffee shop or on the bus, and I'm either crying real tears, or my jaw is hitting the floor, or I'm laughing out loud like an idiot. And I don't care.*

There is no place for grudges between friends and neighbors. I was a little bit surprised to hear some of those things coming out of my own mouth. But I was also surprised to hear the list of all the grudges you've been holding against me. One thing that you brought up was “owning up to breaking things.” If you're talking about the light fixture, that was something that we already discussed several years ago, and I assumed that the issue was resolved. Apparently, in your

mind, the issue was not resolved, so we need to remedy that now. It was clear that Emma (not Cooper) had a part in breaking the fixture—she admitted that on the same night. When you called, blaming Cooper, I told you that Emma was involved, and I offered to pay for it. You acted like you didn't want me to pay for it, and you never submitted any receipts to me. You can go ahead and do that now, and if you don't still have the receipt, please let me know how much that glass cover cost you.

I wonder if I should put a blank check in here. He might think this presumptuous and take offense. Actually, everything I say to this guy offends him. Maybe I should just shut my pie-hole.

I have been writing the column “Tin Can” for Mental Contagion online magazine for over four years, and for two of those years I served as Editor. In 2006, I took a shot at conducting an experimental interview feature called “The Shovel,” in which I had conversations with such fringe celebrities as Andrei Codrescu and Rennie Sparks. I continue to remain active with MC, helping to produce and launch the magazine each month.

Oh, God, I can't remember what's supposed to get quotes and what's supposed to get underlined? *Italics?* Columns and publications... Where is Strunk & White? Somebody please help me. I am wholly incapable of being bothered to learn proper grammar.

But the Web paid the rent. The Web bought my house.

This is nothing like the original story. I don't like this anymore.

I'm not saying we have to be friends. You don't even have to speak to me if you don't want to. But I promise you that I'll continue trying to be a good and conscientious neighbor, and that I will not remain angry with you. What's done is done, and perhaps we can both laugh about it one day. If we don't, that's okay. I'm just hoping to make some peace with you.

Don't ever scream obscenities at your neighbor out on the street in front of your house. It may seem like a good idea at the time, but it just makes you feel horrible inside. It doesn't matter whose fault it is.

I am including two pieces for your review. The first story is called “Tenderfoots,” and it is a mostly true story about my experiences at Boy Scout Camp at the age of ten. The second piece is the first installment of my “Selected Emails From the Future,” in which I abruptly interrupt myself with a message from my future self. I have a couple dozen of these messages, which arrived in two separate installments. In one story, I actually meet myself in a crop circle somewhere near Stonehenge.

Oh, this is just going to go over great!

I don't think I'm in the right mood to rewrite “Karmic Baptism” right now. I need a rough outline. I don't know if any of this can be salvaged. Write down the main points and expound on it later. This is supposed to be the opening story in the collection, so it needs to be stripped down to its bare essence, and saturated with humor. If I can pull this off, I'll be mailing out this piece instead of “Tenderfoots.”

It's the end of the dot-com boom, and I'm frustrated and lonely, and working in my basement.

It is a filthy, dark place. There are pipes over my head. Describe the end of my days as a contractor. I particularly like the description of stacks of tax forms and papers all over the floor with little bits of dirt on them, and tracks dented into the paper from my office chair rolling over them.

Work the metaphor of the Web is an elaborate sewage system, carrying loads of shit from every home and every building in the world to a massive pipeline that just travels everywhere in a big, surging mass.

There is an injector pump in the addition at the far end of my house. Describe how it fills up to a point, kicks off the switch, and pumps 55 gallons of waste water through a one-inch pipe, right over my head, and down into the main drain pipe. This is a lie. That pipe never traveled over my head. But it will build tension.

The pump is broken. There is mud in the crawlspace under the addition.

Tell more lies about sounds coming from the pipes above my head in the days before the plumber arrives. Like, I'm sitting there working one day and I hear things... Maybe bring the descriptions of the filthy basement down to this section.

The plumber arrives. His name is Joe. I descend into the crawlspace with him, to replace a furnace filter. I crawl on my belly beneath the ductwork in the dark. Joe starts working on the injector pump at the other side of the furnace. He has forgotten to unplug it first. It explodes in his face like a shit volcano. This is not a lie. I was there. Use the descriptions in the original story. They were good. Stinking fresh memories.

Joe talks about karma and changes his uniform.

Conclusion: Some bullshit about initiation into the Web, and entering the workforce, and blah, blah, blah, plus more about karma and baptism. Say it. Don't spray it.

I might give it a new title. KB is too obvious.

And that would be the end. Outlines are tough, because now it's gonna feel like work, instead of free-flowing creativity.

Again, if you have any issues with me or with my family in the future, please contact me on my cell phone, and if I do not answer my phone, please leave a message.

Sincerely,

Gene

And lastly, to my agent-to-be:

So suck on that for a while, and get back to me as soon as possible. I need someone to think for me!

Yet Even More Sincerely,
Gene Dillon

March 2007

Facing East

I am taking a long lunch to meet the man who is going to make this thing happen!

I step out past the construction of the Super Wal-Mart across the street from work. They've been scraping vast acres of dirt and digging holes and putting up massive amounts of iron and brick. They do this in the snow. It's crazy. These guys look really fuckin' cold out there. There's a lady on the street next to the site, selling tamales out of a blue and white cooler in the back of her pickup truck. There's another guy who sets up a grill, but he only comes out when it's warm and sunny. When they put up the Chili's last summer on the other corner, there was a lady with one of those silver delis on wheels, with a nice little awning. She'd ring a bell and the workers would come running. "The roach coach!" my office-mate would exclaim, and he would run outside as fast as he could run to pick up a couple of empanadas.

So, I just realized that hearing the words, "the roach coach" gives me a great deal of joy. Realizations like this should make a man happy to be alive, being in a place where something so simple can bring such happiness... Others may read this and declare, "How sad!"

I like to think about my deathbed. Those last few breaths, when I look back upon a life and beam up at the nurse, telling her, "You should have tasted those bean burritos!" [tears] "They made the whole trip worthwhile. They gave me... a purpose!"

Now I'm at some shit-hole called Proto's, where they make you a specialty pizza for one and take away your money. I'm allergic to wheat now, and dairy too. The only Asian place within a mile of here is the Colorado Wok, where they don't even bother to remove the wings and antennae off the flies before they mash them up into the black bean sauce.

I wait for my man and order some coffee. Since most places don't carry soy milk, I have to drink it black and it burns like hell. He's late. I let the waitress pour the third cup of the afternoon. My intake is up to about a gallon a day. I'm exhausted from it.

I'm sitting at the bar staring blankly through the big, bright windows facing East. Cars and trucks rumble along on 287, feeding the sprawl. A candy-red Humvee, headed Southbound, turns off the road beyond the shoulder, through the grass, up over the curb, right into the Proto's parking lot. It isn't slowing down. Patrons shriek, knock over chairs and tables and scatter just in the nick of time as the machine smashes through the windows, screeching to a halt directly on the spot where tables 9 through 12 used to be. Engine revving, the driver's tinted window lowers with smooth precision. A man with mirrored sunglasses, a handlebar mustache and a gray tweed fedora speaks to me from way up there... "Gene?"

I... don't have a response.

"Get in!"

What reason would I have to turn and run? Such an effort...

I throw a five on the bar and climb up into the passenger seat.

May 2007

Doula

The booths at the diner are still the originals. I know this, because a fat man doesn't get a fuckin' break. The table is bolted to the goddamn wall and floor, so I can't shove it toward the skinny guy on the other side. They designed these booths when people weren't so fucking fat around here. I guarantee they give you a lot more wiggle room at the Cheesecake Factory, and if you still can't fit, the busboy comes out and rubs you down with nice thin layer of whipped butter and gives you a gentle shove to help wedge you in. But here, as my stomach seems to increase in volume when I bend my body in half and attempt to slide across the vinyl bench on my side of the table, it's like sticking a tennis ball into a chain link fence. That's fine for an inanimate object, but it makes me uncomfortable. I don't even feel like ordering the cheese fries.

This guy doesn't say much. Is he staring at me?

His fedora sits upside down on the table like a crumpled candy bowl, containing his massive set of keys set on a ring in the shape of a Jesus-fish. His hairline recedes farther up than my own, and he has a little bit of length to his hair in the back. His handlebar mustache is like something I haven't seen since I stopped watching professional wrestling—you know, not the curly, waxed variety, but the Fu Manchu / Harley Davidson kind. He seemed to have a cup of black coffee in his right hand before we even sat down. He's wiry, and veins bulge on the forearms reaching out from inside the roomy sleeves of his cornea-shattering purple and green Hawaiian shirt. He has about six inches of room between his chest and the edge of the table.

“What have you done?” he inquires. I stare at myself, first in the reflection of his mirrored left lens, then in the right—and back and forth again and again, as I consider the intended meaning of his question. His shades are vintage classics, straight from the highway patrol of the early eighties, betraying nothing in the eyes behind them, not even a blink, but to me, they provide a couple of miniature security mirrors with fisheye distortion, showing me every corner of the room, the table, the waitresses...

I feel guilty for no reason, like a shoplifter at a convenient store. I shrink a little, giving him the same “What?” that I would give to my old man when he knew I did something wrong.

“The book.” (Duh.) “What have you done?”

“Oh. Uh...” I look around as if I'm fumbling for my notes. “I, uh, finished revising three pieces, and—”

“Send 'em out!”

“Huh?”

“Send 'em out.”

“To who?”

“To whom. I think it's whom. Hey, who the fuck uses whom in a reality sentence anymore? I highly recommend that you never use that word again, okay?” His manner is very calm and even, almost soothing. But he's all business. “Look, you'll figure out where to put the stuff. Ask around. Who do you know? Anyway, that's the easy part. The hard part is just doing it.”

“Well, what's the process? I've been putting together the book and—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. You have no idea what you're doing, and that's okay. You have to be out of your mind for going back and trying to reconstitute all the muck you've been trudging through for the last four years. But, no worries! You had to go there and face all of that and see what you've done and where you've been. Kinda scary, huh?”

“I wouldn't say that. Frustrating... Annoying... Impossible...”

“So you see that where you were is not where you are. For most humans, it's madness to go back there, but you just keep doing it all the time. That's a hidden talent. You keep going back to those places until

there is nothing left to dig up, nothing left to learn. You visit a mind that is four years younger, and you can see how far you have come. You can't look at any piece the same way, you know, not after all that time has passed. And of course, you have refined your craft since then.”

“I'm exhausted!” I blurt.

With a smirk of good-natured rejection, he chastises me, “Exhausted? How can you be exhausted? You haven't even been born yet!”

The conversation clanks to an abrupt halt as our waitress brings us what seems like too many plates of food. I am puzzled by the pointless use of the extra plate for the hash browns and also my rye toast, and the insistence of garnishing my breakfasts with a twisted slice of orange and a sprig of parsley. So much waste! So many plates to bring and to clear and to run through the dishwasher! I bet Charlotte could make 15% more money a night if they would just blow off the garnishes, and put the goddamn hash browns and toast on the same plate as the omelets.

My companion has ordered biscuits and gravy with 2 eggs sunny-side up. He had asked for the eggs to be placed atop the biscuits and gravy, but Charlotte brought the eggs on an extra plate, with a serving spoon, and instructed him to place the eggs up there himself, because she couldn't get Arturo to understand what the hell she was asking for. “So much waste,” he audibly echoes my thoughts whilst carefully placing each egg atop the two fat mounds of greasy gray carbohydrates. He points his dirty fork at me, “You gotta get somebody to do the rest of that shit for you. Just let it go. Trust a good person to help you with it.” He stabs a half of a biscuit and shoves it into his mouth, and forces out his next sentence through the crumbly paste after only the second chew, “You got a web site?”

“Yeah. I got my name. GeneDillon dot com.”

“What's up there?”

“Uh... nothin' yet.”

“No sweat. But get busy on that. You're gonna need it. People come looking for you, and you gotta be there.”

I'm a little lost. “What about the book? Are you telling me to forget about it, and just start sending my pieces around one at a time?”

“Yes and no. I mean, no and yes. You need more exposure. You need street-cred. You need a rep. Nobody knows you except for the guy or gal who's reading this right now, or who read you here the last couple of months. Which is great, don't get me wrong. But your sphere of influence is a marble on the playground. Don't you want a whole bag of marbles? Then you can bring that bag of marbles to any other playground in the city. Maybe even the world. And one day you can trade that bag of marbles for a couple of gold bars, or a bong, or a crucifix—whatever you want! What the fuck was I talking about? Oh, yeah. You send your stuff out there to the journals and mags while you shape your book. But remember that word: shape. Your book needs a common thread, a cohesive idea. You can't get an agent to look at a first book that's just a compilation of random stories. That kind of stuff is for the somebodies. You gotta earn that. That's why you need to get your work into multiple locations. If they'll have you.”

“So you think I'll be able to land an agent? How do I go about—?”

“I don't know, man. This is gonna take another year. Maybe two more years. You're startin' over, dude. But this time, you're doing it as a writer. Not just some guy who wants to write. Do you understand what I'm tellin' you?”

“You've got to be fucking kidding me...”

He wipes his mouth, the napkin shredding slightly from the stubble upon his chin. “Pay the bill, willya? I gotta take a dump.”

Well... At least the food is cheap here.

I am a writer.

I'm thinking about ditching him. But I have to find another ride, and quick!

June 2007

The Baptist

I discover an active set of railroad tracks by the silo out behind the diner. A freight train passes by real slow, lurching sluggishly and making the most awful sounds, like Godzilla battling Gamera under the sea. Inside the restaurant, I can pinpoint nobody that I would feel comfortable asking for a ride to take me away from this place. Every last one of them eyes me with small-town suspicion and animosity. I'm a stranger with something more than pie and coffee on my mind.

There is nowhere to hide. Not enough trees, too many angry dogs... And I don't know how to hot-wire a pickup truck. I look up at the passing railroad cars. The train is running left-to-right, toward the setting sun. I can't see the beginning or the end of this thing, but the next dozen cars or so are all matte-black painted tankers. I had expected the tankers to contain oil or some type of chemical, but no. Stenciled upon the back end of the first tank in 2-inch high, pale yellow letters are the words "INEDIBLE TALLOW."

I'm sorry, but I just don't like the sound of that.

I estimate that I still have a couple of minutes to ditch this guy, but you never know how long it takes a man to tend to personal business after a hearty late-afternoon breakfast. There is no time to wait for an open boxcar and ride in hobo comfort. I have to jump on one of these tankers, and just hang on. I wait to read the contents of the next car. This one is different. It reads, "EDIBLE TALLOW."

Geez. I don't care for that, either.

I'm afraid he'll come looking for me any second now, so I jog to my left, poking my head up and down to see what they're keeping in the next one. I find my answer about one-third of the way from the end, at eye level. All it says is "TALLOW."

That's good enough for me. I like mystery.

I reverse my direction and get in step with the speed of the train. Reaching for the metal ladder fixed to the end of the tanker, I am jerked forward, nearly losing my shoe, or my foot, or my entire leg, under the wheel of the train. With time for nothing else, I adapt and master the necessary maneuver quickly, pulling my big body up with all the strength that I have in both of my arms and then I strain to get my right foot up onto the bottom rung.

Home free!

I flatten myself against the ladder as best as I can, and put my head down, as if this will make me only partially visible. I see some bushes and trees about a half-mile ahead. In this part of the country, that means we'll be crossing a river or a creek, which is good news, because it most likely means that I will not be followed. But, cripes, are we slowing down? I think we're going about 2 miles per hour.

I lean outward to my right to take another peak around to see how close we are to the river, but I have to pull my head back immediately to avoid having a low-hanging branch drag across my face. Once we are clear of the tree, I cautiously peer around the side of the tanker again.

Oh no...

It's him... parked in a vacant lot, leaning against the grill of the hummer with his arms folded in mock judgment against his chest. He strolls over to my moving train.

"Where do you think you're going?" he wonders aloud.

Like he doesn't know. "I found a ride. I'm going home," I reply.

"Home? What home?" he asks of me, which is just too strange because he actually sounds exactly like Clarence, the angel in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

“You’re insane,” I accuse. “What are you even talking about? Who the hell are you anyway? I don’t even know your fucking name!”

He continues walking alongside me in his flip-flops, keeping perfect pace with the train. “My name,” he declares, “is *Jean Baptiste!*”

“No it’s not!” I yell. “Shut up!”

I can see now that he’s going to have to either give up, or remove me from this ladder by force. I climb two rungs higher and note the approaching trusses of the bridge through a thick, impenetrable tangle of bushes. He’ll never get through that stuff.

I’m wrong again. He weaves his way through the thicket, keeping his eye on me. “Come on, Gene,” he pleads. “Come down off the train.” He’s running out of room. “Let’s do this thing, Gene.”

“What do you want from me?” I plead.

He trips and steadies himself. “I want what *you* want from *yourself.*”

“What are you, Dr. Phil?” I ask. “Go to hell! You’re out of room, and besides that, I’m out of time. Thanks for all the advice, and good luck to you.”

“I ain’t stoppin’!” he announces, and continues on toward the edge of the embankment.

“What are you doing?” I inquire nervously. The river looks high and muddy, and it’s moving pretty fast. “Stop!”

“No!” is his reply, head down, determined. He ditches the flip-flops and keeps on moving.

Before I can jump off the “tallow-car” to stop him, his foot slips on a fern, and he tumbles down the slope. The angle is roughly 60 degrees, and he cannot stop himself as he slides a full 30 feet on his bare

heels through the weeds and the mud before a halting launch sends him flying face-first into the North Platte River.

“Help! HELP!” he cries out, flailing in the water. This is his second imitation of Clarence today. Should I believe this? Do I have the luxury of time to be an asshole right now?

No, I don’t. Actually, I never do. I keep forgetting. Ducking my head around a thick wooden beam, I take one-tenth of a second to prepare myself for a jump into the deepest part of the river. I close my eyes and hurl my bulk off the train, feet-first. Falling through the air takes an eternity...

I land hard, with my feet planting themselves firmly into the muck about 3 feet beneath the surface of the filthy water. The sting sends a shock right up my spine to the top of my skull and then right back down to my feet. Having plugged myself like a lawn dart, I struggle to keep my body upright, but the current here is too strong. I lose my balance and fall back on my ass, with my feet still planted into the ground. The river is now passing by with a slow but steady flow several inches above my face. Now I’m the one who’s thrashing. I paddle and thrust my face upward as best as I can, begging for somebody to please come down here and drag us out of this, the most dangerous 3 feet of water in Eastern Colorado.

In the brief glimpses I am able to take of my partner in death-by-drowning, I notice that he seems to have given up the fight—no more splashing, no more screaming—the end may be near for him. But wait...no... The son of a bitch is standing up! He stands up in the shallows reaching halfway up his thigh, wrings out his fedora, places it back on top of his head, and trudges over to me gradually across the current. With a strong right arm, he grips my own right forearm and pulls me to a standing position.

“I’m stuck,” I explain, without thanking him.

“Only if you want to keep those running shoes,” he says.

He bends over slightly so that I may brace myself on his shoulder and pull out my left foot, then my right. “They aren’t running shoes,” I inform him. “They’re walking shoes.”

“That’s even worse,” he replies.

* * *

I have moved my writing desk back down to the basement. Michelle now has to run her business out of some combination of the bedroom and the dining room. The reason for this is that we now have a houseguest living in the last 2 rooms of the addition.

He made me run one of my stories past a proofreader. She ripped it apart pretty good. Uh... Pretty well. I had no idea how suspect my grammar was. Is. Then I sent the story out for possible publication. As I sit here waiting for rejection letters, I’ll continue shaping a dozen other stories. I finished the opener—the one about the plumber. It’s done. I can hardly believe it. The entire contents of the book are in the hands of my editor friend in Illinois.

JB refuses to leave until I am done. He can stay, but I refuse to call him by his alleged name. He’s a decent guest. Clean, quiet...

Sure eats a lot of eggs, though.

July 2007

Doing the Darks

Sunday night is a time for finishing the laundry and watching the afternoon's Cubs game on tape. I have this down to a science now. My wife is about 98% happier if I do just a handful of simple things. After the kids go to bed, throw the dishes into the dishwasher and run it. On weekends, blow through the laundry like it's nothin'. Monday morning, you start the week fresh, and everybody's got clean clothes, then I can go back to neglecting all the other chores until Saturday.

But what, honestly, is worse than folding socks? Matching them up, I mean. I reach into the basket to pull out the other things first—washcloths, t-shirts, bras, underwear and hand towels. So many socks... Why don't they have a machine for this, like a Coinstar machine for socks. I would pay a thousand dollars for a machine like that.

With the Cubs ahead 4-0, I finish up with the whites, and proceed to the darks. Marquis gives up a home run. Here we go again. Why do they torture me like this? How many Sundays have they ruined? Michelle has too many black socks. She cannot seem to find them in packages of six, as I do, or even in threes or twos. Every single pair is unique. The skin on my fingers is dry. And now there are men on first and third with only one out.

JB refuses to use our washer and dryer. He does his laundry in the bathroom sink next to his room. I suspect that he uses hand soap. This morning, he was out there in my back yard, shirtless with his big 'ol shorts on, and his flip-flops, and he was hanging his clothes on the line with clothespins. He installed the clothesline himself, right after he moved in. He found a T-shaped piece of pipe about six feet tall, painted pale green, and stuck it in the middle of my lawn. The other end of the line is attached to a hook that he twisted into the mortar between the bricks of my house. All day on Sunday, my family has to look at his underwear and socks drying stiffly in the sun. Hey... He pairs the socks up as he goes down the line. That's handy...

He's gonna be here for a while. I sent out my first story in late May to 28 publications. I received 3 little form-letter rejections after a week, but I haven't heard anything since. I feel like I can handle rejection. I've come to expect it. It sort of makes life easy. That's why there are so many Cubs fans out there. Low expectations, no chance at disappointment. But I can't stand waiting. It's like watching this pitcher load the bases. I want to enjoy this game, but it makes my stomach hurt. I'll endure two and a half hours of frustration and stress, just to find relief in a single moment. Win or lose, there is relief at the end, just to be done with it. Of course, winning makes you feel better. It gives you more hope. Makes you want to keep watching.

So why is this taking them so long? I know the answer to that. They've got work to do. I've done it myself. Putting a quality magazine together once a month is a lot of work. Reading people's submissions takes a lot of time. It's the middle of summer. People should be golfing, and canoeing, and eating ice cream. What the fuck would they be doing reading the ramblings of crazy people, when they could be riding the ferris wheel? Or going to a Cubs game... Oh, no. They could be as bad as me. That explains everything. I'd better get used to all of this waiting. Just think how many socks will be matched together between now and the time I have finally received my last rejection. Maybe by then, people won't wear socks anymore. They will have invented something else that sprays on and washes off at night.

I finished up that plumbing story, and I sent it out too—round two. That was a bitch to get done. Never again will I revisit something I wrote seven years ago. I rewrote all but 14 words out of 4000. Not much sense in that. Who writes about plumbing? Who wants to read that, anyway? Housewives? Young adults? What's the market for this? Do I have a market? Am I marketable? Or am I novelty, like Daniel Johnston or Wesley Willis? Actually, DJ's brilliant. I met Wesley several times, in and around Milwaukee Avenue in Chicago. He likes to shake your hand and look you right in the eye, real close. Our eyeballs almost touched. He drew pictures of el trains all day long.

I'm ready for a vacation.

My shirts are all wrinkled. I've expended a lot of energy trying to amass a wardrobe that is hassle-free, that never needs ironing. But I have failed. They won't stay flat. I have to iron the little kinks out of a shirt almost every day, just so I don't look like a slob, and every week I have to match up these goddamn

socks, and the time passes sooooooooooooooooooooo slowly, and it's hot, and my head hurts, and JB is playing Bad Company on his boombox again. Who the fuck listens to Bad Company on purpose? Bad company 'til the day I die.

I finish the darks. Marquis induces a grounder to short, and Theriot flips to Fontenot, who throws on to Lee for the double play. Out of the inning.

Top of the order is due up. Now, let's get some runs!

August 2007

Mountain

“I got ideas ... but they’re all bigger than me.”

JB and I are having coffee and hard-boiled eggs in the dining room. I boiled a dozen. They’re still warm, sitting in a bright red bowl in the center of the table. We have this one thing in common—when we break hard-boiled eggs, we crack them right on the surface of the wood, and then press down and roll them, crunching to loosen up the shells. I try to match him egg for egg, but he peels too fast and doesn’t seem to care if he eats a piece of shell. I worry about cuts and scrapes in my esophagus, especially near the pyloric valve, so my egg’s gotta be pristine.

JB eyes me with a mixture of suspicion and pity. “You haven’t penned anything in over a month. What’s goin’ on in your life?”

“I dunno,” I reply. “My uncle passed away. The first of my nieces and nephews got married. An unusual number of butterflies and moths keep smacking into my windshield. Really big ones, too... I had to scrape the whole thing with a razor blade last week, it was so disgusting.”

“Oh, well,” he grunts and stretches. “Too bad you got nothin’ to write about. Wanna go for a hike?”

“Sure.” I like to salt my egg and then bite it in half, and then salt it again and finish it. JB doesn’t put anything on his, and he places the entire egg into his mouth and commences to chewing on both sides of his mouth until it’s gone, cracking his next egg while he chews. There’s nothing left to put back into the fridge. He has beaten me, eight to four. Bits of shell, large and small, are strewn all over the table, among a few grains of salt. I should have brought out some plates. I wipe the shells and salt off the edge of the table into the empty bowl with my hand. Michelle wouldn’t like this. But she isn’t here. She took the kids to the pool at the rec-center.

We drain our coffee cups, and refill them for the drive up to the trailhead. I'm adding a lot of soy milk these days. The esophagus... Is it stress? Or too much coffee and eggs? What do I have to be stressed out about? I could stress out about worrying about getting stressed out. I'm not trying that hard to deal with it anymore. And that bothers me. I seem to remember that the solution to all of this is rather simple, and easier than I usually think it is.

JB wants to go to Eldorado Springs, and I can't talk him out of it. The trail is too steep, and I just ate. Anyway, I'm not going to keep pace with him this time. I like the hiking, but I have no interest in breathing hard and sweating. He likes climbing too, and he likes to mess around without any gear, using nothing but his fingertips and toes. He's a nut. But he's in good company out here in Colorado. I'm still getting over a childhood defined not by physical activity, but by shared television experiences with family and friends. The things we watched! Talk about adventure...

As expected, JB moves ahead at a clip about twice that of my own. See ya later, pal. Higher and higher we go, back and forth up the switchbacks, over small boulders and the fat roots of crooked trees. It's hot and dry, and hotter still. We should have headed up earlier. Blood rushing to my extremities, my face is the color of a freshly cut steak, and I feel steam rising from the roots of my hair. Sweat-rings don't stand a chance on a shirt out here; not on a day like this. The outer eighth of an inch of my entire body is sublimating gradually up through the dry needles of the ponderosa pines.

JB has been gone from my sight for more than 15 minutes. I don't even hear his footsteps anymore. Wait, there he is. He's climbing a massive boulder, some 20 feet in diameter, and very nearly round. He finds his way up its side by the little moss-filled cracks, scaling a section of the rock that is curving backward beyond vertical. I don't know climbing terminology, nor have I ever had the stomach to watch serious climbers doing what they do, but I had always assumed this particular feat was impossible for, say, humans. I've just been struggling up a grade of perhaps seven or eight degrees, in comparison to the 110-degree challenge JB was meeting.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I had to ask.

Of course he was unable to look back or to break his concentration. “Funny thing about a mountain. Sometimes you find yourself strolling on a nice easy stretch of flat ground. Other times you find yourself hanging by your fingertips.” He lets go with his right hand for some sort of literary effect, now dangling and swaying, held aloft by just three remaining fingers of his left hand, as he peers over his right shoulder to look me in the eye. “But the mountain, it’s just there. It’s not going anywhere.”

He’s been talking like this ever since I realized that most of my writing submissions would not receive responses for several months. Ever since “nothing” became the answer to every question people asked me about what is going on in my life. Ever since I entertained my very first thoughts about giving up this whole mess. People say to me, “You’ll always be driven to write. You won’t be able to help yourself. Like John Lee Hooker’s mama tellin’ his papa that the blues is in him, and it’s got to come out.” But I have to be perfectly honest with you. It would be easy... Stopping... I could just stop...

I’m tired of waiting. I feel no sense of worth.

I decide to finish JB’s sermon for him. “And sometimes you walk up that mountain at a steady pace, and sometimes you run like hell, and **sometimes**, you stop to smell the columbines, or to take on a little challenge along the w—”

Suddenly JB loses his grip on the mossy little crevice in the boulder and falls from about ten feet up, landing flat on his back and hitting the back of his head with a **crack** on something hard upon the ground.

“Help!”

I rush to his side, “Are you okay? Shit! You’re head’s bleeding. Can you move? Wait, maybe you shouldn’t move. Uh... I’ll run down and get some help. Did you bring your cell? Mine’s in the car. Oh, crap—”

“Carry me,” he winces feebly. “I want ... you to ... carry ... mmmpph ... me ... up to the top ... of this mountain.”

“Dude,” I protest, “You’re gonna die if I do that. Probably me too. I need to get you to a hospital, and if you have a spinal cord injury, I shouldn’t—”

“To the top!” he cries, fighting back tears of pain. “Bring me to the **top!**”

“I can’t do that, man,” I tell him. “Listen, if you really think you’re okay, I can help you walk back down, but I’m not bringing you farther away from medical help. You have to—”

“Aw, forget it,” he says, and he stands up straight and starts dusting himself off, like nothing happened. He’s a tad concerned about the blood soaking his hair and flowing down the back of his neck. “You really think I should get checked out?”

“I don’t know,” I respond. “It’s your head, not mine. Wait. I know how to tell if you have a concussion.” I hold up my two index fingers side by side, and tell him to follow the movements of my fingers with his eyes, without moving his head. I do this for about thirty seconds, moving my fingers in wide circles and figure 8’s. As soon as I’m somewhat satisfied that he’s okay, I move the two fingers right up close to his nose, and then I rip them apart from each other in a quick, violent motion, which nearly causes his eyeballs to pop out of his skull.

JB is impressed.

We hike back down, and drive to Boulder Medical Center, JB in the passenger seat, holding a filthy, greasy, car-trunk towel to the back of his head.

September 2007

How About This Line?

JB has installed a chin-up bar in the wide doorway between Michelle's office and studio. She's not gonna like that. I knock on the open door, and he grunts, "Entré vous!"

I enter cautiously. It smells like a moist jock strap in here. "Hey, man—" I try to speak without having to breathe in through my nose. "I started a new piece." I think I detect an airborne fungus... It feels like I'm in a Tinactin commercial.

He's too tall for the height of the bar. His legs remain bent as he does short chin-ups at a rapid pace. He pauses briefly at the top and without looking at me, he declares, "It's about fuckin' time!" and continues with his exercises.

That was uncalled for. "Need I remind you," I answer, "that you were NOT invited? If you don't like the pace, then just go ahead and get the fuck out!"

He pulls himself up, swings his legs forward and drops to the floor. Every encounter I have had with JB over the past month has consisted of his repeated attempts to check on my progress down in the basement, only to find me immersed in a seemingly endless cleanup project. He's got to believe me when I tell him that I cannot get started on anything of genuine value until I finish throwing most of this shit away and mop the goddamn floor. Dust bunnies don't even visit the place anymore—it's too filthy. But most of all, I need to obliterate my past before moving forward—sort of like reformatting a hard drive, but much more time-consuming and painful.

JB grabs a towel and wipes his dank armpits, which are now glistening from beneath the tank top that he wears to bed every night—the tattered gray one with a faded picture of the Keebler Elf. "Let's hear it then," he shrugs, with a bored, almost ambivalent tone.

I don't need this. "Forget it," I tell him, and I turn around to leave him alone in the oppressive cloud of his morning workout.

"You got some fan mail, dude," he calls out.

"What?"

"Some nice lady from Littleton digs your column," he says. "She sent you an email last night."

Oh, no you didn't!

I temporarily lack the ability to look him in the eye. I don't want the answer, but I ask anyway, "How the hell do you know?"

"I checked your email," he replies, calmly.

I'm furious! "You are FORBIDDEN to use my laptop again!"

But...

I have to know. "What did she say?"

"I don't know man," he responds. "What difference does it make? I deleted it."

Oh, great. Here comes another speech about how I'm not supposed to care about what other people think of what I do and say, and how that's what ruins everything. I hold up my hand, stiff-arming his lecture in advance. "Forget it," I say. "I don't have time for this shit. Check it out, my friend—I got down to business. I've been writing something new every day."

"You!" he blurts out. "You, Gene Dillon, have been writing every day?"

“Yeah,” I answer. “Well, for two straight days, anyway. It feels good! Listen to this, bitch—”

But I guess it’s my turn now to talk to the hand. “I don’t need to hear it,” he interrupts with an air of smug bitterness. “It doesn’t matter. I know you can write—otherwise I wouldn’t be here. You’re seeking reassurance where none is needed. If I critique you now, you’ll get all pissed off—partially at me, but mostly at yourself. And then you’ll be off to the basement again to find more notebooks to recycle, or to scrub coffee stains off of the concrete floor. You’ll kill the piece. You’ll stop in your tracks because someone had an opinion about your work. Conversely, if I heap praise upon you, then you’ll think you’re hot shit on wheels and get all soft and lazy. Or what if I’m indifferent? I can’t even imagine what that would do to you.”

I’m sort of dumbfounded. I have no idea what this man is doing in my house anymore. I would punch him if I weren’t so sure that he would block it and dope-slap me back within an eighth of a second.

“Fine,” I tell him. “I will never show you anything I write, ever again.”

“Good,” he replies.

“Not even the line about the Teletubbies never dying,” I continue. “Or the horrors that live inside the barber’s little hand-held mirror. Or the picnic dinner—I’m not even going to tell you where we ate!”

“Fine,” he says. “Are we done?”

“Good Lord,” I reply. “I wish we were...”

I drive away—far away from everything that I know, and away from anyplace where I might see somebody familiar. I am not followed. It’s Saturday. I go to the Super Wal-Mart across the road from where I work.

This place sucks. But in here, I'm anonymous, invisible... Nothing is right, nothing is cool, and nobody will recognize me or place an ounce of judgment on me. I am glad for this.

There is a Subway sandwich shop inside. All I can possibly order is a cup of coffee. Their bread smells like dirty mop-water, and I don't like the idea of people wearing see-through plastic gloves when they prepare my food. It makes me think of what might happen if they don't. The coffee is just eighty cents, and the boy hands me a styrofoam cup and points to the coffee tank on the other side of the room. I load up, and add more cream and sugar than I need. My laptop is warm at my side.

So what am I supposed to put down on the page now? If I don't care what anybody thinks, then why am I even doing this?

Maybe the reason why I write is to find out why I'm writing. Perhaps this has nothing to do with me.

Nothing to do with me?

Then who the hell is writing this? If the message and the story are completely uncontrived, then won't the words simply write themselves? Where would that leave me, then?

Lost... Disconnected...

I am the onliest guy I know...

But who is *that* talking? Is that just the part of me that ruins everything?

God...

This coffee is terrible.

October 2007

Move Over, I'm Driving

Frank Zappa at 2:30 in the morning on a school night? Michelle grunts in frustration and grabs her pillow and all of our blankets and stomps off in the dark, knocking over a lot of things on her way to the living room couch. I fumble for my pants in the dark, grab a dirty shirt and cover my bed-head with a Cubs hat. This is it! He's got money for a hotel. I'm throwing him out, right fucking now.

I proceed to Kramer the door open, unconcerned about the current state of denudation in there. It's my house!

JB welcomes me from the love seat, "Duuuuuude! Come on in!" His bathrobe is open and he's being careless with a small opening in the front of his red plaid boxers. He's rolling a cigarette. I told him not to smoke in here. There is a woman on the love seat with him—a woman wearing what appears to be an extra large, dirty tee-shirt and glittery flip-flops, and she's glaring at me while taking a long drag from one of JB's smokes. She wears too much mascara, and the black roots of her straight, bleached hair make me wonder if darkness is gradually leaking out of her. Another woman sits on the overstuffed chair, and she looks like she just hopped on a time machine after exiting a Cure concert in 1986. Her dyed black hair is very stiff and sticky, her face is pasty white, and she's wearing a dog collar and some sort of a black ... thingy ... that's too tight over her bulging fishnet stockings. She seems excited that I've showed up. I can't look at her. I actually have to turn my head so that she's positioned in a corner of my eye that is not covered by the lens of my glasses.

"JB, what the fuck do you think you're doing?" I demand.

"JB?" the fake blonde asks. "I thought your name started with a G."

JB tried to clear his throat over this, but I heard it. It didn't matter, because immediately, the goth woman says, "Yeah! You told me Gene was short for Eugene! Neither of those starts with a J or a B!"

JB puts his head down. Oh, is this going to be fun! “So...” I begin, “How did you ladies come to know Gene?”

“We both read his work online and emailed him,” the blonde declares scornfully, with a silent “duh” implied at the end of her sentence.

“OH!” I exclaim. “Well, that’s nice! Technology, huh? It really brings us all closer together! Hey, Gene... Is that your wallet on the coffee table? I bet I can guess your birthday! Tell you what, let’s have a bet—if either of you two girls is closer, I’ll give you a glass of my best single-malt scotch.”

“Oooh,” the goth is intrigued by that one. She reaches out and snatches JB’s wallet and massages it playfully, trying to get a read on his astrology. The fake blonde is staring at his down-turned face, sizing him up, imagining that she can guess a man’s age to within a month’s accuracy. But I’m getting a feeling that JB isn’t going to let the game play out.

“Gimme that,” he says, and he reaches out quickly to rip the wallet out of the goth woman’s chubby hands. “Everybody out!”

Both women are shocked by this, but I launch them even further into confusion by calmly ordering JB out the door with a “You too.”

“Oh, come on!” he yells. “What the hell is your problem? I—”

“We’re done,” I interrupt. “This obviously isn’t making any sense anymore. Thanks so much for your help, but I think I’ve just been working extra hard lately only to spite you—so I can get rid of you! And I gotta tell ya, man ... I just don’t like the way that feels. And of course, the last straw in all this...” I feel bad, but I can’t help myself, “This pretending to be **ME** thing is just plain unhealthy.”

JB is too focused on me to notice or even care about the looks on the women’s faces as they gather their things and storm out the door into the night. Zappa blares on for another minute or two. JB finally speaks. “You’re no fun anymore.”

“And you’re pathetic and stale,” I respond.

“You haven’t been fun in years,” he continues. “You’re not even funny anymore. Why don’t you write anything funny anymore?”

“I haven’t felt like it...” I answer. “I’ve tried... You can’t force it.”

“Why?” he asks.

“Why?” I ask, finding it hard to believe someone would actually ask that question. “Forcing humor is like trying to take a dump when all you have is some really bad gas. It’s like putting parmesan on cornflakes... It’s like buying liquor for a homeless man. Or dancing at a funeral... It’s—”

“What the fuck—?”

“It’s not natural! Let me tell you a story... I met David Sedaris once, after standing in line for a really long time with the flu after a hilarious reading. I almost passed out, but I wanted to talk to him, because his shit makes me laugh out loud, and he was in town, and for some reason a thousand people were allowed to stand in line and take turns getting their books signed. So I finally got up to his little table and I showered him with idiotic praise, and I asked him some questions. The only question I remember asking him was: ‘What drives your humor?’ Do you know what he said? He actually had to think about it for a couple of seconds, and then he gave me what seemed like an honest answer: ‘I just need the attention.’”

JB is perplexed, as I am. It’s three in the morning, and I’m rambling.

“Now that was brilliant,” I continue. “It was funny. And it was perfect for him. But that ain’t me. I don’t need attention. I don’t want attention. I don’t want success. I love making people laugh, but more than anything, I just want to write, so that I can understand this life better and articulate some things that need to be clarified in words. I want to keep writing because I enjoy it, and it would just be great if a handful of people happened to stumble upon my shit one day and enjoy it just as much as I do, or even a little

more, or a little less... Maybe they laugh out loud. Maybe they gain some sort of insight from something I said. But who knows? It's out of my hands. I put it out there... Most of the time I don't even know what I'm saying or why. It just comes out. Nothing is forced. Some days I'll find the humor. Some days I'll see blood. Some days I'll find the ultimate in a floating speck of dust, and some days I won't be able to see shit. I can't make anything happen. I have to just let it..."

I'm running out of shit to say. I'm tired. JB's eyes are bloodshot. He seems a little sad. But he also seems to be fighting back a bit of a smile. "Something good happened... Didn't it?" he asks.

How did he—? "What do you mean?" I ask.

JB folds his arms. "Nobody talks like that unless something good is happening. Only success breeds comments like those. You got something to tell me? Come on. Out with it!"

"It's nothing," I say. "I got a letter from a Review down in the South. They enjoyed my piece about the plumbing mishap. They asked to see something more. Something a little less disgusting."

"Anything else?" he asks.

How does he know these things? "Yeah. I got an email from another magazine. They're considering the publication of Monsters, and they're meeting about it next month."

JB smiles and says nothing more, with a twinkle of something like pride in his stare. Then he glances around the room and starts picking up his things. He finds his big, weathered duffle bag and starts stuffing it full of clothes.

I know I just kicked him out, but I'm feeling some regret. Is he really leaving? Will I really miss him?

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"You don't need *me* anymore. I'll be heading back to Springfield. You won't see me again."

All I can say is, “Oh.”

He’s becoming immersed in the details of packing. He stops the Zappa CD right in the middle of Joe’s Garage, which had to be difficult. He has a lot of toiletries in the bathroom. I call out, “You can sleep here tonight if you want.”

He stops, and breathes out a long sigh. “Okay.”

Knowing he’s going to be gone by tomorrow afternoon, my mind is racing with questions and comments about everything I’ve been going through. He sits back down on the love seat, alone, and I take the spot vacated by the she-goth. “This whole thing is taking a really long time,” I announce, as if he doesn’t know the fact intimately. “A really, really, really long time... Even now, all I have is a couple of positive comments, and a small shred of hope that they’ll come through for me. But I still have a long road ahead. Why does it have to be this way?”

You know,” he responds, “if you want to speed things along a little bit, I have a friend I could send your way. He’s the kind of a guy who can really make things happen, and happen quickly! His methods are unorthodox, but often effective. He goes by the name of BJ.”

“Get out!” I yell. “Get out of my house, NOW!”

And we have a good laugh that lasts for a really long time.

I wish a fond good night to Jean Baptiste. When I get back from work tomorrow evening, he will be gone from my life ... for the most part.

December 2007

Cruise Control

I don't miss JB. Hanging out with him was really painful. He showed me how horrible I was with my execution. He showed me how much harder I needed to work. He taught me a thing or two about patience, and then he left.

Two days later, I received an email from BJ. JB wasn't kidding about BJ. BJ is real, and he's supposed to help me with the next phase of my publishing efforts. He's living in DC. He's a very busy man out there. I tried to explain to him that I would not require his services, but he's very persistent. And so nice! He compliments me all the time. I like that. But I'm not so sure of his sincerity. Chances are he's never read a word of my work, but he acts like he has, and that's good enough for me.

Last month I turned 40. This book has a chance of getting published by the time I am 42, if at all. I spoke with the editor. He finally has a bit of time for it. The book is going to see some serious hatchet-time. I'm okay with that. I'm stronger. I'm more humble. I have to be.

Yesterday, I came home from work to find the stack of mail at my place on the dinner table—three letters from publications. I rolled my eyes and muttered the word “fuck” under my breath. This is my reaction now. Even the positive responses, of which I have now received three, tell me that they cannot use this particular piece, but that I should go ahead and send more. I have to pretend that this isn't happening so that I don't quit altogether, because if I do that, I'll have to figure out what else to do with my time. I'm taking suggestions. How about jogging? Mountain climbing? Ice Hockey? I haven't done any of those things yet.

So writing has become kind of like a job for me now. A job that costs me money and time. A job that keeps me too busy.

But it's worth it right? You're doing what you love?

Yeah... Sure... It's just getting a little tiring. I miss the humor and the raw craziness that I was getting out of my work in the past. Stuff that's lacking in the piece that you're reading right now. You wish you had a Prozac filter on your screen. It's a little more serious and refined, writing with too many goals. But these are supposed to be good things for a guy over 40.

So! Enough about THAT, and more about my book: My editor is looking over the main elements of the book, which take up the three longest "chapters," one of which is actually a novella in length. There are nine other stories. I have taken five of these and completely revamped them. For one of these, I have recently discovered that I need to put in another several days to get it down to a reasonable size. That leaves 4 more pieces for me to look at. That's what I'll be doing in 2008, while my editor does the rest, and writing new stuff that is hopefully not too serious and bitter...

My plan has been to document the entire process here in this column. But did I or the magazine's director ever imagine that it would take over two years to complete? Wait until I tell her that I need her to design the cover.

I'm not sure what I'll be writing about next for the Tin Can. Maybe I'll get back down to the business of putting out more important work. Please feel free to contact me and tell me what that might be. I've lost track of...

Wait...

There's the doorbell. I jump up to answer it right away, because it might be those goddamn kids again.

I fling the door open to see a man at the end of my sidewalk, running away. He's an enormous man, and he's dressed like Bigfoot. Halloween is tomorrow... there is now a duffel bag sitting on my stoop.

"Hey!" I yell. "Sasquatch! Get back here!"

He lopes away like a gorilla down the street, looking back over his shoulder several times, appearing frightened.

“That’s a very convincing costume!” I yell out.

He answers, “WWHHAAAAARRRRUNNNNNNGGG!” and darts into the bushes next to my neighbor’s house.

Hmmm... I open the zipper on the filthy, green duffel bag carefully. It’s filled with money! It’s packed full with loose ten-thousand-dollar bills!!!

Nice prank! These bills look real. Faked to look really old? Hmmm... Salmon P. Chase... Series 1918... Wait! There’s a note!

“NEED YOUR HELP”

January-February 2008

Sabbatical

Karen,

I'm really sorry I haven't gotten my column to you yet. In fact, I'm not sure that I'll be able to get to it at all this month. I know I should have contacted you sooner. I've made my deadline every month for five fucking years! What could possibly be so special about this month?

Well, things are kind of unusual. It's not every month that we quit our jobs. It's not every month that we even have an opportunity to quit our jobs.

Anyway, I have to make this quick. I found a motel up here in B.C. with wireless, but I have to get back to them tomorrow, and I'm totally exhausted. They have a certain level of impatience and paranoia that makes me worry about my safety a little bit, but I figured out if I don't piss them off or make them wait, they seem to be more able to trust me. It was hard enough for them to allow a “hairless pink” like myself into their world. Their culture is far more complicated than I expected, having developed and evolved mainly by means of isolationism and the attainment of only the tools and information that they've chosen to let into their lives. They're extremely democratic, but their choices are very final, very black and white. I'm sorry, I'm probably not making any sense. Perhaps because I spent Thanksgiving week among the Sasquatch. (If you decide to publish this email, I leave it to you to figure out if Sasquatch has a plural form; I think the plural of Sasquatch is also Sasquatch.)

Remember that bag of fake money that was left on my doorstep last month? It wasn't fake. Those were real ten-thousand dollar bills! The duffel bag was absolutely stuffed with them. They told me that their people found this canvas bag about seventy years ago, and several people throughout the years have been using it as a seat or a footrest or a pillow. Now it's mine. But not for nothing.

I'll be looking for all the help I can get. When the Sasquatch finally embraced satellite technology, they somehow discovered me on the Web, and through some complex set of criteria, decided that I was a guy

who could help them, and they put all their money on me. I gotta question their evolutionary development in this regard, but what can I do now? I'm going along with their plan. Unfortunately, they really like to take their time, so I'm not going anywhere for a while.

As far as the money goes, I haven't turned it in yet. The way I see it, it could be traceable back to some sort of famous bank robbery—the money must belong to someone, and it probably isn't them or me. So I'm being patient with that too, researching ways to move the money just a little bit at a time, so I can make it last. I'm living off of a couple of bills that I swapped with a collector last month.

Say hello to everybody and let me know if you need any suggestions for replacing my column for December. Maybe a rerun of an old piece. But stay away from my Christmastime writings—they are extremely vulgar and depressing.

G

March-April 2008

Freelancing for Sasquatch

G: Gene

K: Karen

iChat, Feb. 21, 2008

G: Karen, are you there?

K: Gene!!! You're alive! ;-)

G: Listen. I gotta type fast, and if I run out of juice you'll know what happened. That's why I'm chatting you.

K: Where the hell are you?

G: In a cave. In an elaborate network of tunnels beneath the lush forests of British Columbia. I haven't seen the sun for a long time. I was lucky to log on while you're awake. We don't go by day and night down here. I still don't understand... There are no regular sleeping cycles around here. Someone is always awake, but everybody is quiet. The Sasquatch speak rarely, and when they do, they whisper. So... I've lost track of time, unable to discern the day and time until I was able to power up my machine just now. It's almost March?!!!!!!

K: Wait! When are you coming back home? Are they keeping you there against your will?

G: Um... No... No, not really. I can't say for certain that I'm having a good time down here, mind you... But I think I've gotten used to the smell. In fact, they're the ones making fun of me now. I'm the only creature around here with any residual garlic and onion pumping through his veins, and underground caves don't seem to be equipped with showers. I stink like a homeless man in mid-summer. Have a little

sympathy the next time you move away from someone or hold your breath. This is a natural human smell, like it was for a hundred thousand years. Somehow, we've come to find the stench of our own selves intolerable. I think maybe it's just an indication that we can stand ourselves in general.

G: The bugs are getting to me. You're supposed to not mind letting earwigs and pill bugs crawl all over you—you just accept them. Subterranean insect life seems to like the way I taste—I'm not bred for this place. The Sasquatch find this very funny. I get plenty of visits from everyone in the tribe, every single day. They come to see what's funny about Big Pink today. It's like turning on a sitcom. Yesterday, I had a centipede in my underwear—it crawled right down my butt-crack. Wait... I don't have time to talk about this. Power is rationed here like you wouldn't believe. It's beautiful, actually. They've been harnessing geothermal energy for what appears to be two centuries. But they only live with what they receive. They never use more than they have been given.

G: Which means that I had to wait something like a month to come up near the surface to power up and use their wireless satellite card to send this message. This battery usually lasts about 45 minutes. So here's the scoop: The Sasquatch are in trouble.

G: “Join the club,” you say? Yeah. But I'm working for them now, so I have to figure out what I can do to help these good people. I've had plenty of time to think, obviously. But I'm stuck. They seem concerned by the long face I show them. Are you still there?

K: Yes.

G: Seclusion was supposed to make them immune to our problems. But they can't escape anymore. Their greatest concern is to preserve their culture. They have a deep and passionate need to be left alone.

G: I'd say their biggest problem is entangled in one of their biggest strengths: their patience. Since time doesn't pass for them in the same way that it does for us, all of the modern cultural infestations that have spread over the world so gradually for us have come into their lives more like wildfire. They're terrified of the speed with which they must discern about what to accept and what to reject, what to avoid and

what to embrace. They've never been bombarded with so much technology before. So many new influences. And so many terribly odd cultural twists.

G: They have two laptops. They have several pairs of hiking boots for particularly rough terrain. They have obtained dozens of high-end sleeping bags. Some of the younger kids wear clothing randomly—underwear and baseball hats and sun-dresses, and they chew on coffee beans. One kid actually shaved part of his face. His head looks like Ted Kaczynski's and his parents are furious.

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G: Are you still there? This thing is flaking.

K: Yes.

G: You know, this is an interesting case. They've come to the realization that the discovery of their habitat and their people is inevitable. But unlike other such “discoveries,” the Sasquatch are not ignorant

of their choices, or ignorant of the consequences of change. In fact, they are true masters of the management of change. I think what they're looking for now is a smooth transition. They're looking to negotiate a clean entrance onto the world stage, and they want it on their own terms. They want to write this chapter of history themselves.

K: Gene?

Gene left the chat by logging out or being disconnected.

May-June 2008

End Transmission

G: Gene

K: Karen

iChat, Apr. 20, 2008

G: (nudge)

G: Karen!!!

K: What?!!

G: Oh, good, you're there. Listen and listen good. I gotta get outa here.

G: What am I gonna do? I seriously want out of this gentlemen's agreement. There are serious issues, Karen! Serious issues!!!

K: Slow down. You're living with a tribe of Sasquatch. It's not supposed to go smoothly.

K: I've been reading up on them, and the more I learn, the more impressed I become. They're like stealth-savants. Is it true that there are thousands of them?

G: No.

K: Oh. Well... How many?

G: Hundreds of millions.

K: No way!

G: Way.

G: If you started digging in your back yard and continued digging for a half-mile through all that rock, you'd start breaking through into their tunnels. But two things would happen before you reached them. You would either disappear, or you would die from a natural event of some sort.

G: We don't find them down below, because they avoid high concentrations of oil and natural gas. No sightings in Texas or the Middle East, for instance. Yeti live in Tibet and Nepal, but not in Alaska. Wherever you find no combustibles underground, you find Sasquatch and Yeti. That's a major portion of the subterranean world.

G: They know how to deal with water. They control the flow and storage of H2O, everywhere they live, which brings me to my next point. They control ALL underground water supplies on Planet Earth. Do you understand?

G: Shit! They're coming.

K: Get out of there!

G: British Columbia

G: Send help

G: Find me

G: f;asdf

Gene left the chat by logging out or being disconnected.

July-August 2008

Supper on the Road

A card table, adorned with a green-and-white-checked tablecloth, rests in the middle of Route 20 at exactly ten minutes after 6:00 p.m. The tablecloth is rubbery and waterproof with some sort of white, fuzzy polyester underneath. It flaps lazily in the oppressive summer breeze. Intermittent, fluttering parcels of shade from the waving branches of a tall, silver maple tree barely give relief from a long day's worth of heat that relentlessly rises from the cracked, sunbaked asphalt. The din of an unseen army of cicadas provides an endless voice to the surroundings—deafening, yet somehow peaceful—pregnant with the faded memories of many a sleepy childhood vacation, when my brother and I would hunt down these big, fat insects and invent new ways to torture them by means of the removal of limbs or wings or submersion into different combinations of fluids. The tranquility is disturbed slightly by my meddlesome feelings of guilt.

About 40 yards from the road, my wife emerges backward from the screened-in porch, bent over with her ass thrust outward to the right, making the door swing wide. She still looks great in a pair of jeans. I glance up at the house. It was built out of wood, using hammers and nails almost a hundred years ago, and the dirty white paint is peeling beyond control. This is the house that I have always wanted. The screen door slams shut, making the sound that I have always wanted out of a screen door that slams shut. Beth is carrying the largest of our CorningWare dishes, white with the blue floral pattern, topped with a glass lid that is clouded with steam. Her oven mitts are a different shade of blue than the CorningWare flowers—in fact, the mitts have purple leanings, and they're downright filthy. Of course, nothing is perfect.

The card table straddles the middle of the road in a diamond orientation, two of its sturdy, black legs positioned precisely between the two yellow lines. Five cream-colored folding chairs and a white plastic highchair await our arrival. A red book of Jimmy Carter presidential matches is crammed under the southern leg of the table in the eastbound lane in an effort to lessen a troubling wobble that has recently developed. The card table is getting old, but I refuse to give up on it. I found it at a garage sale completely covered with a ton of worthless objects for sale. The only things I ever want to buy at garage

sales are the tables that are dragged out of the house to display somebody's crap. I almost always ask if I can buy one of these tables, and then the people get mad at me—except for this one woman I knew personally. She was moving to another state. I quickly skimmed over all of her stuff, and, of course, I didn't want any of it. I figured that since she was moving and I'd never see her again, what difference would it make if I offended her? So I asked her if she was selling the lovely card table over there—the one with a giant humidifier on top of it, surrounded by a box of audio cassette tapes, two ashtrays, a Rolodex, a wooden chicken, three decks of cards, a Thermos, a desktop telephone with a cord, a Yahtzee game with no blank score sheets left, and a set of plastic juice glasses with faded tulips painted on them. I could tell that she really had no intention of selling the card table, and she hesitated for a really long time, hemming and hawing and waiting for me to change my mind. I just stood there waiting silently for her to give in—patient but pleading like a bad dog. She eventually caved, and I gave her five dollars and helped her move all of her crap off of the table and onto the driveway before folding up the legs, putting it in the backseat of my Geo, and saying good-bye to her for what turned out to be forever.

Dinner smells good. The Chinet is being held down at each place setting by nice-looking, fist-sized rocks chosen from the edge of the flower bed by the side of the house. The forks and knives are of a sturdy, green plastic, heavy enough to weigh down the paper SpongeBob napkins all by themselves. My wife apologizes to me and to our four young children for being late with dinner again. But the kids are far too excited to care. *She made tater tots!*

Beth and I position ourselves at the east and west corners of the table so that we are able to view the oncoming traffic from either direction and have plenty of time to react. It troubles me that the children are sticking out into traffic more than we are, but it seems to be the best plan of action, overall. I insist on being the one to face west, feeling a biological sense of responsibility as the man of the house to keep watch in the direction that presents the highest potential for danger—there is a curve in the road toward the left with a clump of trees obstructing our view. We agree that if it becomes necessary, I will grab Kaley in the highchair, and Beth will grab Zack from the booster. Connor and Emily are old enough to fend for themselves, but I take great care in pointing out the quickest routes to safety and how little time they will have to get out of the way of a vehicle traveling at 60 miles per hour and how they should be careful not to freeze up or make any last-second missteps and that rather than think, they should simply focus and act quickly and keep watching to see what the driver does, because he or she may be

surprised, or even shocked, and perhaps not be in the right frame of mind to make a proper decision with regards to braking or swerving.

But what worries me the most is this casserole dish. Beth hates cooking for so many reasons, not the least of which is the fact that nobody in this family likes to eat the same things. I'm a vegetarian, and Emily only likes to have foods that are white or brownish. Connor will eat anything that lacks flavor, and the toddler and the baby have their own special issues with food, surrounding the establishment of boundaries and the testing of manipulative techniques wrought against their parents. I know that trouble lies ahead when Beth pulls out the Betty Crocker cookbook before she goes shopping, like she did yesterday evening. It means that she's going to *try something new*. Go and ask a person under the age of ten if they would like to try a new kind of food. Furthermore, ask them if they'd like to see all the new kinds of ingredients mixed up together and baked in an evil casserole dish with little bits of green stuff and some kind of a murky sauce. I observe the look in Emily's eyes as soon as the dish lands on the trivet. The odor that has intrigued me so is doing nothing to Emily but turning her stomach. She's going to fight this one, whatever it is.

"Okay, everybody!" calls Beth. "Pick up your rocks and dust off your plates!" I help the kids dispose of their paperweights, because they aren't quite sure what to do with them. Neither am I, actually, but I take immediate action and toss them over, one at a time, into the drainage ditch past the shoulder.

Kaley is having something mushy and green tonight, out of a yellow plastic bowl, using a tiny spoon that is red rubber coated for her protection. As always, if she excels during this portion of the meal, she will indeed receive the Cheerios. Emily, though six years her senior, has yet to graduate from this phase of meal management. If a biography were to be written about Emily's life up until this point, it would most likely be called *Filling Up On Bread*. The rules state that she must eat her vegetable and protein items first, before she may receive any of the tasty carbohydrates. She is predictably jealous of the heaping pile of tater tots that Connor has already taken and worried that we will run out. "Hurry up, Dad!" she yells, as I make my way from plate to plate with a portion of the stuff that Beth has thrust upon us.

The serving spoon lands upon Emily's plate, spilling forth the contents of my wife's latest attempt at culinary adventurousness. Beth looks past me into the distance with some trepidation. Four pieces of asparagus tumble down like the felling of massive trees, followed by a cascade of gooey chicken chunks, deeply browned by a reduction of balsamic vinegar, olive oil, and caramelized onions.

"How much of this do I have to eat?" Emily demands.

"Gene!" alerts my wife, pointing over my right shoulder with an essence of awestruck wonder in her voice—the kind of tone we use with the kids to distract them from an impending tantrum by getting them excited about something completely different. I turn sharply to glance behind me. The shimmering heat plays tricks with my eyes, but I can see that something is rising and dancing out of the road to the east. I return to my meal quickly—it's my job to keep a steady watch on that perilous curve in the road before my own eyes. Beth is mesmerized. "It's like a mirage...an apparition..." Her demeanor is both calming to the children and alarming to myself. It's like finding yourself hiking alone in the mountains at dusk, when the unfolding richness of nature's beauty is almost too much to bear—but then you remember that there are mountain lions in the vicinity that, by the same nature, occasionally feast on human flesh.

Fear creeps in to ruin an otherwise perfect moment—just like the guilt about the bugs that hit me a short while ago. I don't always behave like a thoughtless child anymore; therefore, I don't have to live in state of perpetual guilt. I can resolve to do better and move on. But isn't fear different? Fear nags at me because there are things in this life that never go away. Fear sits in the shadows, always within spitting distance. Fear sleeps with one eye open.

But you gotta live your life, and that's what we're doing. We continue eating, with Zack making the usual mess—he insists on having ketchup with his tots, and he's getting it all over his hair and up his nose. Emily hasn't even touched her food. She keeps dropping her fork or letting her napkin blow away. "Keep it under your plate," I politely suggest. Beth's eyes are fixed on the approaching car as she devours bite after bite of her meal, much more quickly than she is accustomed to doing. Now she has the hiccups and has to stop eating.

She indicates to me through husband-wife sign language that the car is slowing down and moving over to the edge of the road. A fat lady with tall hair and giant sunglasses rolls down the window of her burgundy Buick sedan and screams, “Are you nuts?”

I wave and tell her no, with a pleasant smile.

“I don’t like this,” Beth says. “We should both be sitting on the outside, not the middle.”

“I thought we discussed this already,” I reply, but she’s visibly agitated, and my life always seems to be so much easier if I comply as quickly as possible when the alternative doesn’t make that much difference to me, anyway. “I’ll take the westbound lane,” I volunteer. “We’ll need to switch Zack and Connor.” Connor picks up his plate and walks around while I lift up Zack, booster and all, and place him atop the vacated chair on the other side of the table.

So, now my seat and Beth’s are sticking out almost halfway into our respective lanes. Perhaps a mother’s instinct is to put her body between her children and any kind of imminent disaster. I’d prefer logic and reason in this case. Anyway, Zack doesn’t care for the change of plans either. “NO!!!” His screams drown out the chorus of the cicadas. “I...DON’T ...WANT ... TO...SIT...IN...CONNOR’S...CHAAAAAAIR!!!” And when he says the word “chair,” his voice goes up about nine octaves. I throw down my plastic-ware with a feeble clatter. I can’t eat my Boca bratwurst anymore. Beth tries to reason with Zack by way of threats to remove at least a half dozen of his stuffed animals from his room. Emily spits out an asparagus head into her milk. Connor asks his mom, “Can I have some ice cream?” His plate is empty, but I haven’t been paying attention. I ask him, “Did you have any...” and he interrupts me with a surly “Yes!” but I’m not so sure that I trust him, and Kaley is sobbing because it’s just too noisy around here, and her face is contorted and frozen into that awful state of agony, like a child preserved by the lavas of Pompei, and a huge, black semi suddenly rounds the curve, bearing down at roughly 55 miles per hour.

“SCATTER!” I yell, and I grab Kaley’s high chair by the handle in the back and, just for good measure—I know he’s almost ten, but he just seems to have an underdeveloped sense of danger—I grab Connor by his upper arm and lunge backward toward the shoulder of the road in front of our home.

Kaley is strapped in, and her highchair is on wheels, so it glides easily to safety. Connor pulls off a perfect dive-roll on the gravel. I glance up to see that Beth has Zack in her arms, and he's beating her about the face and neck. Emily has managed to scamper all the way to the other side of the ditch and is already picking flowers.

The massive, roaring truck is in a wide swing straying about a foot and a half over the double yellow line. So many things can happen in two seconds. The casserole shatters against the wide, menacing grill, a thousand bits of pyroceramic glass mixing with an explosion of wet greens and browns. The Chinet sails in all directions like poorly thrown Frisbees, and mangled chairs sail through the air like spastic gymnasts, landing gracelessly upon the gravel or the weeds. The card table—my card table—skids, crumples, and then tumbles, end over end, for about a quarter of a mile before landing in a field of corn. The tablecloth gets caught on the vertical exhaust pipe, and the truck just keeps on going, its newfound victory flag flapping in the breeze. Against the blackness on the side of the trailer, a blur of red, white, and blue zooms past us in the gigantic forms of the letters U, S, and A.

My first instinct is to run and hide like my brother and I used to do when we broke somebody's window. But the semi rolls on down the long, thin ribbon of road, eventually disintegrating into the distant edge of the horizon, another dancing ghost of mystery. We all stand and stare until it finally evaporates from our view. Except for Emily—she's doing a little dance of her own over there in the wildflowers. Whoo-hoo! Dinner's over! Whoo-hoo!

We can't be bothered to clean this up right now. Thankfully, Zack and Kaley have calmed down. We trudge back up to the screened-in porch. It is time for ice cream, except for Emily. She has to have some carrots, or something, first.

We don't need to live like this. Tomorrow I'll go to work on the picnic table. I can rig up a little Go Kart motor and put the thing on some good, strong tires with a steering wheel at the head of the table. We can always look for ways to improve. There's no sense in living in fear.

THE END

November-December 2008

Field of Beast

A glint of bright-yellow sun cracks the horizon behind me, piercing me in the eye through the rearview mirror as I drive westbound on I-80 with motel coffee in an open styrofoam cup. This car doesn't have a cup holder—just a bunch of nooks and crannies where I can wedge the drinks that have lids. I'm tired of holding this cup already, so I try to drink too fast and end up scalding my tongue. I wish my taste buds had been singed in advance because this doesn't taste like anything I ought to be putting in my mouth. It tastes like brown. Brown and styrofoam. But what can I do? This is my ticket of admission to another day. Without it, I would become nauseous, and my brain would start to swell and test the integrity of its thin bone casing. My face would hang from my skull like sandbags from a hot-air balloon. I would be worthless, less than human...

Shame on you, Sleep Inn of Kearney, Nebraska! Shame on you for calling this free!

Smack-dab in the middle of Nebraska, Canadian geese feel safe on the banks of the North Platte River. Clouds of them, numbering in the thousands, teem and swell like waves of an oncoming plague, blackening the sky. They blast their cacophony out to no one in particular with deafening abandon, like a grade school marching band on crystal meth. I'm glad now that my time in central Nebraska has been limited to a brief stay in a motel room that smelled like carpet cleaner and cockroach sex. I've seen the disgusting deeds performed by much smaller numbers of geese at city parks and golf courses, with their plentiful logs of greenish excrement, like warm, fetid spinach dip, left to rot in the sun. I can't imagine how awful it must be out here. Something seems out of balance. This isn't nature. It's more like an infinite row of Port-A-Potties at a street carnival—a wild and putrid scene you can't wait to get away from.

It's been a long time since I ate an animal on purpose, but I sit here wondering why other people don't eat these birds. Impoverished nations could be relocated to the banks of the North Platte River to thin the gaggle. It wouldn't take more than a handful of randomly thrown rocks to bring down enough food to last a family for months.

The interstate veers away from the river and takes me away from my fowl thoughts and into America's breadbasket. I pay less attention to the cows, barns, and plantings of winter wheat than I do to the chunks of random weird stuff that litter the fields. I see rusted contraptions abandoned on the exact spot where they stopped working. I see enormous metal claws and mangled barbed wire and gears and wheels and parts of worn-down fence posts and the sun-bleached shell of a lonely Studebaker. I see giant rolls of hay lined up end-to-end to form long pipes the size of subway trains. I see deserted, weather-beaten structures serving only the termites and carpenter ants and whatever other creatures might enjoy eating lead paint...

The muddy winter landscape now bristles with the hacked, stubby remains of pale, dead cornstalks. Upon the tenth mile of this dormant stretch of land, I spy a concrete structure rising about a quarter of a mile ahead of me. It appears to make a lumbering shift in direction, and it begins to heave its weight toward the road methodically. Roughly 20 feet tall and as thick as a one-car garage, it is mostly covered with white paint and is missing a large chunk of itself on the topmost part of its left side. It is headless but seems to possess arms constructed of hinged lengths of rebar sporting rusty cogwheels at the joints. It wields formidable hands—the right one composed of some 22 pairs of ancient hedge clippers and the left a tangled mass of well-honed spades and shovels. Its two legs are thick like an elephant's but hooved and adorned with long, sandy-brown hair like a Clydesdale's. A wide, flat club of a tail thumps the ground hard, pulverizing the earthworms and scattering their carcasses in a careless dispersion of bloody segmentation.

I should have grabbed two coffees. I don't know what this is. It isn't moving very fast, but it's clear that this thing is about to meet me up there on the highway.

I swerve into the center ditch, going 79 with the cruise control engaged. The beast reaches out with a full extension of about 38 feet and clips the side-view mirror off of my car like a Ginsu slicing through a tomato. I fishtail into oncoming traffic and find myself barreling head-on into a semi. I yank to my right, and the truck yanks to its own. I don't like the sound of trucks skidding and tipping over onto their sides and scraping along on an eastbound stretch of highway at 70 miles an hour, making sparks and smoke and fire. The looming jaws of my own grave are cavernous; its teeth are magnetic. But I've got no time

to contemplate as I rumble back across the grassy divide, only to hit a patch of standing water and stinking, black mud that sends the car spinning four or five times, counterclockwise. There is nothing to do now but to lay off the gas, lay off the brake, lay off the steering wheel, and just wait for the world to stop doing what it's doing.

I try to relax. It's difficult. The dregs of my coffee have spilled everywhere. I'm wet with it, and everything smells brown and styrofoamy. I need that coffee. Nothing can help me now but this red Ford pickup that seems to be sliding along on my right on a sort of a parallel course. This vehicle eases my pain; it shields me from the sloping concrete of the overpass and crumples to soften the impact of the abrupt—

Rattling of the shopping carts. I dream about the old man at the Wal-Mart. He pretends to enjoy himself and extracts a cart from the corral. I tell him I don't need anything, really; I just need to use the bathroom, to look in the mirror and see if I have any large chunks of glass embedded in the bridge of my nose or in my forehead. He gives me directions to the restroom in some other language—Aramaic, I think. I stagger in the general direction of his wild gesturing and find myself in the pillow section. The aisle is far too narrow, the shelves being overstocked beyond reason. I stumble and end up face-first in a wall of feather pillows from which I cannot seem to extract myself. I feel bad about getting blood all over them. Something in the pillows makes me cough and sneeze. Some sort of dust is coming out. Like an air bag...

In my car... Oh, no! Blood... I remember!

“DOES YOUR CAR WORK?!!!”

Huh? Some guy is yelling at me through the jagged open space that used to be my windshield. I don't know what to do with the air bag—it's sort of all over the place. Feeling groggy, I kind of stuff it into the steering wheel wherever I can.

“I dunno,” I answer. “Maybe... It's still running. Do you need a ride or something?”

His devastated truck is in the way, so he tumbles over the hood and pulls hard on the passenger door, snapping off the plastic handle. I reach over to let him scramble in.

“Here goes!” I throw it in reverse. So far, so good.

Oh, God, the beast. It’s after us. It’s after me, lunging stride after stride—it could make the length of a football field in four steps. I ram the shifter into drive and hit the accelerator just as the monster leaps into the air with both feet, five stories into the sky. It slams down hard behind us, crushing the overpass into boulders and twisted metal and dust. Ensnared in the rubble of its own aftermath, the behemoth is temporarily unable to continue pursuit.

White-knuckled on the wheel, I push the little black Geo as hard as it can possibly go. The stench of adrenaline and cortisol saturates the stains under my armpits, and blood continues to drain from my right nostril. The Geo shimmies pretty hard above 60, so 95 feels like a very unsafe carnival ride. We squint through the rush of air blasting our faces, wincing when bits of glass break free and sail into the car. We work hard to open all the windows to cut down on wind resistance. Mine won’t budge. I glance behind. I have enough distance on a flat landscape to have lost sight of the monster. It seems safe to slow down. I turn to check in with my passenger.

“Hey, man.” He speaks to me softly. “Next big town you see, pull over. I need to hit a Wal-Mart.” Oh... He’s wet his pants. “We should call 911,” I declare while searching for my phone, but my passenger looks puzzled.

“What are you talking about?”

“Uh...that monster back there. We nearly died. Twice. Look! You wet your pants.”

He takes the defensive. “What? What are you talking about? I didn’t wet my pants! I spilled my coffee.

LOOK. It’s empty,” he declares, showing me my own empty cup.

“Okay. I’m sorry...I just... Are you telling me you didn’t see that beast back there?”

“What beast?” He turns around in his seat, first left, then right, looking all around. He looks concerned.

“Are you okay, man? You want me to drive?”

For a brief moment, remembering that I was probably knocked unconscious, I begin to doubt myself. But it can’t be me. He smells like pee. Doesn’t he?

I’m not letting him drive. He’ll get his mess all over the driver’s seat. “I’ll...find you a Wal-Mart.”

I begin my search for a massive block of ugliness in the middle of a cluster of old, dead towns. We find one within 10 minutes. At the very least, I can refill my styrofoam with more great coffee while I’m here. My plan is to ditch this guy while he’s trying on pants.

We enter the store, and the old man pretends to enjoy himself as he extracts a cart from the corral. He is kind enough to ignore the blood and the urine stain. We thank him but turn down the cart and begin to weave our way through aisle after aisle of worthless crap. I search for a way to separate myself. “I need a...nose hair trimmer. I hear they’re pretty cheap here.”

He looks at me with annoyance, like he’s about to say, “Okay, let’s do that first,” but then he shakes it off and says, “Meet me out front?” And I nod without guilt.

I walk in the general direction of the personal grooming section, checking over my shoulder to be sure he isn’t following me, and then I beeline it for the door. I stop next to the old man. “Excuse me. Sir?”

He looks at me like nobody calls him sir, ever. He likes me. I like him. I wish he still ran the corner hardware store. “Do you remember the guy I came in here with? The guy who wet his pants?”

“Yeah...uh...I was sorta wondering about that...I—”

“Listen—make sure he’s okay. I don’t know the guy. We were involved in an accident out on the interstate...cars and trucks piled up all over the place, and there was this... Anyway, I think he’s okay, but he’s a little disoriented, and...unreasonable. He might have a concussion or something. I gotta go—I need to go back there and help out.”

He smiles and waves me on. Looks like a guy who enjoys helping people...and enjoys helping people to help people.

I steer the vibrating Geo toward the on-ramp, heading back east. About 10 miles from the scene, I can make out the smoke rising from the dual ribbon of highway before me. Am I really going back there? This thing, this creature—what created it? Why is it so angry? A concussion may be clouding my judgment, or it may have destroyed any fears or inhibitions that I might normally have. I feel compelled to investigate and find no reason to refrain. At the very least, I’m sure there are a few people in need of help, if they survived. I near the edge of the scene and begin to slow down.

I-80 looks like the backyard of a family of giants raising two-year-old triplets. But it’s quiet now, like the toddler-giants have finally gone down for their naps. There are cars and trucks and tires and twisted bumpers and sporadic bits of flame and puffs of black smoke. A thin vein of destruction slices through the middle of America, splitting the vast, rolling landscape in two. Undulating flocks of geese continue to blot out sections of pure blue sky. The sun is sharp and is clearly unaffected by all of this.

I find the highway completely blocked ahead, so I park my rattling Geo alongside the first casualty I see, an upside-down brown Buick sedan, smoldering in the ditch, missing its left front wheel. Gazing eastward, the devastation continues on to the horizon for at least 20 miles. It’s pretty quiet but for the geese and other birds and the sound of a gentle breeze fanning the flames from the last full tank of gasoline this car will ever know. I’d better run over and see if there is anyone inside it who isn’t already dead. Geez...I’ve never seen a dead person outside of a funeral home. Tentatively, I crouch down in the mud to peek inside. Nobody.

Several hundred yards ahead of me on the grassy median, I locate a jackknifed semi that has trapped a couple of SUVs into its skid. I dash over to the three vehicles and climb upon each one to look for

survivors. Nothing. No bodies or anything. Strange...no fire engines, no cops, no ambulances... It's been less than an hour since I left this place.

Onward I trudge. I check cars and trucks, minivans and SUVs—countless capsized, crumpled machines. Not a soul. Eventually I just give up and walk down the middle of the road.

Eastward, I trudge farther and farther on through this graveyard of charred metal tombstones adorned with flaming rubber. Why am I still here? As I ask myself this question, only then do I realize that I am running, running full bore down the center of the westbound passing lane, against what would normally be oncoming traffic traveling at 75 or 80 miles per hour. I'm wheezing and sweating, a man very much out of shape. My thighs ache terribly. I have no water. I'm hot, so I throw off my coat and just drop it on the asphalt and keep going. The noxious smoke mixes with the air wafting in from a nearby feedlot. The stench of the atmosphere is overwhelming, and it stings my eyes. This could be hell, but I don't hear any screams. I need to suppress my imagination for a moment—of a vision I'm having of the beast devouring terrified human beings whole. It would explain everyone's disappearance, but I have yet to see a drop of blood other than my own. And it doesn't seem to have a mouth. My instincts tell me that something else has happened here. I just don't know what it is yet.

I slow down. I haven't run this much since high school wrestling. I wouldn't be surprised if I died right now, at this very moment. I'm so thirsty and soaked with sweat—my blood must be as thick as molasses. My head throbs, and my lungs rasp and heave. I collapse in the middle of the highway and lie on my back to rest, staring directly upward. The sky remains blue and clear. The sun is sharp and clearly unaffected.

I get back to my feet and stagger slowly to the top of the next rise.

And there it is.

Off to my left, on the side of the highway near the river, sits the massive white block in the middle of a field of stubble. I stop, frozen but for the uncontrollable shaking of an exhausted body.

A thought occurs. Sometimes, people don't care why things happen. Why isn't there anybody here? Did they call 911 after all? Perhaps an air strike is on the way...

Looking down, I can't believe it, but I've actually started running again. Shouldn't I be running the other way? How come I'm not running the other way? With every passing second, the beast looms larger and larger before me. There's not a chance in hell of me outrunning this thing if it sees me now and decides to get up and turn me into mulch.

This is what crazy people do. Stuff like this...

I am close now. I slow to a walk and stop to again catch my breath... It hasn't moved. We are separated by a hundred yards of mud clumps and dry, hay-colored stalks cut to within a foot of the ground. Here goes.

Is this suicide? Am I committing a pointless martyrdom to be witnessed only by the crows? I know I've always had a bit of a self-destructive streak, but this is a little over the top. I don't know. On the highway, everything is usually moving too fast. But there's a world on either side of the road, and right now, something by the river needs my undivided attention.

The mud is nasty. I trip over a tangle of corn leaves once, dirtying my knees and the heels of my palms. My guess is that I should employ the rules of an encounter with a bear, so I crouch timidly so as not to provoke the beast.

I'm a stone's throw away now, but I won't be throwing any.

The beast is facing away from me, toward the sun. It's huge, absolutely HUGE! It's so much bigger than I remembered—the rampage must have fueled a growth spurt. It is currently at rest, sort of backward-kneeling on its massive haunches, the long, brown-gray hair mixing and matting up with the soil. Its torso must be three stories tall, 20 feet wide, and 15 feet thick. The white paint upon this mass of concrete is shockingly bright, without a smear, without a blemish. The long-spanning rebar metal arms are resting gangly at either side at wide angles, with its fearsome, rusted shears and implements, which

seem to be playfully sifting through the fertile soil. Sitting up there on the top of its headless body, two crows dart their heads this way and that.

I had forgotten how long those arms were. If it wanted me dead, my head would be sailing through the air right now. I stand upright and gaze upon it...for how long, I do not know. Suddenly, the monster hoists itself up to rotate its body. The crows complain and take off immediately into the sky, and the beast sits back down to confront me. Face-to-face...

I cannot move a muscle, staring at the pure, blank wall of beast before me. We remain like this for many hours.

The sky remains blue and clear. The sun is sharp and clearly unaffected, rolling gradually across the span of daytime to its western position of late afternoon.

My back is killing me. Sure, I was frozen with panic and horror for quite a while. But time and pain have a way of helping us to let go of our fears. So this is it. Here goes.

Calmly, taking one careful step at a time, I walk toward the beast. It does not move. A dozen or so red-winged blackbirds are now perched along both of its arms, letting out the occasional referee's whistle sound that is both shrill and sweetly perfect in my ears.

I am close enough to touch it now. And I do...

It is cool and a little bit bumpy. It feels like the wall underneath the back porch where I grew up. I press my ear up against it to listen, but there is nothing much to hear, aside from what is all around us...

A realization of my own exhaustion drains me of all my cares and cautions. I turn around and lean my back against the beast. Then I slide slowly down until my ass hits the ground. It feels good to sit.

I can't remember the last time I've rested. In recent years, I've witnessed a handful of memorable evenings out on walks or at the park with the kids, glimpsing the sun sink behind the mountains, still

bright and yellow, followed by a long hour of incredible skies having miles and miles of clouds turning all pink and orange and purple. But...the last time I just sat and watched a sunset? Years, perhaps... I remember camping on an island with Michelle off the coast of the Sleeping Bear Dunes in Michigan. Oh, yeah...that couldn't be duplicated. But I can't recall a time that I sat for this long without a thought, without being bothered by anything...knowing the sun would set eventually. Is it really true that I have never done this? How depressing...

I look down at the front of my shirt and notice a thread sticking out of one of the buttons. If I pull on it, it might just keep coming, and the button will fall off and get lost in the mud. At the exact moment that this little crisis enters my mind, the monster reaches inward with its enormous claw of tangled, rusty blades and gently clips the thread, right close to the button.

The sun is warm... I am warm. At some point earlier in the day, I knew hunger and thirst. Perhaps there will be time for those things tomorrow.

About 50 different species of birds come to visit by the time the sun turns a deep red-orange and kisses the horizon. Their songs layer and intermingle, weaving in and out over miles and miles of breezes. I regret having cursed the geese this morning. I resolve not to do it again.

The glowing ball plummets behind the rest of this day for good. And sleep comes down like a sledgehammer.

Eyes peel open one at a time as I awaken, lying on my side with a clump of mud for a pillow. I pull myself up from the ground. The sun has returned to my left. The smoke has dissipated. The highway is clear.

The monster is gone.