

# xenodu



a short story by  
**e. g. fabricant**

©2013 E. G. Fabricant.

All rights reserved..No reproduction in whole or in part in any form without written permission.

*Xenodu* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously..

Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

*Author's Note:*

Dystopia Americana, anyone? *Xenodu* is my dark look—redrawn November 7, 2013—at our Nation's future, near mid-century. Fear, ignorance, greed, and a broken system of self-governance all have consequences.

*Adult language, situations.*

# XENODU



**E. G. Fabricant**

## *Toilet?*

Swirling liquid, pushed into a downward vortex around his pectorals, was his second sensation. Reflexively, he inhaled; a torrent of briny fluid burst from his lungs. Bracing himself against the lukewarm Plexiglas, he retched and gasped until he was exhaling only air. Hissing, the ducts above his head forced atmosphere around him until his glassine prison was dry.

A fleeting shadow caught his attention. He strained to see in its direction, but the distortion in the tube's curvature against the opaline dimness of the space beyond thwarted him. He heard a subdued mechanical whine and his enclosure whispered upward; simultaneously, hand rails and steps materialized. He staggered momentarily and caught his balance. The rush of cool air raised gooseflesh on his extremities. Three halting steps and he stood, wavering, on the dank, rubberized floor. He took in his surroundings. He stood to one side at the end of a long, corridor-like room. Against the faint luminescence from the other end, he made out a jumbled silhouette of abandoned equipment and counted 16 pods, including his. Only

two others had been vacated and, judging by the state of their neglect, some time ago. The rest were sealed and pristine.

A distant click. Bluish fluorescence marched down the center of the ceiling toward him. Startled, he shielded his eyes with his hands until his adjusting eyes brought them into focus. Slowly, laughter came until he arched his back and shrieked. He spied a large stainless steel refrigeration unit, doddered to it and shoved its double doors closed. In its brushed surface he could make out the fun-house contours of his naked physique. He stared until his amazement was consumed by a giddiness that made him punch at his reflection.

*I'm Adonis! Thank you, God—and glycerol, and liquid nitrogen!*

He broke into a makeshift jig that carried him deeper into the room, where he found against the wall what would have been a lab lavatory, with a sink and mirror. After reveling some more at the fine details of his smooth, muscled upper torso, he leaned in and traced with his fingers a barely discolored junction where his neck met the well between his shoulders.

*No scarring—must've used something besides sutures or staples.*

Something bumped his hip. He jerked his head around to see a small, wheeled cart, driven by—*what?* They both jumped away from the vehicle. What he saw was a slight, emaciated figure in a nondescript, hooded jumpsuit. *His—Hers? Its?*—skin was sallow and, through a pair of buglike, polarized wraparounds, the eyes were deeply recessed and appeared weak.

“Hey,” the unclothed one started, extending his right hand. The jumpsuit stumbled backward two paces.

“Okay.” He raised both arms, palms up, then slowly pointed at himself. “Name’s David—David Heller.”

No response.

“Don’t ask; biblical—Jewish. And, apparently, the irony is endless.” Holding the point, he eased the other hand outward. “You got a name?”

The cart driver struck a wan fist to his sternum. “Rehab!”

“S’cuse me—‘*Rehab*?’”

Again, with the fist. “Rehab!”

“Right. ‘Rehab.’” David gestured. “What is this place? Where are we?”

Rehab jabbed a finger at the cart’s top tray. On it were a pile of clothing and what looked like a rucksack.

“For me?”

No response. David motioned between the goods and himself, and opened his mouth slightly.

Rehab stared.

David picked up the largest article, a seamless off-white bodysuit that showed a metallic, aquamarine sheen when reflecting light. He slid it on, wiggled his fingers into the melded handpieces, and zipped it up. He half-pirouetted for Rehab and grinned.

“Think you could take it out a little in the crotch?”

No response.

David shrugged and picked up the hard-soled booties with uppers made of the same, Kevlar-like material. He leaned against the cart and slipped his feet into them diffidently.

“So, Rehab—did Walt and Ted make it, too?”

Rehab eyed him suspiciously.

“Disney and Williams. See, that’s a little neuro-vitrification humor, right there...”

No response.

He zipped the footwear to the suit’s ankle shanks, stood up, and touched Rehab’s forearm gently. He recoiled.

“N’Awsml!”

David pleaded with his hands. “Look—help a dude out here, will you? I’ve been a frozen entrée for God knows how long—well, was—and I have a million questions.”

Rehab gathered a helmet and the pack into a hand and jerked the thumb of the other behind him.

“Moo Forr’d!”

“Huh? Uh—“

Seeing no percentage in throttling his nemesis, David took the gear and shuffled in the direction given. He turned a corner and found a thin concrete staircase. He looked backward.

Rehab pointed toward the cantilevered door set in at an angle at the top of the shaft.

David slung the pack over his shoulder and climbed, with Rehab right behind him. He pulled and twisted the handle to release the latch bar and pushed with both hands. The door swung open easily, and his momentum launched him into a flailing shoulder roll that left him sprawled and half-embedded in sand. He hoisted himself to an elbow and looked back. Framed by the dimly-lit doorway, Rehab stood rigid. David dropped onto his back to get up. In the low-watt light of a waning moon, he was taken by the vast canopy of brilliant stars overhead, the studded belt of the Milky Way at its center. His

ears picked up the muffled, rhythmic sigh of surf. He whistled, stood up, and marveled at the dappled brilliance on the liquid ebony before him.

Rehab made a shrill noise like a dolphin's chirp that brought his charge around. He pointed at the helmet lying at David's feet and patted his own head emphatically.

"Dae-tyme: on!"

David picked it up and moved his free hand between the helmet and his scalp. "Wear this during the daytime?"

Rehab's expression changed.

David raised and canted it against the doorway light to examine it. It was like what he remembered as ice hockey headgear, except matte-finished and with no ventilation or chin strap. Molded ear covers were fixed to each side that adjusted inward by depressing buttons above them. Feeling inside, David touched one and felt membranous cells inflate. He detected rigid nodes molded into the cells and there were two metallic discs on the neckpiece that looked like over-sized watch batteries. The fixed visor seemed opaque and the cavity between it and the rim suggested that something was missing. He gathered up the pack.

"So—where to, now?"

The doorway was dark. He retreated a few steps and cupped a hand against his face. The tooth in the material abraded his skin. "Uh—Which way?"

Silence. He thought he heard a retreating whine beyond the dune at his back.

David shrugged. *Time to try out the new wheels.* He galloped up the beach, splashing into and out of the surf like a tot. He was enchanted by the near-effortless grace of his new

chassis, especially compared against his memories of the last days of his disease. He ripped off an occasional cartwheel or round-off to celebrate, reminiscent of the sometime joy of puberty and high-school gym class. After an hour of sustained effort, he stopped. His heart rate and respiration were unremarkable, and he noticed that his both his limbs and their coverings were dry. *This stuff breathes and is water-resistant—I love progress!*

He strode back and turned his attention to his rucksack. Groping inside, he pulled out an oblong object that buzzed and blinked on, bathing him in a green glow. Amused, he dropped and retrieved it a few times with the same result, then took inventory. *Hm. Couple liters of fluid.* He flipped the cap off the canvas-like sac, revealing a pull-out plastic tube; extending it, he sniffed and sucked. An odd, neutral flavor ran over his taste buds. He sucked greedily a few more times until his gut went spastic, forcing some of the amber liquid up his esophagus and out his nose and mouth. *Whoops. Sorry, new stomach!* When it settled, he felt strangely satisfied. A buzz came over him quickly, reminding him of his three-shot espresso addiction; it was just as bracing, but more potent. His senses magnified. He continued, removing a packet of a dozen or so loose foil envelopes. Tearing one, he removed a dense, textureless biscuit. He hefted it in his palm and stuck it deliberately under his nose—reminding himself of the great apes he had enjoyed watching on *Animal Planet*. He bit down. The sliver on his tongue dissembled and his salivary glands erupted, creating a pungent, chewy cud that took him several moments of concentrated effort to work through and swallow. After a few more small pieces, he



lollod back on his heels, having added a drowsy surfeit to his elevated mood. *Wow. Please drink and eat responsibly.* He sat back against a weed clump and rested; the thinness of the fabric and its surprising pliability allowed him to lace his fingers easily behind his head.

Finally, he felt equalized. He dug down and came out with—he held the glow lamp closer—a battered canvasback book. Its goal leaf legend was barely legible. *SOCIETY AND SOLITUDE. Twelve Chapters. By Ralph Waldo Emerson. 1870.* David hefted it by its spine and noticed that a musty page was dog-eared. He leafed to it, page 14 in the eponymous first essay, and found a passage highlighted:

Nature delights to put us between extreme antagonisms, and our safety is in the skill with which we keep the diagonal line. Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal. We must keep our head in the one and our hands in the other. The conditions are met, if we keep our independence, yet do not lose our sympathy.

A bold yellow Post-It Note stood in high relief to the stained page below, and on it was lettered:

“Hide in Plain Sight.”

David pulled at an ear and mused. *Solitude and Society in 1870. James Caan and Jill Ikenberry in 1980?* He stood, found Polaris above him, and turned. To the north he made out curvature in the distant beach and a faint, leftward jut of land. Lights twinkled faintly at its end and he thought he saw faint luminosity defining its horizon. *Might have to check that out tomorrow, after I see what’s inland here.* David knelt again and, peeling the pack’s flap back, he held the lamp inside for one last

look. *Bushnell 8x40 binoculars, just like Dad used to bird-watch. No use right now. He rooted to the bottom. No knife? No weapon? Pretty grim survival package, if you ask me.* He zipped and plumped it, lay on his side and drifted off.



David woke to lapping at his cheek. *High tide?* He opened an eye to find a mangy, trembling foreleg inches away. He sat bolt upright and the canine skittered away, hackles up and teeth bared. He barked fiercely, but produced only shrill, whiny bursts. David pushed slowly into a crouch and spread his arms outward.

“Hey, boy.” *Dingo? Hyena? What?*

Without moving his eyes he found and zipped opened his pack. Using both hands, he groped for and found the opened foil packet. He broke a sliver off the bar and slowly produced it, extending it to arm’s length. Eyeing it and him suspiciously, the dog shifted forward, straining, smelling—and salivating.

“Hungry, fellah?” David shook the morsel slightly.

The scavenger backed up stiffly, growling, but kept its nose up.

“Okay, suit yourself—crunchy it is.” He tossed it between its paws, startling the creature. It recovered quickly and snuffled noisily, roiling the sand around it. Overcome, it snatched it up.

David folded his arms around his knees. *This is going to be good.*

The animal worked the piece herky-jerky at the side of his jaw until it began to expand and liquefy. Its eyes widened and it alternated chewing and gulping to stay even, hacking as it

threatened to overwhelm it. Finally, relieved, it choked the last bit down and wiped all the viscous goo from its teeth and dewlaps with its tongue. David saw satisfaction in its relaxing face—maybe even a fleeting, indifferent smile.

David removed the packet, pushed himself to a knee and held it out, waving it back and forth slowly. Straining, the mongrel pushed its twitching nose toward it, never letting its eyes leave David'. It snatched it away and, tail down, seemed to acknowledge David' generosity before it raced away and crested the slight dune up the beach to their right. David gave chase and watched the dog disappear into a group of squat, whitewashed buildings.

*So much for companionship.* He stretched and drew in a deep breath—realizing only then how sweetly the air met his lungs. He opened his eyes wide and they filled with clear, brilliant blue. *Pure and clear—good sign.* His reconnaissance was interrupted by the memory of Rehab's injunction. *Right—helmet on.* He trotted back to his belongings and yanked the headgear on, pressing the buttons. It snuggled itself gently to his head. Though mirror-coated outside, the visor was transparent through his entire visual field. He cocked his head toward the surf; the earpieces compromised his hearing slightly—though much less than his old Walkman. David checked his compass to confirm North and shouldered his pack. Instinct told him to hug the coast, so he followed the tide line until he was forced northeast by a small bay, sheltered behind a jetty. He encountered a rail line that he followed around the water until he reached a platoon of industrial buildings fronted to the west by forsaken wharves. Choosing a paved route sheltered by the

buildings—*Wharf Drive; very helpful*—he maintained a quick pace until the street opened up and cut left. Hugging the last structure at its northeast corner, he checked for any sign of activity and continued. On his right was a decayed beachfront community—dead vegetation, no movement or sound. He made a beeline out Wharf Drive until it ended at the beach and turned northwest again. Another 1,000 feet and he was under a pier that bore no decipherable signage.

He didn't risk investigation and kept his course until he reached what he guessed used to be a park, judging by the remaining quadrants of asphalt, moribund palms, and grayed-out lifeguard tower. He decided to try to get his bearings and climbed up. Doffing his helmet, he stood on the seat, turned inland, and began an east-to-west scan through his binoculars. He found nothing familiar, other than dissipation, until he looked due west, where he just made out three canted stacks above a distant, gleaming superstructure.

*Queen Mary? Goddamn—I'm almost home!*

David reassembled himself, clambered down, and sprinted northeast to find the closest Pacific Coast Highway bridge.



He figured he'd covered the five-plus miles from what had to be Seal Beach, around Queensland Bay to Long Beach Harbor, in less than two hours. All along the way, it was the same story. From the tony waterfront properties and marinas of Alamitos Bay and Naples to Rainbow Harbor, everything was comatose. A few once-proud private vessels still lay at anchor,

mostly swamped or sunk, masts and keels jutting out of the water at odd angles. Oddly, he'd seen no automobiles or light trucks. The skyline and infrastructure of the city abutting the Harbor appeared less distressed but just as lifeless. Nothing had stirred.

David made his way across the remains of Shoreline Aquatic Park to the water, to scout the industrial peninsula where the great lady was permanently berthed. She appeared perfectly maintained and there was movement on the ground around her. Rows of double-articulated tour buses moved toward her side from Queens Highway. *Huge—gotta hold 100 passengers.* Through his glasses he traced them coming and going, directly from I-710 south down onto South Scenic Harbor Drive and back again on Queens Highway South. Once he'd waited long enough to satisfy himself that none of the inbound buses used Queen's Way Bridge, he estimated that the closest he'd be to a bus rider's eyes before getting off the bridge over there would be about 500 feet. He swung his optics back to the lot and watched until all the vehicles he could see were emptied and parked, or not taking on passengers. He covered the 350 yards to the other side in a mad duck-walk, once again grateful for his bodily upgrade. His eyes on the Highway, he straddled the rail at the base of the ramp, jumped, and rolled into the scrub at its base. He checked, darted across Queensway Drive, and followed the shoreline past a defunct resort condominium and marina complex.

It was about a half-mile before he could drop into a small field and low-crawl through two rows of mature trees, until he reached the west end of the ship's parking lot. David took a

draught of the amber liquid and settled himself to spy. He closed in on the Queen's foredecks; his heart stirred to see gaily-attired humans walking and talking. A high percentage appeared of be of Asian origin and their regalia suggested they were foreign tourists. Lowering his line of sight, he took census on and around the Scorpion, the mothballed Russian submarine that is the cruise ship's sister attraction. A greater number of her *aficionados* looked like ruddy Europeans to him. Last, he confirmed that there were no visible vehicles other than buses in the lot.

He lay there, his mind awash in speculation, until groups of visitors began streaming down the gangway. David studied the digital marquees on the buses closest to his position as they flashed through their multilingual destination displays—he recognized Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Spanish, German, French, Arabic, and Russian, as well as English—until he saw:

“LAX: Los Angeles International Airport.”

He counted five of those, all contiguous. It struck him that they were all the same make and model, had those forward mounted side mirrors that made them resemble praying mantises—like he'd first seen on a business trip to Shanghai—and the entire fleet had been parked in astonishingly close order. Once the boarding doors were opened there was no room around them. He saw no drivers dismount to assist. As the throng approached, divided, and threaded into the gaps, the enhanced sounds of shouts, laughter, and simple conversation almost

overwhelmed him. He had to stifle an impulse to leap up and run, crying out, to join them.

Departures began with the phalanx of coaches closest to the ship. David came to a knee behind the nearest tree. When the last LAX-bound bus fell into line behind the others, he sprinted after it, caught the handrail of a ladder above the rear bumper, and vaulted aboard. He ascended briskly and found an open module that housed what looked like evaporative cooling fans and other devices he couldn't place. He picked his way along one edge and dropped in behind its leading airfoil.

David was amazed at the vehicles' noiselessness, low vibration at speed, and their linear precision in convoy; he also noticed quickly that the route was devoid of signs—of any kind, other than simple route markers. *Autosensors. Batteries, fuel cells, or hybrid? Nuclear, maybe?*

He sprawled to the left side of the northbound bus to get a look at Piers A-F and the shipping terminals on the other side of the peninsula. They were beehives of commerce. Tankers, freighters, and container ships were being offloaded at practically every berth. Tractors moved containers steadily toward the spur to be loaded on rail cars for transport while others paralleled him along Pier F Avenue to merge onto the 710 above Ocean Boulevard. They, too, were driverless; where David was used to seeing tandem cabovers, there were only platforms with small antennae.



The trip up the 710 produced no real surprises. Still no automobiles or other light vehicle traffic, and most of the big rigs

that joined the tour caravan exited toward renewed industrial areas just over the L. A. River to the east. Those residential areas he could spot from the freeway bore no witness to life. Turning to the west at the 105, David strained to glimpse the downtown skyline but lacked the necessary elevation. As they approached the Sepulveda Boulevard down ramp, he caught sight of his first inbound aircraft. *Holeeee shit! That thing's gotta be twice as big as a 747. Kinda like a Boeing airframe.* On approach, the gargantuan craft was whisper quiet; as it passed through 500 feet, it nosed up, full flaps, and its four engines rotated skyward. Flat, triangular gear emerged from pods on its lower fuselage and it settled beneath the terminal horizon until only the tip of its tail was visible. *VTOL—on that monster!*

When his coach paused to make the left onto World Way, he looked to the east, up Century Boulevard. The density and degree of hotel development from what he remembered was breathtaking. *Wonder where they hid all the Park'n'Rides?*

Nearing the terminals, the maze of fixed, primary-colored signboards he remembered was gone and their caravan was joined by buses feeding in from other locations. He saw no private vehicles, taxis, or shuttles of any other kind. They passed the iconic, spider-legged restaurant and control tower; they both seemed idle and their parking lots were empty. A metaphorical parade of overgrown hearses flickered through David's mind. The coaches broke formation into four lanes leading up to one elevated level. As they rose, he saw that past architectural imagination—dramatic sweeps and arcs—had been foresworn for pure functionality, replaced by short superstructures composed



of squat right angles. He'd seen more impressive Greyhound station exteriors as a kid.

His carrier moved leftmost and proceeded to a spot on the left-center of the terminal complex's horseshoe, where it slid smoothly into a predetermined space. Lack of any information totally disoriented him. *Bradley International Terminal?* . He peeked over the edge. The curb extended barely 10 feet from the opaque glass and steel wall and there were no other humans in evidence. Doors slid open at each end and the passengers alighted, chattering easily in their mother tongues. They made their way directly inside; simultaneously, a segmented tractor-ramp thrust itself out to a stop slightly under the bus's edge. Lower hatches opened and luggage modules rolled out systematically above the narrow concrete strip and disappeared into the building.

David looked up and realized that the edge of the sheltering overhang reached only the vehicle's center and was barely four feet over his head. He stood, leapt up, and grabbed it with both hands. Pulling himself through the overhanging decorative greenery, he found himself on a living roof. The sudden musky scent and humidity of healthy vegetation intoxicated him; he nestled in its comfort until he felt drowsy. Quickly, he shook himself out of it and scuttled to the other side. He puzzled at seeing no jetways jutting from below, until a mammoth shadow and shudder crossed him and he remembered watching the first one land. He sat, cross-legged, and went for his binoculars. All the runways, both north and south, had been replaced by a vast, gridlike tarmac. Monorailed—*mag-lev?*—trams filled with passengers snaked from beneath the terminals

out and into parallel spines of distant outbuildings on both sides. David watched as another beast swooped, hovered, and settled itself onto a raised pad a safe distance from one spine. Once its engines were stilled, the pad retracted into a C-shaped enclosure where automated offloading and maintenance began immediately. At that moment, it occurred to him that he hadn't confronted the smoky smell of jet exhaust. Two sheltered gangways extended to doors fore and aft to process living cargo. Focusing, he searched each idle machine for a discernible cockpit, with windshields, and didn't find any. As they continued their intermittent game of super-scale hopscotch in the landing area, David began checking their outside skins and tails for identification. *Air China. Air Canada. British Airways. Aerolines Argentinas. Lufthansa. Singapore. AeroMexico. Air India. Quantas. Air Lingus. JAL. AlItalia. PAL. AeroFlot. Alaska Airlines. I see Hawaiian—*

He lowered his optics and searched the entire airfield.

*Where are the other domestics?*

The brilliant afternoon sun's image, reflected off a nearby skylight, interrupted him. David made his way to it; knelt, and peeped in cautiously. Two stories below, he saw the end of a downward escalator, people seated in neat rows waiting for the next tram, and little else. *Services must all be in the other building. Still; why does everyone seem so—ordered?* His eyes next fell on the shadow of his helmet set in the parallelogram of sunlight on the waiting room floor below. Then they drifted to her—on her feet, mouth moving, pointing excitedly at him. He jerked back and panicked. After snatching up his pack he sprinted along the roof's southern perimeter to find a standpipe

protruding above its western corner. He saw that it extended straight down into some kind of sealed cistern or storage vessel. *Drainage or collection—can't tell.* He hooked an arm around the union, kicked out, and fell until he managed to clamp his arms and legs around it. Pressing and releasing, he traveled the 30 feet to the collector, hit it harder than he anticipated, and lost his balance. He bounced between it and the wall the remaining eight feet and landed in a heap. Pain shot through his ankle when he put weight on it, so he took enough time to convince himself that it wasn't broken or seriously sprained.

David strained to see everything between him through the southern landing area and the airport's barely visible fence beyond. He couldn't find a small vehicle or anything warm-blooded on legs. Sucking in a breath, he chose a target destination and broke into a steady trot. His feet pounded as he ate up concrete. Halfway, he ran under a fuselage just as its electrical system came to life, quickening his pace. As he passed the end of the last outbuilding, he could see outbound travelers lined against the tinted glass, pointing their fingers and cameras at him. It annoyed him somehow that they appeared more amused than distressed. He attacked the remaining three-quarters of a mile in the open until he reached the cover of an unused cargo transfer building. Panting, he paused, hands on knees, to pay down his oxygen debt. He checked his heart rate, which again was surprisingly moderate, after factoring in stress. He squatted to drink and eat. Refreshed, he walked the last 300 feet to the cyclone fence at the edge of Imperial Highway and hauled himself over it. Clutching the chain links, David took a last look between his gloved hands at where he'd been.

*Why isn't anyone after me?*



David forged due west down Imperial Boulevard. From the angle of the sun in the sky and with dusk hovering, he guessed that it was late fall—maybe early November. A native paradisian, he was used to the relative lack of seasonal “tells.” He passed seven intersections, his anticipation growing. Presented with the next faded sign—“Virginia St.”—he felt a deep tremor. *630 Virginia Street, El Segundo, California. The ancestral hacienda.* His head swam through the remaining third of a mile where he froze, staring. Other than the parched lawn, dead hedges, and scabrous paint, the one-story bungalow was just as he remembered. Two bedrooms, one bath. Covered patio. Two-car garage—of course. *Joe Heller: Born, Queens, New York, 1940. Columbia graduate, B.S. in Engineering, 1961. Peace Corps, “Freedom Rider.” Thirty-plus years in aerospace, Douglas and McDonnell Douglas; took buyout after Boeing merger, 1997. Consultant and...caretaker. Rebecca “Becky” Cohen Heller: Born, Hollywood, California, 1945. Jewish-American Princess; married 1966. Stay-at-home Mom. Clinically depressed; alcoholic.*

David entered, reluctantly, and—troubled but relieved—recognized nothing, other than the interior appointments of 1930s Mission-knockoff homes of the ex-urban type. Casement windows. Scrolled-relief plaster ceilings. Sculpted fireplace. *What happened? They were still here—barely—when I...* The initial impression was that the neutron bomb had been perfected and cleaned up after, or there was a mammal abduction of

incalculable proportions. The living area had been redone in what he remembered as Mated Metrosexual. Deep colors with contrasting accents; studio furniture; plantation shutters; eye-jarring floor coverings over dark wood. Indistinct lithographs and prints. A high-end entertainment shrine covered the long wall. He searched surfaces. *Where are the controllers?* He approached the wall, confronted with both familiar and unknown brands, and saw two goggle-like, wide-banded headsets lying near the game console. *Total virtual reality? Damn—where’s PG&E when you need ‘em?* Surrounding shelves bulged with scores of DVDs and video games that, upon examination, revealed themselves as mostly frivolous—violent, sexual, surreal, or parfais of any two or three.

Kitchen: granite, tile, and superfluous stainless steel.

Master bedroom: TV, Danish, and an embarrassing array of mirrors.

Bath: Utilitarian-sensual gratification train wreck.

Second bedroom: Guest accommodation/office, cramped by material effluvia. *Childless*. Desktop, monitor, and router. Futon. Some books—college artifacts and the rest heavy on chick-lit, memoir, and self-help. Scattering of framed memorials of fraternity, sorority, and pre-wedding excesses. Barely visible on the floor behind the computer hutch was a fragment of paper. David picked it up. Canting it against the light, the seriphed, one word title and litany of celebrity headlines down the right side gave it away. *‘People’—inexplicably durable. ‘February 22, 2013’*. He could just make out the image of a striking, blonde-streaked brunette with stylish eyeglasses and a 300-watt, dimpled smile, winking. *‘Chief Exec Sarah Talks War,*

*Economy.*’ He peered closer, beneath the rag’s title. ‘*America’s Official Newsweekly.*’



Night was upon him. David chose anonymity over memories and set out to claim another vacancy for refuge and rest. He was just out on Virginia Street again when he saw the broad glow to the south. He trekked the scant half-mile to West El Segundo Boulevard. *The Chevron refinery and tank farm—‘Largest refinery on the West Coast.’* He bounded up the fire escape of an old building two doors east and reconnoitered. The distillation centers and the coking units were full-tilt and steam poured from the cooling units sprinkled throughout. Workers in hard hats and coveralls monitored operations all over the huge lot, but darkness foiled further identification. Like his grade school tour, the outbound truck and rail functions were as predominant as they’d been. David scanned west to find a cohort of tankers riding at anchor, proximate to an offshore terminus fed by ganged pipelines. Tracing them back to shore, he guessed that some were offloading crude and others were taking on refined product, including liquid petroleum gas. *Where’s all that product going?* He couldn’t locate the familiar red and blue chevron, so he trained on the dim signage at the front gate across the street from him. *Sinopec. New one on me.*



Passing aircraft woke David from a sound, dreamless sleep. He’d chosen another house at random in a vain attempt to provide some—any—context or frame of reference. No

newspapers, periodicals, or topical nonfiction—just the same electronic relics and bound or stapled fluff. He'd given up and crashed in a preteen male's bedroom. *Kiss II? The Los Angeles Rams of Industrial City? David Beckham playing for the L.A. Galaxy? Apple iPhone4?* The last artifact fascinated and gave him hope until he realized the battery was long gone.

He yawned, stretched, and stepped into the hallway. Seeing the toilet reminded him that—well... *That stuff really metabolizes—efficient.*

In the garage, he found a dust-laden road bike. *Schwinn Prologue—looks expensive; 10-speed Shimano. These things lasted forever, before they started building 'em in China. Hey! Got a helmet...Hell. Tires probably oxidized and axles dry, anyway.* He looked closer. The tires consisted of a flexible, gel-filled composite and the axle's bearing races were Teflon-coated. *Suh-weet!* He found a rag fragment and went to work.

David burst through the side gate into the cul-de-sac and made lazy figure eights in the dying dawn, re-enacting the scene between Paul Newman and Katharine Ross in "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." *'Raindrops keep fallin' on my head...'* *One of Dad's favorite movies.* He remembered the times they spent in the dark on weekends, mostly when "Mom wasn't feeling well," and watching DVDs together, toward the end. *All I need now is a woman.*

He put a foot down and shook himself out of his reverie. Wheeling up Concord, he turned right on Grand Avenue and pedaled east to take in Recreation Park, where he'd played Little League ball. Nothing to see, really. The hardball and softball diamonds were weed-strewn desert and the pavilion fronting the

picnic ground on the east side had long since caved in. *Just like most of the picnics—and the ol' family unit, when...*

Pumping furiously, he shot out the north entrance, glided up Sheldon Street, and turned right on East Mariposa. He swung from curb to crumbling curb, almost indifferent now to the platoons of silent dwellings on either side. His mind festering with uninformed doubt, David really didn't raise his eyes until he'd cruised across North Sepulveda. Against the shimmer of the emerging sun, he detected movement. He braked and clawed for the binoculars. Shadows moved from left to right on the distant 405. *Buses! Different buses!* Seized by purpose, he coursed east, passing the old Green Line light rail station at Nash Street, and pulled up where Mariposa dead-ended into North Douglas Street. Massive office and industrial complexes reminded him that David stood at what had come to be ground zero for all things aerospace before he went on ice. In the few square miles surrounding Los Angeles Air Force Base, upwards of 20,000 souls brought to life virtually every missile and satellite with any military or commercial utility—some weapons platforms and delivery systems, too. The giants among scores of contractors were Raytheon, Boeing, and Northrop Grumman at the time he went under. Now, scanning states of repair and rooftop stacks and ventilation systems told him this sector was still alive.

He recognized the behemoth before him as what his father had shown him was Northrop Grumman, though that identity was no longer apparent. He crossed Douglas and made his way to the southern side of the main building, where the first bus passing on Aviation Boulevard startled him. Ditching the



bike and hugging the wall, he counted a dozen coaches going by. Unlike his LAX transport, they were light aquamarine in color—matching his jumpsuit and helmet. By now the leader in the column had turned left onto 120<sup>th</sup> and immediately left again, moving toward him. Once they all flanked the building, the doors opened and discharge began from the rearmost. Every passenger was dressed as he was; they fell into single file and moved with synchronous precision inside. David dropped his pack and sprinted to the rear of the line. He mimicked their cadence as best he could until he was inside.

A short corridor opened onto the cavernous plant's floor, where the line broke left. To David, the atmosphere was more hive-like than industrial; both the overhead lighting and ambient noise level were muted. The line ahead followed the wall briefly and broke at intervals toward the center, flowing like cells through defined capillaries between glowing, pod-like modules. They reminded him of those upscale, outdoor tennis enclosures, except they were larger—maybe a football field—more rigid, and nearly transparent. The new arrivals queued briefly at entrances where they were scanned as they entered. Meanwhile, he could see others leaving the enclosures, streaming into a central aisle and joining in a single, orderly rivulet that emptied out the north end of the building. *Shift change.*

When the last drone ahead of him broke away, David marched stiffly the last 100 paces to the corner, crossing a track on which flatcars with hoists were mounted. He scaled a ladder that took him to a grid of open maintenance catwalks that crisscrossed the entire enclosure. Crouching, he made certain he was alone aloft; it amazed him that there was no evidence of

external supervision or security of any kind. He made his way to the center and began his investigation. Eight pods, arranged in two long rows. Inside each, similar scenarios of assortment and assembly were unfolding. *Clean rooms.* Arrays of electronics, solar panels, struts, and insulation told him that the products were most likely satellites. His background in software rather than hardware didn't help him much beyond that.

As he lay there, suspended, the hum of ventilation and muffled activity almost hypnotized him. It stopped; in unison, so did the workers. They stood at attention until the first replacement came out of the corridor, then moved toward the pods' exits. David scrambled back to the corner, down the ladder, and emerged from behind the flatcars just in time to join the center line.

They boarded the coaches in the dark. David concentrated hard on his emulations as he went. Inside, they passed the auto-console and took their seats in order, front to rear; there was just enough illumination above the aisle to keep him from revealing himself. Seeing the last seat filled—*of course*—he turned, braced his back against the rear bulkhead, and planted his feet. As they slid away, the low resolute whine of whatever propelled them was the only sound. The passengers sat stock-still, facing forward, hands relaxed in laps. Emboldened, David took a few steps and inspected some of them. They were definitely human, of different sizes, shapes, and colors. None was obese and, though it was hard to tell, at least two genders were represented.

The floor swayed gently. David recovered quickly from the centrifugal pull and made it back to the rear as the bus

straightened and followed the others onto the 405. He saw the glare of LAX and the refinery to the left; to the northeast, there was no electric evidence of any kind of skyline. Moon and starlight were no help, either; gray abandonment was all there was. He guessed 20 minutes had passed when they descended to go left but couldn't be certain, because he had no relative sense of speed.

Their destination was a long, low oblong building that was half strip-mall industrial and half agricultural—all function, no form, and windowless. David followed as the rest trooped inside, then hung back. His immediate impression was of an endless dental operatory without walls, replete with two rows of regimented beige recliners and matching equipment standing by. The drones divided into two columns and filed forward until each had simultaneously occupied a chair. In unison, what looked like the top half of a computerized axial tomography machine swung into place over each body and sprang to electronic life. Tendrils emerged from behind each headrest to free and extract each helmet.

David found what he guessed was the closest female and crept to her side. She lay there, hairless and motionless, her eyes closed. A plastic cone had descended itself over her nostrils and a tube pulsing with amber fluid had been snaked down her throat. The machine had unzipped her jumpsuit. Pulses of light swept over small terminals implanted on her alabaster skin. A strange appliance that resembled the floor tool for a vacuum cleaner lowered itself and crept toward her pubis. He caught his breath and watched her face. Almost imperceptibly, she shuddered and her lips parted slightly. The tremor caused her

exposed breasts to quiver. Seeing her umber nipples tighten stirred David. He slid a hand behind her head, causing an arc that shocked him. His fingers found two quarter-sized electrodes at the base of her skull, above matching terminals imbedded in the headrest. Her eyes snapped open to reveal pupils that were fixed open and did not react to the light. Her eyes widened, straining blindly, and her limbs trembled. She tried to shriek.

Instinctively, David looked around. The bed closest to the door was abandoned. Just before he felt the prick of the needle in his neck, he saw a pleasant Asian face smiling at him.

“Fàngsóng, shúrén,” he cooed. “Fàngsóng.”<sup>1</sup>



As the fog lifted, David sensed a presence over him and came up swinging. The specter retreated.

“N’awsm!”

“Rehab?” David’ aching head brought clarity.

It was he. With his hood off, the steel plug earlets and the wisp of moustache gave him away; combined with the glasses and his fine-boned features, his bald head made him more alien-like. He motioned for David to rise. Staggering, he obliged, and looked at himself. The jumpsuit was gone, replaced by well-worn goldenrod sweats emblazoned with “L.A. Lakers” and down-at-the-heels vintage Air Jordans.

“Where am I? What is this place?”

“Orkle!” Rehab started to walk away, pointing.

“Man—can I get a sentence over here?”

---

<sup>1</sup> “Relax, friend. Relax.” (*Pīnyīn* Mandarin)

“ORKLE!”

“Okay! Okay.”

Outside, in the welcoming sunshine, they came upon two objects that looked like over-muscled push lawn mowers. Rehab stepped between the wheels of one and guided it nonchalantly through a couple quick circles and pivots while David watched. He pointed at the other. David studied it cautiously—*Segway i2*—and boarded. Gripping the steering column, he squatted a little, tensed, and leaned forward. The machine bolted, forcing him off its perch, and stopped. He glanced at Rehab and saw the hint of a smile. Another brief demonstration ensued, with Rehab emphasizing relaxed, deliberate body movements. Soon, David was scooting about like a gleeful schoolboy, which Rehab tolerated momentarily.

“Moo Forr’d—pleez.”

David came abreast. “Why, Rehab—I didn’t know you cared.”

His guardian took off and David fell in behind. Signs put them on M Street. They whirled southeast down cracked asphalt, passing between structures that were best characterized as suburban military. M became Graeber Street. David saw hangars and tarmac to his right and glimpsed gray four-engined airframes, still in formation, disabled, dying, and bleaching like beached whales. They pulled up at the Baucum Avenue Northwest intersection, parked in front of a dull silver building, and entered. The faces of three generations of some two hundred souls, overwhelmingly female and dressed from thrift stores like he was now, turned to meet them. They reflected the California Diaspora he recalled: a plurality of Anglos, including

assimilated ethnic Europeans; Latinos; Asians; and African-Americans. They huddled, sitting or squatting, in what looked like Socratic groups. Earnest instructors, mostly older, stood among them. Lining the walls were makeshift industrial shelves, groaning with books, periodicals, charts, and illuminations of every description. A half-dozen laptops were open and several refugees were plugged into iPods or variants. Frozen by uncertainty at first, they began to stir; some approached.

A white-haired man in a long serape, dirty chinos, and sandals loped up to them from the other end of the room. His face was tanned, leathery, and expectant as he grew closer.

Rehab nudged David. "Orkle."

*Oracle?*

Their leader spread his arms and embraced David.

"Welcome, friend." He pulled back, engaged David's eyes, and offered his hand. "Noam. Noam Haywood."

David took his hand. "I'm—I'm Laza—." He burst into tears.

Noam held him until his sobs subsided, then enfolded David's arm in his. He turned into the room and gestured. "Continue, everyone. Please."

He focused on David again. "Come; let's walk."

They turned left and strolled by a barracks on their left whose trees still lived. Still wiping his eyes, David barely noticed. Noam tugged him along, gently.

"I thought you should see this right away."

They stopped. Before them lay a three-acre field, all under cultivation. David gasped, then smiled. Noam patted his arm and released it.

“There. Feel better?”

“Yes. So you’re...the ‘Oracle?’”

Noam waved his hand. “One of the youngsters came up with that a while back, in a fit of new vocabulary. Embarrassing, really.”

He led David to a corner bench with grass and shade.

“So, again; you are...?”

David sniffled and cleared his throat. “David—David Heller.” Without thinking, he stuck his hand out. They laughed.

Noam waited.

“Oh—sleeping habits, as an infant. New Testament parable, but never mind. You?”

“Parents were lefties—‘liberal’ unionists. After their favorite contemporary anarchist.” He paused. “Looks like we’re both victims of others’ sense—or lack of appreciation for—irony.”

“Apparently.” David fidgeted.

Noam folded his hands. “Now, then; what are your questions?”

“What’s today?”

“Tuesday, November 5, 2034.”

“Election Day?”

“Used to be. How old are you?”

“Um. I was born in 1970.”

“Ten years after me. And, when were you, uh...?”

“‘Frozen?’ They picked me up December 3, 1999. Nice Hanukkah gift, right? Mama thought so.”

“And you chose that course because...?”

“Late-stage, unresponsive testicular cancer.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, how did you afford neuro-vitrification at that age?”

“Not at all. I did really well in software.”

“What type?”

“Gaming—video games, mostly.”

A cackle caught in Noam’s throat. “Care for a pomegranate? We have a tree.”

David brightened. “Real, honest-to-God food? Of course!”

Noam brought back two, produced a blade and sliced each in half. “You’ll have to dig the seeds out yourself.”

David tore through the pith and pasted the kernels into his mouth hungrily, painting his face with his juice-soaked hands. When finished, his quandary delighted Noam.

“Use the grass—we can wash up later.”

“By the way—“ David licked at his beet-colored fingers, making matters worse. “What was that stuff you left for me in the pack? I mean, I assume it was you.”

“Yes and no. We put you out in the world; they get it to us now and then. I don’t know what their constituents are, but you experienced their power and efficiency, I assume.”

“No shit.” David pleased them both with his unintended double meaning. “Or piss, for that matter.”

“You’re still 29—no doubt about that. The ‘employees’ need evacuating, but infrequently. Did you happen to see any of that before you were caught?”

“Yeah.” David stood and searched for horizons. “What is this place?”



“Used to be March Air Reserve Center; before that, March Air Force Base.”

“Why here?”

“Shelter. Water supply and sanitation. Fuel bunkers. Motor pool. Communications, to some degree. Well-stocked commissary, once upon a time. Little bit of arable land—and room to grow.”

“How long have you been here? At March, I mean.”

“Eighteen years, in January.”

“How did I get here?”

“They brought you.”

“So—‘they’ know you’re here?”

“Uh-huh.”

David rubbed his forehead as if trying to tame his turbulent thoughts into an orderly flow of inquiries. “‘Rehab.’ And that place. What—“

“The Institute—your Institute—ran out of money in late 2012. You and other viables were sold as salvage to the military for future research. God knows what; classified. Transferred to Seal Beach Naval Weapons Station. After it all went to Hell, three of you were stable enough to qualify for long-term maintenance. We found you a couple years ago.”

“And the other two?”

“Don’t know. Liberated them first; you’re the only one who’s made it back.”

“Why did you do that?”

“There’ll time to talk about that later. Ready to tackle the obvious question?

“You mean: ‘What the Hell happened?’”

Noam leaned back. “What’s your last political memory?”

David thought. “Monica Lewinsky.”

Noam chortled bitterly. “Perfect!”

“What? Why do you ask?”

“It’s a highly-developed reflex. In my former life, I taught Political Studies at Pitzer College.”

“Claremont?”

“Yes, long ago and far away. About 28 miles, as the crow flies.” Noam looked wistful. “Let’s take it from the top. You checked out with a year to go in Bill Clinton’s second term, correct?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Okay. Long before the Senate acquitted him of the ‘high crime and misdemeanor’ of lying about a blow job or two in his office, conservatives in the Republican Party aimed to reconsolidate after the ‘Contract with America’ debacle by taking back the White House. They recruited George W. Bush, elder son of President 41—“

“Wait—I thought the younger one, the Governor, was the political heir.”

“George W. was a Governor, as well—in Texas, home to one of the weakest of executive branches, for one term. So you did pay some attention?”

“A little—I guess.”

“Enter Richard S. Cheney—Nixon and Ford staffer, journeyman Congressman from Wyoming, Secretary of Defense in the Bush I interregnum, and multinational corporate CEO. He took charge of the “W” campaign in July 2000 and became the Vice-Presidential nominee.”

“They won? Who’d they beat?”

“Al Gore and Joe Lieberman.”

“The Vice President, and both long-time Senators? How did that happen?”

“For my money—and Theodore White’s—it began in earnest with Kennedy-Nixon in 1960, when television became dominant in campaigns. Took a serious turn in 1980.”

“When Reagan beat Carter.”

“Yes. I was in my junior year at Yale when the first debate was televised. I remember Reagan promising to cut taxes, strengthen the military, and balance the budget. I was one of the few people in the room who thought he’d lost the debate. In the eight weeks before he was elected, he was never required to explain exactly how that was going to happen. Turned out B movie roles and ‘Death Valley Days’ trumped a nuclear engineering degree from the Naval Academy. His legacy? ‘The Great Communicator’—in spite of everything else. The medium demanded the message.”

“How is that possible?”

“If you can be persuaded that high-fructose corn syrup is nutritious, you can be convinced that a guy you want to have a beer with should have full access to the nuclear launch codes.”

“Why did an Arkansas Governor beat the sitting President, then?”

“Same way—remember ‘It’s the Economy, Stupid.’?” Difference was, he was brilliant, a student of the Presidency, and surrounded himself with like-minded people who understood the stewardship theory.”

“What’s that?”

Noam frowned. “That not to govern is not a legitimate choice.”

“Back to 2000. Was Bush II a ‘great communicator?’”

“Quite the opposite but, then, he didn’t have to be. A media consultant named Frank Luntz applied the science of media marketing to political messaging. Found a way to measure focus groups’ emotional reactions to specific words and phrases in TV commercials over deliberative or cerebral responses to their meaning. ‘Good guy’ ads—plus healthy doses of manufactured commercial and viral sleaze directed at his opponents—kept enough eyes off his resumé to give him both the nomination and the 1,784 votes in Florida he needed to win by five votes in the Electoral College—with some help from the Supreme Court.”

“Huh?”

“Yep. Gore won the national popular vote narrowly, but there was evidence of widespread voting irregularities in Florida, whose 25 electoral votes would swing the election. Recounts began and both sides wound up in court; 35 days later, the Supremes invalidated the Florida Supreme Court’s recount plan and allowed the state to certify its questionable results. Final irony: under the recount rules initially requested by Gore, Bush would have won, and under the rules requested by Bush, Gore would have won.”

“In America? That’s amazing.”

Noam clasped his hands until his knuckles were white. “Only the beginning. On September 11, 2001, three jetliners were seized and crashed into predetermined targets: both of the World Trade Center’s towers in Manhattan and the Pentagon. A fourth,

aimed at the U.S. Capitol, crashed in Pennsylvania after its passengers overpowered the hijackers.”

David’ mouth fell open; silence enveloped them both. David found the resources to speak first.

“Who was responsible?”

“Fifteen of the 19 identified hijackers were Saudi Arabian. They were all linked to al Qaeda, a group formed initially by Osama bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi, to resist the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1989. He declared a worldwide *jihad* on us in 1998, based on his own peculiar interpretations of the teachings of Islam.”

“Why?”

“My personal theory? Decades of American involvement with friendly, repressive regimes, including the Saudi royal family and the Shah of Iran, to keep the crude flowing radicalized younger Middle Easterners, especially dispossessed males. After that it was a matter of bad geopolitical decisions, our insatiable demand for oil, and protecting private investments in the region. Anyway, ‘9-11’ became our justification for invading Afghanistan and Iraq one and two years later. Saddam Hussein’s alleged possession of ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’—

“Wait. The ‘Operation Desert Storm’ guy?”

“Uh-huh—the same guy we propped up in the ‘80s to keep the Iranian mullahs at bay and the Soviets out of Afghanistan. Anyway, take WMDs, the notion of Iraq as the hotbed of international terror, stir in anti-Muslim hysteria, and our ‘coalition’ takes Baghdad in three weeks. Our first act is to fire the entire Baathist—“

“Who?”

“Ruling minority party—Sunnis, like Hussein and the Saudis. Vast majority of Iraqis are Shi’ites, as are Iranians. So we dismantle the country’s security infrastructure and become referees in a ten-year quagmire of three-way, tribal civil war. Thought we could charge into somebody else’s back yard, wipe clean a millennium of accrued history by using an occupation army to install ‘democracy’ made in our image, then go home for supper. Just like Vietnam.”

Noam pushed at David’s shoulder. “Can you handle some more irony?”

David folded his hands. “Why not? My head’s already swimming.”

“Get this. In Nixon’s first term, Dick Cheney went to work for Donald Rumsfeld at the Office of Economic Opportunity. From there, to the Nixon White House. After Watergate, Rumsfeld becomes Gerald Ford’s Chief of Staff. Ford appoints him as Secretary of Defense and Cheney becomes White House Chief of Staff. After Ford, Cheney gets elected to Congress and Rumsfeld makes money. Reagan beats Carter and calls on Rumsfeld to serve as a trouble-shooter, including ‘Special Envoy to the Middle East,’ where he spends time courting Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war. Bush I succeeds Reagan, Cheney becomes Secretary of Defense, and Rumsfeld is out—seems he and the new President had crossed swords under Ford and Reagan. Enter Colin Powell—you remember him?”

David knit his brow. “Uh—Black General?”

“The one and only. He was a White House Fellow under Nixon after his Vietnam command, got wrapped up in national security affairs and was named NSA to Reagan, late; George H.

W. named him Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He and the senior command—all schooled by Vietnam—were credited with persuading the Commander in Chief not to march on Baghdad in 1991. Clinton beats the Elder after one term, and all three go private. In 1997, Rumsfeld and Cheney co-found a neoconservative think tank called ‘Project for the New American Century.’ Guess what their first ‘project’ is?”

“World peace?”

“Wise guy. Regime change in Iraq—taking out Hussein. All the hardware and aid we gave him during the Reagan years had made him a ‘destabilizing force’ once the war with Iran ended. Bush II and Cheney get elected, Rumsfeld is back as Secretary of Defense, and Powell is appointed Secretary of State. Guess who’s odd man out this time around?”

David smirked. “You’re going to tell me, I hope.”

“Powell—the only one with on-the-ground military experience, resigned at the end of the first term. Bush II beats Senator John Kerry, a decorated Vietnam veteran—“

“How?”

“Same recipe—formulaic advertising and slander, except the dominate theme was fear instead of ‘feel-good.’ They even dusted off a discredited old bunch that had tried to undermine Kerry in 1972 for criticizing the Southeast Asian war. ‘Swift Boat Veterans for Truth’ became ‘swift-boating,’ a synonym for unfounded political attacks. A couple “Red” states provided the margin again and the GOP held onto a Congressional majority, so the neo-cons shopped the word ‘mandate’ around a little to see if they could get some traction to dismantle the legacy of the New Deal. The war ground on at \$10 billion a month,

compounded by a wearying litany of ideologically-based domestic shenanigans, and resulting failed cover-ups. The Dems took back Congress in 2006, launching a two-year race for the Presidency.”

David brightened some. “Did we get a woman President then? I found a magazine cover—“

Noam held up a hand. “Eventually. First, though, we had an African-American President.”

“Bullshit.”

“Absolutely not.” Noam looked beyond his pupil. “Barack Obama, a young, first-term Senator from south Chicago, Illinois.”

“‘Barack Obama?’ Sounds exotic.”

“Interesting, yes? Kenyan, exchange-student father; White, Kansan single mother. Raised in Indonesia under a U.S. supported dictator and in Hawai’i by his grandparents. Columbia University, Harvard Law. Tall; intelligent; unflappable; inspiring. Electrified the 2004 Democratic convention and wrote two books exposing every detail of his life and articulating a vision for the future. He took the nomination from Senator Hillary Clinton—“

“Bill’s wife?”

“The same. She took Dan Moynihan’s New York seat when he retired in 2000. After the June 2008 primaries, he chose Joe Biden, a six-term Delaware Senator with deep foreign policy experience, to run with him. Took on Senator John McCain of Arizona—“

“I remember that name. Wasn’t he a pilot or something?”



“Right. Navy and Vietnam vet—more irony—prisoner of war for five years. Eighteen-year congressional veteran, too. He’d run in 2000 and gotten slimed by the Bush-Rove machine in the South Carolina primary, ending his chances. He traded on his ‘maverick’ reputation to outlast three other party mainstreamers in 2008. Turned 72 and picked a former Miss Alaska and small-town mayor 20 months into her first term as Governor, Sarah Palin, for Vice President.”

“She’s must be the one I saw on *People*—“

“Hang on. What was thought to be a genius campaign stratagem—push forward an attractive woman to galvanize the base, attract uncommitted female voters, and attack the other ticket with comparative impunity—broke down, for two reasons. First, the media pounced, as planned. She did get a free ride for two weeks, ending the Dem convention news cycle, but in the remaining six they couldn’t ignore she was an empty suit—rented, at that—a heartbeat away. Second, after almost two years of clear warnings the economy went straight into the crapper. Worst collapse since the Great Depression.”

“Things were pretty good when I checked out. What happened?”

“The ‘dot-com’ bubble that fattened your bank account burst in the first year of Bush II, then ‘9-11’ came long. The second bubble was a killer combination of inflated residential real estate values and ‘sub-prime’ lending. Wall Street devised a way to ‘securitize’ questionable mortgages and re-peddle them around the world as lucrative short-term investments. Deficit spending and mounting debt slowed the economy, which depressed property values. Credit evaporated and everybody too

deeply invested in funny paper suddenly found themselves cash-poor. Investment houses, banks, insurance companies, and even brick-and-mortar industries fell like dominos. Millions of homes had been foreclosed on by the election.”

“Didn’t the government do anything?”

“What government? The central principle of neo-conservatism seemed to be that free markets can correct for everything, including ignorance, hubris, and naked greed. Unlike their forebears, the latter-day Bushies seemed to be so hypnotized by their own beliefs that they didn’t know *how* to govern, so they had nothing when Ayn Rand shrugged.”

“Who was Ayn Rand? Was she in the cabinet?”

“Uh—not exactly.” Noam paused. “Jesus. Did you read *anything* in college?”

“Blew off college, after a couple quarters; took my computer skills straight into gaming. Old man wasn’t thrilled about that. So, nobody did anything?”

“Well, there were enough gray heads around to realize that there are worse things than losing an election. The consequences of market behavior not seen since 1929 left no room for argument. The wagons got circled and an infusion of \$1.3 trillion occurred before Obama was sworn in. That amount just about equaled the debt Bush II had run up in eight years.”

“Obama just blew it, then?”

“Hardly—wasn’t given much of a chance. Oh, he pulled the best and brightest together; set about to restore credibility in the world community; worked his new Congressional majority; leveled with the American people. All the furniture was in place pretty quickly. The criticism began almost immediately.”

“Criticism? From whom?”

“Not from whom, per se, but from where. Let’s walk some more, before I ossify.”

They arose. David offered Noam his arm and they started around the crop quadrangle.

“Unlike before, after the bailouts finance and industry could absorb only so many pink-slipped neo-cons, especially with the feds overseeing them. Public service was out and academia never paid well outside of development, so the best remaining option was media. At the time, a half dozen multinational corporations owned every means of public expression. Alliances with liked-minded owners and managers were already strong, after all, so it was a short step to the largest disinformation campaign ever undertaken. Everything President Obama did or attempted to do was subtly distorted and filtered through lenses of race, or inexperience, or ineptitude. Simultaneously, Governor Palin was resuscitated, re-groomed, and installed as a celebrity. Through her first term and re-election in Alaska, her every move was magnified; by inference and innuendo she was everything he wasn’t. They didn’t make the same mistakes. She was cocooned, rehearsed, and schooled. Times remained tough enough that the Democrats lost some seats at the next mid-term election, and another two-year campaign was on.”

Coming upon neat rows of emerald, tasseled cornstalks didn’t distract David much from the shock he felt. “How is that possible? What about the FCC? The First Amendment?”

“Two years isn’t much time to rebuild an agency that was leveled in eight. They had platoons of lawyers standing by to run

the clock and play defense, in case somebody managed to find one of the quarter of federal judges George Bush hadn't appointed by then." Noam turned rueful. "Don't even get me started on the Bill of Rights."

"What do you mean?"

"The 'public figure' doctrine conferred immunity on for-profit media in 1964; good for civil rights then, bad long-term. The free press right was intended to protect basement pamphleteers, not them. Speech, petition, and worship belong to the least of us, not just the well-represented and tax-exempt, prosperity ministries. Privacy, unreasonable searches, fair trials, dignity for the imprisoned, freedom itself—all thrown under the bus to acquire wealth. Makes my blood boil."

David feigned interest in soybeans for a moment. "Palin was elected in 2012, then?"

"Uh-huh, along with Grover Norquist, self-styled 'tax patriot.' Things went downhill quickly, once the old orthodoxy was back in place. Vice President Biden and Secretary of State Clinton—"

"Which one?"

"Hillary. Anyway, they'd pieced together a political solution in Iraq, with back-channel help from Syria and Iran's Shi'ite clerics. Revived the Middle East "roadmap," for real. They were well on the way toward pacifying the Afghan frontier, to divide the Taliban and force Pakistan to disgorge bin Laden, at last. The Palin administration reversed course, snuggled up to the Sunni oligarchs again, and resumed a hard line with Iran. In early 2014, we bombed selected targets there; they retaliated by launching several Fajr-3 MIRV missiles at Israel. One of the

warheads hit their ‘secret’ nuclear weapons reactor at Dimona. Israel launched against targets all over the region. Millions perished and most of the oil fields were contaminated.”

David stopped. Noam held his elbow until he could resume.

“Where was the rest of the world?”

“The Chinese took the initiative. They went to the U.N. first but our Security Council veto put an end to that. They quietly pulled the others together—Russia and the European Union, primarily—and agreed it was time to take the dynamite and matches away from the toddler. The economy being what it was, the combined threats of drastic currency manipulation and foreclosure on trade and investment debt were overpowering. Essentially, Beijing played the landlord card—call it a ‘leveraged buy-out.’”

“And the administration reacted—how?”

Noam laughed. “They were happy to escape with their hides. In exchange for eventual sanctuary offshore, they agreed to a ‘show’ re-election in 2016 and full cooperation in the conversion and management schedule, between and after.”

“And no one found out?”

“As I said, the media merchants were full partners.”

“What about—the people?”

Noam raised his arms. “Who was left to tell them that anybody paid attention to? Newspapers were already on life support, so they were merged into the electronic polyglot. Fact-based journalism died and the transition from ‘infotainment’ to total entertainment was complete. There wasn’t a dime’s bit of difference among broadcast news, culture, sporting events, and

those video games you used to write. Elections became hyper-extended ‘reality’ shows, brought to you by billions spent on for-profit media advertising, crowding out any sort of political discourse in between.”

David thrust his fingers into his curly hair. “I—I just can’t accept that freedom would die so—quietly.”

“To be free is to be able to choose, but what are the choices and who defines them? The 21<sup>st</sup> Century American’s definition of good citizenship was to acquire goods and debt to enrich others. ‘Consumer Confidence.’” Noam jabbed an index finger into his palm, for emphasis. “If you’re constantly urged to reinforce your own assumptions, rather than challenge them by acquiring new information, and to act on impulse, are you really making free choices? The last two generations of free Americans had stronger allegiances to pop stars and professional sports franchises than any concept of self-governance. At the last, the most popular form of non-fiction was ‘self-help.’”

David eyes shone as he groped for words. Noam studied him and laid a hand gently on the side of his head.

“Let’s get back to the others; maybe you’ll feel less...abandoned.”



David was feeling better, moving among them. Noam had let him go, to wander. Just seeing him seemed to bring comfort to the elders, and the timid, furtive innocence of the young ones pleased him. They connected to him in varying ways, either tactile or at varying levels of speech. He saw that understanding them would take time.

Noam rejoined him at the end of the room. “Fitting in, I hope?”

David nodded, tentatively.

“And ready for some additional details, I presume?”

“Okay.”

“We are three classes: ‘Opt-outs;’ ‘Rehabs;’ and juveniles.”

“Ah, ‘Rehab.’ Not a proper name, then.” David surveyed the room, found his first chaperone, and gave him a thumbs-up. Rehab cocked his head, puzzled.

“No. We Opt-outs—“ he indicated himself and another dozen or so eldest—“were given the discreet choice to migrate, or stay.”

“Migrate? Where?”

“Unclear, but I assume to whatever industrial or developing country most in need of particular conceptual skills—academic, professional, scientific, and the like.”

“Why did you—“

“I’m a liberal arts kind of guy, not prone to cost-benefit analyses. Rehabs, most of those you see here, were middle-aged and younger adults for whom assimilation didn’t work out, for whatever reason. Juveniles were just born to or gestating in Opt-outs at transition time.”

“What about the elderly?”

“Seemed to me like almost all of them were taken—Thank God for Chinese cultural priorities.”

“And the sick and disabled?”

Noam pursed his lips. “Euthanized, I assume.”

“How did all the non-Rehabs...get like that?”

“You’re gonna love this, David. Around 2006 your fellow gamers got serious about BCI.”

“BCI?”

“Brain-Computer Interface.’ They borrowed from noninvasive neurofeedback research to perfect headsets that allowed the wearer to play games just using their thoughts.”

David grinned, in spite of himself. “Sweet!”

“Bitter,” Noam said. “Overuse led to lapses in normal brain function—sort of self-induced attention-deficit disorder. Chronic abuse could produce a state of near-catatonia.”

“Didn’t anyone get concerned?”

“The Obama folks monitored federal research and fired up the FDA for legitimate medical uses, but the technology was out and there was money to be made. Kind of a reprise of the whole ‘Stick an M on violent video games’ charade. Development continued behind closed doors. Short walk, I guess, to software that could overpower the brain’s higher-level, sensory motor areas, allowing unconscious memory to be altered by environment or task specific programs. Specifics are beyond me; the helmet and electrodes are obviously key. Phoebe—here!”

A pleasant-looking woman, about 50, scuttled over.

“Show,” Noam said.

She lifted her sleeve above scar tissue on her right shoulder and lifted her hair to reveal two old wounds at the base of her skull.

“Thank you,” Noam said.

“Welk’m,” Phoebe said, with difficulty. She touched a finger to David’s face, giggled, and melted away.

Noam watched her go. “Function returns fairly quickly.”



“Phoebe?”

“I give them bird names. Simple—and cheerful.” He was sheepish. “Sometimes it’s good to be the king. Where was I?”

“Headset and software.”

Right. Mass-marketing took over with a fury in 2010. Almost a patriotic duty to own and play, like the early iPods.”

“David looked puzzled. “What’re ‘iPods?’”

“Portable digital media players.”

“Like a ‘Walkman?’”

“More like a tiny computer, really. Anyway, mass drone conversion began in earnest right after the 2016 election. First public step was implanting RFIDs - “Radio Frequency Identification Devices”—that had already been tested on prisoners.”

“What for?”

“Universal health care was promised, and making health records electronic and portable was the advertised reason. The chips used were infinitely more programmable and versatile than simple scan-and-read. They were transceivers; basically, a global ankle bracelet. After that, choices were made, subtle migration started, and implantations began, disguised as a national vaccination campaign. The rest was logistics.”

They sat. David buried his face in his hands for a time, then turned his gaze to Noam. “Are there others?”

Noam smiled broadly. “Sure, just like us—near places where industry and tourism survive, mainly urban and “destination” centers.”

“Are you in touch with them?”

“Some.”

“How? Internet?” David eyed one of the laptops.

“No—that’s out of our reach. Single sideband amateur radio is all we’re allowed to play with.”

“Have you reached outsiders?”

“Oh, yeah, through other hams. The ones we’ve spoken to are prospering—doing just fine without us. We’ve become a novelty. We’re dialing up some Brits tomorrow night.”

“Do you think they’ll...recolonize?”

“Can’t say. They seem to keep up the infrastructure they need—remember, they use a longer lens than we did.”

“Will they let you—us...?”

“Live? So far, so good. We’re no threat, sufficiently contained, and they seem to know when we’re in need. Our hope is that they’re keeping us around, however many we are, to leaven the new migration a little, if it comes—caraway seeds to give the fresh rye loaf a little snap, as it were. I suppose thinking we’re the ‘New Native Americans,’ as long as we endure, helps sustain us. Which brings me to another subject.”

“What?”

Noam braced David at the shoulders. “Have you checked out your ‘equipment’ yet?”

David blushed. “No...uh, I mean, not really. I guess; felt like it responded last night. Who’s had time? Anyway, why?”

“Well, as you’ve seen, the Opt-out boys and I are getting on and all the other males were sterilized, including the juveniles. Son, I don’t know how to tell you this, but this is ‘Planet of the Apes’ and you’re Charlton Heston.”

David felt as if every female pair of eyes was on him.

Noam shook him, smirking. “Do you know how long I’ve waited to use that obscure cultural reference?” His grip became a bear hug.

“At least it’s a movie reference,” David said, over Noam’s shoulder. “I like that.”



“Wren, come.”

Noam introduced her into the room with one arm. “It’s her time, Laz. Good luck.” He closed the door gently, but not before David glimpsed the anticipation on his face.

Wren was about 16, he guessed—post-migration child—and lovely. Noam had cautioned him that, as such, she was by default a complete stranger to courtship, meaning that her own sense of intimacy and limited verbal skills were still strangers. Anything that might come out of her would be more derivative than felt, he’d said—as if, at this moment, David cared. He led her to the cot and disrobed; her eyes never left him, and she complied eagerly when he invited her to undrobe. He lay on his back and guided her onto him so he could glory in all of her. He showed her kissing. Wren’s guileless joy at each sensual discovery, her playfulness, and her explosive natural scent entranced him. Her fondling engorged him fully; her eyes widened. He guided her onto him and, by heaving upward, encouraged her to move. She did.

“Unh,” she squeaked.

He thrust again; she reciprocated.

“Uhn—uhn—uhn.”

They undulated.

“Uh-uh-uh-uh...”

David came up on his palms. She drove down on him.

“UnUnUnHnMm—YerUhYer...”

They clutched and rocked, hard. She threw her head  
back.

“Yer CALL IS VERY IMPORTANT TO US!”





**E. G. Fabricant**  
writes and lives in San Jose, California.

Read, sample, and purchase more stories by E. G. from his [web page](#).