

The Casey Fahy Online Collection

Escaping America

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Part I

Free Will

For fifteen years she had come here on September twenty-second. Her driver never asked her what was special about this place. Something about her mood always discouraged him. He had imagined many explanations, each filled with intrigue and romance, but none of them were as fantastic as the truth.

Sapphire Hunt stood by her limousine for a moment, her long coat open to the night air. Her copper hair was wrapped like a crown on her head. She was six feet tall, curved but hard, with Egyptian features, and lapis eyes. The night was muggy, though it was fall and the leaves had changed. She twisted a penlight, and walked up into the cemetery, weaving through the slate headstones. For the first time, she was late, but she didn't hurry.

She remembered the tone of his voice on the telephone, his need to be reminded of a passion they had once shared. It hadn't sounded like John Mack, the world's leading computer scientist, who was also, secretly, her husband.

Ahead in the gloom she saw the empty tomb her great great great grandfather had had built under a false name during the Civil War. Candlelight shone from the crack in the heavy iron door. It was here that she and her lover had dreamed of freeing the world, when they were young.

She hesitated now outside the small crypt. Then she pulled open the iron door.

He sat cross-legged on the slab. His six-foot, six-inch frame was folded comfortably, like a spider. His long silver hair and beard were

yellowed in the candle light. In a bar of shadow beneath his straight-lined brow, his eyes gleamed steel-blue. His black topcoat was open over a navy cashmere sweater and gray jeans. He wore blue tennis shoes, like a teenager. His right hand was gloved and swung a gold watch by a chain.

“You’re late.”

He did not rise to greet her.

“Come on,” he laughed. “Jump up.”

She climbed onto the slab, dreading his kiss, which was too practiced, too brief. She pulled away.

“This is it,” he said. “One more year. By this time next year, we’ll throw the switch together, before we leave. Did you bring it?”

He pretended he did not notice her reaction. He had expected it, planned on it, she thought. “Why weren’t Choices put in the shipment for China?”

His face froze and his smile cracked. “Straight to the point,” he mused.

“Why didn’t you put them in? I’m not shipping those things without them.”

He looked at the gold watch swinging on its chain. “Where there is no choice, Free Will is obsolete,” he said, looking from the watch’s face to hers. There was an inconceivable tone of contempt and condescension in his voice.

“You’re —” She couldn’t catch her breath. “Who are you now, John?” She stared at him, and trembled. “Who are you?” A tear punctuated her question.

He frowned, clutched his forehead in one hand and waved his other hand briskly at her. She hurt something deep in him, something he distrusted now. “I’ve just seen it, that’s all!” He met her eyes with a final, urgent honesty. “We were wrong, Saph! We built the perfect social machine just to destroy it?” An eager light smoldered in his eyes, but he saw how his hope insulted her, and he looked away.

She closed her eyes and nodded. “To destroy it.”

“There is no free will,” he said. “It’s obsolete. We made it obsolete. The human race is dysfunctional. It’s too late to turn back. It’s adolescent fantasy, Sapphire! It can never be what we hoped when we were children. We could cause a new dark age if we went through with it! We must destroy Free Will.”

“Ironic,” she murmured. “Did you hear yourself?”

He looked dangerously at her. “We were children when we dreamed those dreams. It would be criminal to go through with them. What right do we have?”

She answered him with a steady stare.

“Give me Free Will,” he said, extending his hand.

She had kept the small golden switch for a year. It was his turn to keep it, but she had anticipated him. She softly shook her head.

He grinned in incredulity. "You can't keep it. It's past midnight, and you know what will happen if you touch it."

She looked distracted.

"Where is it?"

"I don't have it."

"Who does?"

"Someone."

"You didn't explain what it is?"

"Of course not."

John Mack smiled and looked at his chest, putting his watch in his inside coat pocket. His hand emerged, gripping a small Glock pistol. He pointed it at her, but she was gone. His startled shot missed her over the granite slab and the iron door banged open. He jumped down and ran to the door, stopping it with his hand as it swung back.

He looked down the dark hillside but couldn't see her. They both knew too many hiding places on this hill. He stroked his beard, glowering at the grim little city of Middletown. His omniscient machine had one year to find the person she had entrusted with Free Will.

* * *

Edmund Green slammed the door of his room and slid his bookcase to block it.

He turned off the light, and his room shimmered in the light of his aquarium. He tapped fish-food into the tank and sat on his bed, firing a dart across the room into the dartboard on the wall.

He looked out the window. Five miles away, in downtown Middletown, the Hunt Robotics building was burning.

He fired another dart.

Some distance to the left of the burning building, on a grassy hill, stood the Community Service Broadcasting Tower, the "CSB." Charitably designed and donated to 55,000 locations throughout America by the supercomputer genius and zillionaire, John Mack, the CSB's were a familiar American landmark. Golden flames swirled up the Hunt building as electric blue words scrolled up Mack's tower:

NATIONAL INFO WATCH

**THINKING OF STARTING A BUSINESS?
FOR ONE-CALL QUICK-INFO:
555-101-6656.mak
AN INFORMATION DIRECTORY!
EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW:
LICENSING REQUIREMENTS,
EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS,
DEMOGRAPHIC REQUIREMENTS,
INSURANCE REQUIREMENTS,
HEALTH PERMITS,
SAFETY PERMITS, FEES
(PLUS FILING),
INSPECTION REGISTRATION FILING,
(PLUS FEES),
SOCIAL SECURITY FILING,
FEES, ETC.
UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE
ENROLLMENT
(PLUS FILING, FEES, AND COUNSELING),
S&L TAX ENROLLMENT FEE FILING,
MEDISURE ENROLLMENT
(PLUS FILING FEE),
DENTISURE ENROLLMENT
(PLUS FILING FEE & FEE FILING),
EMPLOYER RESPONSIBILIT HANDBOOK,
DEMOGRAPHIC APPRENTICESHIP
REQUIREMENTS,
PRICING STRUCTURES, PROFIT
ALLOCATION,
ZONING PERMITS, MERCHANDISE**

**REQUIREMENTS, ADVERTISING
DO'S AND DON'TS,
ENVIRONMENTAL STANDARDS PLUS
TAX FILING PLUS FREE FEE TAX FILING,
RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS TIPS, NO-
NO'S, PENALTIES, COUNSELING,
COMPETITIVE EQUALITY AGENCY
INSPECTION ENROLLMENT,
DRUG FREE AMERICA EMPLOYEE
TESTING STARTER PACKET,
REGISTRATION, ENROLLMENT,
FILING FEE PLUS FREE FEE FILING
AND PENALTY FILING FEE FILING
(PLUS TAX FEE FILING FEE INFO),
WORKER'S COMPENSATION AND
DISABILITY REQUIREMENT
WORKSHOP (PLUS
REGISTRATION, ETC.),
NEW PRODUCT SAFETY LIABILITIES,
INSURANCE AND ENROLLMENT (PLUS FREE
FEE FILING INFO),
FREE MARKET STRESS MANAGEMENT
COUNSELING REQUIREMENTS,
CERTIFICATION, AND FEE FILING
PLUS FREE FILING FEE TAX FEE FILING,
*AND MORE!***

**REMEMBER:
AMERICA NEEDS YOUR BUSINESS**

Edmund Green looked at his hand. The plastic band made by Hunt Robotics that was riveted around his wrist said: THIS BODY CONTAINS THC. A red LED glowed next to the letters, highlighting the tiny quadrangles wrinkled in the skin on the back of his left hand.

A screensaver showed the same messages rolling up the CSB on the screen of his PCA, which stood for "Public Computer Access." One was provided to every child in America. It had very limited access to the now almost underground "Internet," as the Mack Link strained and filtered by locality what was accessible to the user and recorded the identity of anyone who tried to go around it, wherever access was requested. Governments had jumped on the technology, all over the world. Edmund draped his long green coat over the screen of his PCA, as was his tradition.

He didn't use his PCA to type his school essays, preferring to fill out computer forms with a pencil instead, even though he knew they would be put into his file when they were fed into the Mack grading machines at school. He had used his PCA only once, a month ago, when he sent a mak.mail to John Mack and Sapphire Hunt. "Why are you doing this to us?" was all it said.

In the last week, Edmund had cleared out of his room every knickknack relatives had given him, every generic thing, every posed photograph, and all the unexplainable baggage of his first seventeen years. He kept a postcard photo of the eight-foot-tall stone head of the Emperor Constantine, which he taped to his wall, and his old twenty gallon aquarium. He poured black sand into the aquarium and stocked it with guppies, an Australian crab named Augustine, a tiny Red-Tailed Shark, one big plecostimus to suck the algae off the glass, and an African frog named Pelagius. It was another world, one which he watched over benevolently, separated from him by glass. As he pulled the circle of plastic darts apart, he saw the frog hiding in a grotto of red basalt, and he wondered whether he, or the frog, was free.

He fired the darts, ringing the bull's eye.

He had organized his books in the bookshelf blocking his door: Aristotle and Bradbury, Aeschylus and Asimov, Homer and Farmer, Shakespeare and Herbert, Melville, Niven, Hugo, Tolkein, Heinlein, Rand, O'Henry, Conrad, and Twain. Romanticism and reason in past and future — but nowhere in the gray present. On the bed before him was a leatherbound book with blank pages. He opened it for the hundredth time but as the CSB tower cranked its endless words and numbers he couldn't think of a single word to write inside it.

He fished a rolled-up newspaper out of his coat. It was a good old coat, with black silk lining and black stone buttons. He spread the wrinkled face of the *Middletown Crier* on the bed.

NEW PENALTIES FOR USING NON-FIRE-RETARDANT PAINT TREND SEEN AS 'GAPING LOOPHOLE' IN NATIONAL INSURANCE

MAN SHOOTS 10, SELF

He turned it over. Black circles and red X's covered jobs he thought he could walk to, thought he could do, hoped he could get. He crumpled the world into a ball and missed the wastebasket across the room.

In the last month he had bought second-hand clothes of pure colors, cut clean, and had trashed all plaids and argyles and polkadots and stripes and paisleys, clothes with extra buttons, tags, flaps — everything with pointless things attached. He cut his hair one inch long and bought the blank book. He used the money he saved working at the drugstore. It wasn't worth saving money, anyway. His minimum wage had been raised to \$39.99 an hour, but his employer deducted Interest Tax, S & L Tax, National Insurance Tax (NIT-TAX), Environmental Tax (E-TAX), and Third World Assistance Tax (T-WAX), Worker's Comp, Social Security, Income Tax, Unemployment Insurance, State Income Tax, State Highway Tax, State Children With Disabilities Tax, State Wildlife Tax, State Children's Poverty Fund Tax (CPF-TAX), State Children's Education Fund Tax (SCEFT), State Art Foundation Tax (SAF-TAX), State Children's Artistic Opportunity Fund Tax, National Children's Heritage Preservation tax, and the Children Tax itself, of course, whose rate was tied to world population growth, and on top of all, the Flat Tax.

Mr. Dusett, his boss, had to let him go because he was "spending a fortune in stock boys!" With the Unemployment Insurance and Medisure rates going up, he simply couldn't afford it. He said a government official of some sort told him there were supplements he could apply for to get money to help pay for employees, and that they frowned on laying off employees, but the forms were so complicated he couldn't figure them out. He went on to explain to Edmund, as if he didn't know, that people couldn't afford legal merchandise anymore, not with the gangs selling all the black market stuff at half-price and making twice the margin. Edmund winced as a memory of Mr. Dusett played in his head. "Sorry, kid. The mayor's nephew is a dimwit, but can I let him go? I got a call from the mayor's office about him, can you believe that, checking in to see how little Matthew is doing! And, you know, they could skin me more ways than a cat with all the rules and regs they've got. They just walk

through here with a clipboard and a checklist and I'm finished. I'm on the edge as it is! Do me a favor, Edmund. Burn the place down for me, will ya? I'm serious. Think about it, kid. Be some money in it for ya. Heh, heh. Not really though. No, not really."

He looked at the burning Hunt Robotics building.

Two weeks after losing his job, Edmund was busted for smoking pot and for possession of a black market music disc by his favorite retro band. He was fined \$10,000 (over 20 years), and was forced to wear the THC detecting device on his wrist. A monitor was also placed in his room, wired to his PCA. If either was triggered, he would have to spend eighteen weeks in a drug rehabilitation program at his parents' expense, which they could not afford. And Edmund would have to do 1,000 hours of community service. "Hey, I didn't do this to you, kid," said the Judge when he saw Edmund's expression. "Remember that."

The CSB changed into a four-sided video screen 350 feet tall. An image of a man buying paint from a shady dealer in an abandoned warehouse appeared.

YOU COULD BE HELPING CRIMINALS!

The same man furtively painted his house while his children slept.

YOU COULD ENDANGER YOUR FAMILY!

The screen then flashed to the man sleeping with his wife as a chimney ember landed on the eaves.

YOU COULD LOSE EVERYTHING.

The man woke up screaming, engulfed in flames.

YOU COULD KILL YOURSELF!

The screen changed to a shot of the American flag waving over the National Insurance Agency building in Washington, D.C.

YOU COULD DESTROY THE NATION'S ECONOMY.

The final image showed the man sitting on a bench as prison bars slide 350 feet down the sides of the CSB, smashing without a sound into the sidewalk.

YOU COULD GO TO *PRISON!*

PAINTING WITH NON-FIRE-RETARDANT PAINT IS A CRIME!

The Hunt building glowed like a charcoal briquette in the gloom, crowned by pale flames. The CSB flashed back into a bulletin board with scrolling words and numbers.

Someone screamed in the distance and Edmund pulled the window down against the damp wood of the sash. His father couldn't afford the government-approved paint, or the certified painters, since the National Insurance went into effect. Edmund noticed the old house turning soft and spongy as winter approached. The volcanoes were making the winters worse. They said it was only forestalling the global warming. The global warming was coming, though the winters kept getting worse. Cooling was one of the symptoms of warming, they said.

It had all started a month ago, at church. Labeled a "breakdown" by his school psychologist, it was actually his turning point. It tore Edmund permanently away from everyone else and made him *him* for the first time.

It had been a beautiful day. The little church filled up with blissful song and happiness happier than anything real, made instead of misery, misery heaped into a mound that mocked happiness, that replaced happiness — deliberately. He saw a poster of Jesus thumb-tacked on the side wall of the church, with Jesus smiling with his arms spread wide, nailed to the cross. The caption read: "I Love You This Much!"

Edmund's cry blended with the chorus like a dog's howl behind sirens. His father rose to strike him, but stopped in fear for his son, whose face flushed bright red.

They called it a breakdown and explained it away, at first. His mother called it "a wild stage." His father called him weak.

After school started, his mother contacted the school counselors and psychologist at the urging of a PTA friend. The counselors said he was "assimilation-phobic" and "socially under-utilized," and they reminded his mother of the general drug problem. The school psychologist prescribed Prozac, Zylene, Phyrnol, Transol, Xalax, and several other drugs that came in a color wheel dispenser, from blue for depressed to pink for hyperactive. She diagnosed Edmund as having a mother complex, coupled with AYDS (Attention/Yelling Deprivation Syndrome), and even Reactionary Ego-Logic-Nationalist Syndrome. The school Environmental Counselor suggested Mrs. Green change her brand

of disinfectant because it might be responsible for his mood swings. Edmund's friends thought he was crazy. The girls at school guessed he had some kind of virus because of the medical-looking bracelet. The Church thought he was disturbed, possibly suicidal.

Pastor Wilson called him in for counseling. "God is still there for you, son," he said to him, looking at the screen of his Mack Link PCA. "Have you ever thought it might be you who isn't there for Him?"

Edmund felt like he was disappearing. "Aren't you more sure I'm here than God?" he asked.

Pastor Wilson just looked confused.

He pulled the darts from the board again and sat back on his bed. Today, another hope burned out. For the twelfth time, he had tried to find a job. Times were slow and tight, and buildings were boarded in the land of the free and the brave, but he had a brilliant idea as he looked into the bookstore window that afternoon. He loved the store, crammed with books, divided like a mind into every category of fact and fantasy. He ran in and told the manager his idea. He would take a smaller wage to work there. "Under the table," he whispered. No Medisure, no Unemployment Insurance or Social Security, no Liability Tax or registration, or pension, or certification, or enrollment, no nothing except their own honorable agreement!

He would work so hard, they would soon give him a raise, make him legal, and promote him. It was the American Dream. Edmund saw it all, right inside himself, ready to be real.

He hurled a dart at the red bull, and missed.

He would have worked harder than anyone else. He would never have betrayed them. He gave them his word.

The manager of the bookstore, who traditionally hired only high school girls anyway, looked at Edmund suspiciously after his proposal. "I'm sorry," she said, but she definitely wasn't. "It's not up to me, anyway."

MIDDLETOWN COMMUNITY INFO WATCH

**THE MIDDLETOWN LEAGUE OF
FUTURE LEADERS
IS PROUD TO NAME
JOHN LANIER
AS ITS FIRST PRESIDENT!**

A picture of the broad-smiled Mayor's son followed the announcement up the tower.

AND JOSEPH “JO-JO” PENDLETON AS VICE PRESIDENT!

Jo-Jo Pendleton, co-captain of the Middletown High Wolverines, grinned at Edmund from four miles away.

CONGRATULATIONS TO THESE UPSTANDING REPRESENTATIVES OF MIDDLETOWN YOUTH!!!

Edmund Green laughed, looking at his hand, and the tiny quadrangles wrinkled in the skin. It was so real, it didn't belong here.

He felt the red eye across the room watching him, sniffing him with its sensor. He stared back as he put his pen on the virgin page:

You're so perfect. You have no heart that loves, no mind that dreams. But you feel and think for everyone.

The eye looked back at him from across the room.

And if I want to escape — inside my own human being to dream of being human — you label me “OUT OF ORDER,” like a broken machine. My own body is not mine. This body contains THC.

He stared down the red eye on the black box and almost broke his pen in his hand. Instead, he wrote.

You're just a machine. You can't see me.

Out the window, gray smoke curled over the gutted building of Hunt Robotics. The fire was out. The neon words flowed on over John Mack's tower.

“Someday,” he whispered, looking at the glowing red eye on his bracelet, “I'll figure out how to turn you off.” He pulled the extension cord of the aquarium's light out of the wall. “Before you turn me off.” He rolled over and grabbed his pillow.

* * *

Jo-Jo Pendleton clamped his eyes shut, pistoning his glistening penis in and out. His lower lip jutted under his teeth. His muscles rippled, shiny in the moonlight as he gripped her sweaty shoulders like a pull-up bar. Each thrust sent the air from her lungs, like a bellows pumping, but her eyes were blue and cold, burnt out. With her geisha makeup she was like a doll, like an android; he liked it.

Ellen Neville's pelvis would be bruised for a week after this bozo was done. She looked at the poster on her wall of the Shit-Eaters, the all-girl underground heavy metal scum queen band. In the poster, the SE's grinned on all fours, and rabid wolves collared in diamonds leaped behind them. Unbelievably and suddenly, she almost came for Jo-Jo Pendleton in a blast of hatred for the whole fucking goddamned universe. She was fractions away from dropping the match on the sacrificial altar and letting the flames engulf her in crazy laughter and death.

She opened her eyes and saw his picture through the window on the side of the CSB tower. She noticed a mechanical stupidity in his face. He was a freaking robot! He wouldn't even notice. She had a last little girl's fantasy that he would notice, and cherish the moment she came, but then he sprayed his victorious semen on her belly like graffiti on a wall, squeezing his fat penis more passionately than he had held her. She watched the Hunt Robotics building as the last orange flames peeled off its roof.

Let them have my body, she thought: cold and dead. They don't know the difference.

He was perfect, she laughed. Football stud, rich, connected, sports car, animal, rock star hair, brat pack looks, occasional drugs, token rebel, date rapist, and Vice President Elect of the Middletown League of Future Leaders. He was a miraculous human mirror that reflected everything and revealed nothing. She laughed crazily in Jo-Jo Pendleton's face.

"Are you OK?" he said groggily, with sudden tenderness.

"Sure. Why?"

His head fell on her breast, gnawing possessively. He pushed himself limply back inside her.

She stroked his blond curls, looked out the window at the stars, moved her groin against him, nullified her brain with harsh sensation, wiping out the world that had whispered hope in her ear once long ago.

When he fell asleep, she left the bed, and walked stealthily down the halls and stairs. Ellen's parents were in Washington for the week. A chill hung in the dark, empty house. Like a tragic princess, she admired her battlements: the white lace stockings on her legs, her nails, her

bleached blond hair streaked with blue and red and yellow, the thick mascara on her eyes, the blue tint of her contact lenses, the white geisha face-paint. She relished the state-of-the-art power of her defenses and the impenetrability of her disguise. She could fuck the hottest guy there was, she thought, and still be untouched on the inside. She was tough.

She crossed the living room. The dying fire coughed blood in the fireplace. Wine bottles and a bong were on the coffee table, glowing green and crimson beside another English essay she had written for him. All the essays she wrote for him were jokes, but it didn't matter. He got better than average grades. The teachers didn't know the difference.

Before the long row of windows stood her Steinway. Ellen Neville was spoiled because of her name, and she was popular because of her looks, but the piano was the mirror in which she could see what no one else could: her weakness, her strength, her ugliness, her beauty. She could see Ellen Neville, like nowhere else, in the sounds that came from her piano.

She sat at the Steinway. From the posh North Hills Estates above Middletown she saw the city lights wavering on wrinkles of heat rising from the valley. She could read the name PENDLETON in neon red, white, and blue above the shoe factory Jo-Jo's father owned. Across the street from the factory rose City Hall, where her father, the city councilman, worked. She saw the Hunt Robotics building on fire in the distance.

Nearby, the CSB tower turned into a video screen: a young woman ran down a dark alley, holding her stomach. A man with greasy hands grinned at her. Behind him were men counting cash and cleaning guns.

YOU COULD BE AIDING CRIMINALS!

The young woman sat on a bench, crying as prison bars rolled 350 feet down the CSB like a four-bladed guillotine in the center of Middletown.

YOU COULD GO TO PRISON!

Another drug message, Ellen thought. Then the screen showed a smiling baby grabbing a model's manicured finger.

YOU CAN BE CONVICTED OF MURDER! ABORTION IS A CRIME.

Oh, abortion, yeah. It was the same kind of thing they used for the drug warnings, and the black market warnings, and the prostitution, and the pornography, and the gambling, and the drug rock warnings, and all the rest. They were commercials for the only growth industries in Middletown.

Red letters followed the video up the tower.

STATE INFO WATCH

**TEENAGE PARENTHOOD ACT
NOTICE TO TEENAGED GIRLS:
TO QUALIFY FOR \$900 MONTHLY
MATURE PARENTAL PLANNING
ALLOWANCE
YOU MUST BE AT LEAST 13 YEARS OF
AGE,
PRESENTLY ATTENDING SCHOOL,
AND HAVE NON-PREGNANT STATUS
CONFIRMED BIANNUALLY.
TALK TO YOUR SCHOOL COUNSELOR
TO ENROLL!
WISE PARENTS MEAN A BETTER
TOMORROW!**

How many girls paid for illegal, rusty abortions with their Mature Parental Planning Allowance? Ellen shook her head.

She looked down. Jo-Jo's sperm was crusting on her belly.

She touched a key and a single note colored the darkness. It hung there, pure, warbling and waning beneath her trembling finger. She hummed softly and pulled her finger from the key, looking at the rhinestone-studded black nail glued to her fingertip.

* * *

At half past midnight, a door closed behind Jo-Jo. "Is this cool, man?" he asked.

The crumbling apartment building with bodies huddled in the halls gave him the creeps. It was muggy and suffocating inside the giant housing project, even now. Poverty terrified him, but here he was again. The smell and pressure of Blue Fire filled the stuffy air.

Jo-Jo stood five feet, eleven inches tall. His curly blond hair was cut to the length of his football helmet. His eyes were pale blue, like his mother's. Despite the ordered, opulent world Jo-Jo came from and his handsome, wholesome looks, he saw what was hiding inside himself in this haunted place. It terrified Jo-Jo, and welcomed him home.

"Yo! Shhh!" Charles Holmes held a finger to his lips.

Jo-Jo's dad's factory was downtown, nearby, and made shoes and sporting goods. Jo-Jo received a kind of fame because of the family business. His father was a Pee-Wee Football coach, and Jo-Jo was first string tight-end, but never quarterback, which definitely pissed off his father. Jo-Jo had played football and swam at the country club for several second-place trophies. He was displayed, and he glowed at the center of attention. He was co-captain of his football team, and he was just named Vice President of the Middletown League of Future Leaders. His father's frat brother, Tom Neville, the City Councilman who was Ellen's father, had recently founded this "grass roots" institution. Jo-Jo didn't know that, in the game of life, he was a nepotistic shuttlecock in a political badminton tournament, but when he saw his face on the side of the CSB tower that night, he wished he could just disappear.

He was here for the formula.

"Is this cool, man?" Jo-Jo asked, again.

"Yeah, man. Just *be* cool!" said Charles Holmes.

"Come on in here," said Charles' younger brother, Ghost. "We'll do some up. You want a fifty piece? You sure you don't want a hundred? I can get you a big ol' piece for a hundred."

"No, man. No, I can't, man."

In the other room, Jonathan Holmes, the youngest Holmes brother, woke at the voices. He whispered to himself and rolled off the mattress, taking the blankets and his pillow with him. He knew they were going to take the mattress anyway.

They opened the door. "Good, Jon, you learnin'," Charles said.

The small figure wrapped in blankets didn't look up.

In the curtainless window, Jo-Jo saw the CSB three blocks away. The giant prison bars slid down the walls and hit the ground soundlessly.

YOU COULD GO TO PRISON! SELLING DRUGS IS A CRIME!

"Close the door," said Charles.

“Man, I don’t want to do any here,” said Jo-Jo. “Why don’t you just take some for yourself?” Too many doors had closed behind him, and his inner voice laughed at him. He wondered if they could sense it.

“Hey, what’s that shit, man. Relax, man!”

“I’m worried about my car out there.”

“Nobody’s gonna fuck with your car, all right?”

Ghost leaned the mattress against the window. “Takin’ some for ourselves? What is up with that?” said Ghost.

“We just saw yo’ face on the CSB,” said Charles, sitting on the carpet.

Jo-Jo sat across from him. “Yeah.”

“Fuck, man,” laughed Ghost.

“It was my father’s idea. Bogus, right?”

“You said it!” chuckled Charles.

Jo-Jo pulled out his pipe.

“You see that fire, man?” asked Charles.

“Yeah.”

“Shit, that whole building got torched,” said Ghost.

“Vice President, I can just see it,” laughed Charles, nodding at Jo-Jo.

They each took a piece of a coat hanger bent around a cotton ball. After dipping them into a coffee mug full of rubbing alcohol, they each lit one and smoked a grain of the fifty piece of Blue Fire. It was a crystal tinted slightly blue and melted clear onto the pipe’s screen, fizzing as the genie inside escaped through the glass tube into their lungs.

The ice-cold fire invaded his heart. Jo-Jo leaned back as pure panic soared over his capacity to fear. He reached a plateau of tranquility and surrender as the last residue of himself was wiped away. He laughed at what had been Jo-Jo Pendleton.

He looked around and recognized the face of the scrawny kid asleep on the floor. “Hey, man,” he whispered. “I didn’t know your brother was Jonathan Holmes. He’s in my Biology class.” Jo-Jo laughed breathily.

“Idiot Boy?” chuckled Ghost.

“The Mute,” smiled Charles.

“Yeah, he’s in my biology class.”

“Yeah, he’s real big on biology.” Charles stared at the wall, grinning.

“The only biology I like to study is Ellen Neville,” snickered Jo-Jo. “I just came from her place!” He touched the alcohol flame to another pipe-load of rich, wild panic, surrender, immortality. It was like he never existed at all. He grinned, feeling omnipotent.

“Yeah, dude, I hear ya,” said Ghost. “You nailed her, huh?”

“Yeah!”

“Slamma-jamma,” laughed Charles.

Jo-Jo laughed. “Sure did, man. Not one hour ago, man.”

The brothers tilted their heads at each other, smirking.

“You sure you don’t want a hundred piece?” Ghost snickered, low-fiving his brother’s hand behind his back.

* * *

NO MAN IS ONE MAN

Thad Pendleton’s eyes blurred and drifted from the gleaming oak fraternity paddle on his wall.

He was a big, well-preserved man with a pencil mustache and long, powerful arms. He rolled up his sleeves when he was at his factory or when he was at his desk at home, where he was now, with his sleeves rolled up, at eight o’clock in the morning. He drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair and scratched his mustache, thinking about the coming Presidential election, the robotics bill, the Trade Bill, and Tom Neville.

He idly surveyed the wall of his study behind his desk. There was the stuffed twelve-pound bass he caught two years ago, his Civil War rifle collection, a picture of himself in Kenya, a postcard of Ernest Hemingway from Key West that looked remarkably like himself, a photo of himself with the Mayor, one with the Governor, and a picture of his son Jo-Jo sitting behind his desk at work when Jo-Jo was two years old.

What his big gray eyes came back to was the fraternity paddle from Phi Phi Epsilon. Its motto was spelled in red and gold: “NO MAN IS ONE MAN.”

Thad Pendleton was depending on several men right now. His nephew was his Director of Marketing, his son was next in line to be President and CEO, his next son would eventually be Vice President. And technology, on the pneumatic arms of super robots, was clawing at his father’s factory. His money and his family’s future were wagered big on the National Security Party in the coming Presidential election. The fire last night had destroyed the entire shipment of robotic assembly equipment the government had subsidized for his company, and the sharks were already circling. He swiveled in his chair, grabbed the phone, and punched in a number.

Jo-Jo Pendleton was just going in to say goodbye to his father when he overheard him talking to Ellen’s father, who was in Washington.

“Tom, I want you to do something about this little rat-fucker. He’s about to close the deal on the Farmer Street factory, and by God, this young punk’s bragging about all that Japanese robotic tooling he’s got. It’s just like I said it would be, Tom! He’s been telling his investors he can

beat my productivity by seventy percent. If this little upstart non-union fucker moves in next door — need I remind you how many people I employ at my factory? The kid's a goddamned nightmare and I want you to do something about it! Well, what about the No Growth thing? Good. OK then. I like it. Good. I remember, a children's park. Yeah, a petting zoo. Good, then just zone the fucker. I owe ya, buddy! No, the fire destroyed everything, absolutely everything. I know and I appreciate it, guy. Oh yeah, the place in Kauai is all ready. What? Shit, Tom, November in Kauai is like June in Arizona. You'll get a tan for the Inauguration, don't worry! So how's our candidate look? Here's to it! That's great, buddy, that's great! Hey, hey, the Mayor's son and mine were on the CSB last night!"

Jo-Jo rolled his eyes.

"Yes, yes, now my question is, when will we get to name your Ellen female President? Oh, Tom, she is an Honors Student, I mean more so than Johnny and even Jo-Jo. She's a virtuoso pianist. Why isn't she coming around? Hates uniforms? Jesus, Tom. Oh, I know, what can you do? Sure, sure. Well, you know I support the P.P.P. Bill! I think all these 'hip' parents are full of it! I don't have to tell you what I'd do to my kids if I caught them doing any of that shit in my house!"

His father laughed his big, overpowering, awesome laugh.

"Well, now, Tom — what about the new robotics bill and that damn trade bill?"

Fuck that shit, thought Jo-Jo, but he didn't know why.

* * *

Before school, Ellen Neville stood at her father's desk in the living room. She couldn't reach his room at the Watergate Hotel. He was already on the phone at eight in the morning. He hadn't wanted to book there, he told her, but there were more homeless in Washington than in the rest of the country combined during the pre-election crush. Nice line, she thought.

Where would he have hidden the damn car keys?

Her father was riding the grass roots ground swell of a promising third party, the National Security Party. The NSP combined, as her father put it, "the best of both worlds." Tom Neville was generally an ambitious politician with lots of ideas and a bright future in the NSP. He was a slow-growther and an anti-drug, anti-abortion heavy, a backer of the National Insurance and the National Bank, a staunch environmentalist, in favor of prayer in school and socialized medicine, a fierce opponent of business moguls in his vicinity who didn't lick his boots — and there were plenty who would — pro-draft, pro-gun control and pro-tectionist,

as he liked to say. Ellen's mother was the daughter of an inventor who made a fortune during World War II. She spent her time arranging social activities, when she wasn't drinking.

Ellen was treated like a princess. No matter how shocking and outrageous she looked or acted, her father and mother never objected, and they granted her every whim. Three years ago, Ellen even demanded to go to public school, and her father said yes, then told "the story" in his speeches every chance he could.

She found the keys.

She jumped into the Cadillac Coup de Ville, gunned the V-8, and slalomed all the way down the smooth roads of the North Hills Estates.

* * *

Mr. Green's eyes were glued to the horrors of the *New York Times* as he barely chewed his breakfast. Edmund and his mother waited for him to start in. "Yeah, well, it's about time," he said.

Edmund braced himself.

"Pete Parson's my man. This National Security Party is really serious about everything, damn it. They're not holding back. That's what this country needs, Mother."

Edmund finished his orange juice and tossed his napkin on the table. The messages on the CSB seemed pink in the early morning haze framed in the window.

"Everything's out of control. The kids are going wild. This country needs order. Oh, hey, you gotta help me paint the house, Edmund."

"How did you get the paint?"

"I'm getting some today at the plant. One of the guys has a source."

"Dad, that illegal stuff Mr. Fletcher tried to use?"

"No, Fletch got ripped off. This is legitimate. Certificates come with it. I've seen 'em."

"What about the NIA painters, Dad?"

"I checked it, it's OK. We gotta get this house painted, boy."

"I know, Dad. OK."

"We gotta do it fast, in front at least."

"I thought you said —"

"I don't need any hassles! This stuff is the exact same gray the certified stuff is, anyway. But the NSP has FFII's driving around the neighborhoods now, and I don't need any hassles!"

"The NIA," said Edmund.

"What?"

“The NIA has Federal Fire Insurance Inspectors driving around.”

“Federal Fire what?”

“FFII’s!”

“Oh.”

Edmund shook his head, looking at his father. He heard a car horn. “Your car pool’s here. Bye.” Edmund waved and darted out the back door.

* * *

*Keep sendin’ your goons
Mr. Washington Man
Mr. Jesus Man
Keep sendin’ your flunks
Political Man
Keep on thinkin’ you can
Send pill-poppin’ punks
Hypocritical drunks
Tryin’ to tell the kids
What they can’t do
Keep on thinkin’ we’re finished
You keep thinkin’ we’re through!
'Cuzz I’m sorry to say,
Got somethin’ brand new
Yo, Hypocrite Man,
I got news for you!
How long ya gonna fake it?
The rule you gotta break it
The law you gotta make it
You know you gotta shake it
Yo! Gang up and take it 'cuzz
They be doin’ it, too!*

It was the latest roll anthem by Uncle Sam and the Domination Lords, pounding across the quad area of Middletown High. It was against the new school rules to play music, just like it was against the rules to wear anything but uniforms. But there was a revolutionary army of 9,000 kids at Middletown High, so there were barely any uniforms in sight, and there was music.

*We’re all sick of your rules, Cop!
What I say
Fuckin’ cops and your fools, Pop!
Blow away!*

*You all gettin' wealthy with your legal crime
 You all stayin' healthy while we do time
 Do we gotta do a little ragin'
 To remind you who's who?
 You'll just do a little agin'
 To remind you who's through!*

*Liberty or Death
 That's what you say!
 Just say No and
 Crime Don't Pay!
 Yo, Hypocrite Man
 We play by your rules
 We play your game
 But we always lose!
 The rule you gotta break it
 The law you gotta make it
 You kids you gotta shake it
 Yo! Gang up and take it 'cuzz
 THEY BE DOIN' IT, TOO!*

Middletown High was a giant “magnet” school. 9,286 students attended, from all ethnic and income brackets of Middletown, brought together in what used to be a private college as the “magnet” gobbled up smaller high schools. Its red brick buildings were five and sometimes six stories high. The CSB tower loomed in the ocean-blue sky over the brick gymnasium that used to be a factory.

A gigantic rusting sculpture made of welded iron scrap and I-beams reared up in the center of the quad area. A four-legged Praying Mantis-like being pinched the world, which was symbolized by an old buoy, complete with real barnacles. The crane-like neck leaned over the Earth and the dump-shovel head hung open, a vomit of nuts and bolts and wire just beginning to deluge the surface. A human nose was centered on the top shovel blade. It was called “The Dragon of Eden,” and was commissioned by the State Endowment for the Arts and subsidized by the Department of Education and dedicated by the local school board.

Like the teeth of a great cog, the concrete buildings of Middletown High radiated around the quad area. All surfaces, except for the brick gymnasium, were painted the same gray which proved that it was government-approved fire retardant paint, which made graffiti-covering easier throughout the school. There was a constant war being waged against the gray on the walls, lockers, and doors of Middletown High.

Edmund Green stood alone at lunch in his moss-green coat, lime cotton shirt, jeans, and canvas sneakers, leaning against a gray wall as he looked at the groups of kids in the schoolyard milling around the Dragon of Eden.

“Colors,” he wrote in his book.

Skin. Each kid has to take the class of his skin color to graduate, except for whites. We have to take one of the ethnic classes. All the rest is considered white. Everyone’s hiding behind skin, marching behind skin flags to city halls. Gang up and take it.

Then there were clothes, chosen colors, thought Edmund as he watched. He wrote down what he saw:

Christian Punks, jocks, Thens, Nows, Lateres, Deads, Dreams in stylish earthtone paisleys, militant Deads in combat fatigues, toadies and loadies and metals with long hair, and cogs with shaved hair, and pretty, rich religious groups with simple make-up, wire-head groups with headsets, dumb tough groups, twisted eggheads, decadent country club groups, rich hip groups, black roller gangs, shithead Skinheads, ghoulish gothics, Asian mullet gangs, and Latino mullet gangs, intelligent, terrified nerds of all races, all sticking to some tribal dress code. In every gang there are a few leaders, but the leaders need the followers even more than followers need leaders. Without them, most of them would be nothing.

Edmund closed his book. His inch of jet black hair pointed from his head in all directions. Some Punks nearby thought he was a Punk. He just shook his head at their cryptic hand sign and they shrugged forlornly as they passed.

Ellen Neville walked by him on a flank of a very elite group. Her long blonde hair was frizzed and bleached and streaked with violet, bright yellow, and blue. All of her prewashed, paisleyed, polka dotted, pinstriped, phosphorescent, post-nuked clothes were so pressed and fresh they looked like they had been released from ziplock bags that morning. Like most girls in her group, her face was covered with white face paint, blue eye shadow, purple eye-liner and metallic gold lipstick — a Japanese death mask. No way, thought Edmund. “Hi,” he laughed.

She winced nervously, and looked away from him.

The declaration of independence. The free and the brave. God bless America. Edmund smirked at her and she looked around as if to make sure no one had seen him talking to her.

*How long you gonna fake it?
You know you gotta shake it
Yo! Gang up and take it 'cuzz
THEY BE DOIN' IT, TOO!!*

* * *

When Jo-Jo got to school, he met Ellen in the hall. He kissed a hard kiss on her glossed gold lips and messed them up. He liked to watch her fix them after he messed them up, like a dutiful geisha girl. He decided to walk her through the halls to her first class.

She was outrageous! They had finally fucked. She was his now, and everyone would know it. Hey world! Fuck you! I've got Ellen Neville! What do you fuckin' think of that, he thought.

There was something superior about Ellen — a diamond in her eyes which she tried to hide, but Jo-Jo saw it. It was just like that superior little part of himself that always laughed at him and thought it was better than him, siding with his father, most of the time. He mentally dangled her in its face. Fuck you! he shouted at his own conscience. "You're lookin' good, Babe," he said. "Hey, tomorrow night?"

"Yeah? What?"

"You want to get together? There's a little hot-tub party at Johnny Lanier's."

"John Lanier?" She looked intensely at him, like he must be crazy. "No."

"Well, whatever you want then! I just want to see you, Babe. Hey, come on, what you say?"

"This is my class," she said, on the verge of laughter.

That crazy laughter, thought Jo-Jo. He looked at her, puzzled and embarrassed.

She smiled nicely.

"How about a movie tonight, then, with John and Jennifer?"

"OK."

"OK. Good. I get my Social Studies essay back today. I hope you got me an A." He kissed her again.

She nodded goodbye, quickly fixing the paint on her lips.

Ellen sat in her calculus class, glancing at the studious, virginal girls who weakly hid their glances at her.

She was a stupid jumble of nerves. She looked at her hands and noticed her nails. They were glue-ons, black with rhinestones. She wore fingerless leather gloves, plexiglass bracelets, a denim jacket with the outlawed rock band pins, a retrofitted 1980s ensemble. She caught the blue curve of her contacts, her thick lashes, and rainbow bangs as she glanced at the clock.

The short teacher raked the long strands of dyed black hair over his bald head with his fingers. She noticed some hairs were grown extra long on the left side of his head, so the part had to be precise, but it wasn't. He was an egghead, whatever. Smart people seemed to enjoy looking like exploitable goofballs so people like her father could use them to rule the world, she thought.

He babbled on.

The textbook wasn't much better. Every textbook, in every subject, had footnotes called "Food for Thought." Uncertainty principles, nonabsolute absolutes, imaginary integers, radical numbers, gray areas, and paradoxes were incessantly pointed out at the bottom of most pages by a cartoon egghead with a perplexed look on his face, undermining any certainty that might have been established by $2 + 2 = 4$. It made her sick.

The "Food for Thought" footnotes had discouraged her a long time ago from becoming a mathematician, and she was good at math. She enjoyed working on complicated problems and coming up with the absolutely right answer. But if cartoon eggheads sat around coming up with tweeby little paradoxes to taunt each other with all day long so they could be sure no one could be sure of anything, she never wanted to meet any of the useless nerds.

Jo-Jo was — she wanted to cry for a second, a single wild, perfect second, and squelched it. Jo-Jo was perfect, she thought. A perfect choice! She looked toughly at the other girls in the class. They thought so, too, and that was the joke. They actually thought Ellen Neville was the ultimate winner. And maybe she was.

She laughed out loud right at her bald teacher's baffled head.

* * *

Jo-Jo saw the grade on Edmund's paper. Edmund just looked at Jo-Jo's grin. It was identical to the one projected 100 feet wide on the CSB tower the night before.

In silence, Edmund reread his essay:

Social Studies 1:00 p.m.
Mr. Thatcher

POSITIVE PEER PROGRAMMING PROGRAMS

Assignment 2-A

by Edmund Green

As we all saw in the class film, these new mandatory drug rehabilitation programs for people who use illegal drugs ignore the causes of drug use, and are useless. Mandatory drug rehabilitation programs for kids who use illegal drugs deny people's right to be parents and to know their own children better than the government. These programs are an end in themselves and ignore human freedom. They are an attack on the very ownership of human consciousness. Is a man or woman's body private property, and are people's children their own responsibility until they have full rights of their own, and don't a man's friends have more of a right to counsel his private behavior than the government does? Their answer is no!

What is life if it isn't using the Free Will nature gave us the brain and body to use? It's our nature, it's our right, it's our natural right! What government thinks it can choose for people and parents better than they can choose for themselves? Or, to paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, if people can't even think for themselves how can politicians think for everyone? These programs take away Man's choice after taking away everything he can think, do, and be. They make him a criminal for using his free will! If we take away our choice, starting with drugs, we do more damage to the mind of Man than any drug could ever do. We take away our freedom and our dignity, forcing us to trust the judgment of others instead of our own.

And, ironically, that's why we kids get stoned. If you really want to know the truth, Mr. Thatcher, no one is admitting it, but there it is. Because this machine is going to "program" our lives in every way, because it is trying to wipe us out of our own future, even with our own families if we ever decide to have children. You've got to be a lawyer just to set up a hotdog stand! Social planners did not make us. They don't have the right to control us, or to tell us how to do everything under the sun or make us criminals. The whole country is a machine, Mr. Thatcher, playing a joke on living, breathing, thinking people who can't be mass-produced and whose short lives on Earth can never be repeated. There's no freedom in this fucking world anymore, and there are practically no people left, either. We

kids seek freedom from this world, so we get stoned, to escape and feel ourselves and save our sense of individuality, creativity, possibility and, yes, reality — to fly high and dream what life could be, which we can still feel like a phantom limb. We go inside our heads now, where we still can. And, of course, you try to stamp that out, too.

This social programming won't stop until man is dead so a machine can use his body to keep on running its program.

**UNRECOGNIZED
IMPROPER FORMAT/SUBJECT ERROR
MACK LINK “HUMAN TOUCH” GRADER
SYSTEM GRADE: D+**

The plus was added by his teacher, as well as a personal note:

Edmund, your thesis sentence is missing again, you did not follow the five paragraph format, and you have no examples. Study the e-mail. This essay was supposed to be limited to the drug rehabilitation programs we learned about in class, and their benefits, not your own personal philosophy. Also, there are several run-ons in this essay. Your sentences are too long. Try to isolate your points instead of stringing them together in sweeping statements of opinion. Focus on the assignment. Use more examples. Avoid profanity and speculation.

— Mr. Thatcher

Essays had to be filled out on special Mack Link “Human Touch” forms with a pencil if one couldn't type them into a PCA, which Edmund never used. The essay was supposed to be one page long, but Edmund had to add another page to the form. Evidently, the Mack Link did not understand, nor could it. Mr. Thatcher added the plus, but thought this kid, loaded with talent, wouldn't last a second in college with these wild, unfocused efforts. That's why he felt compelled to discipline him. If Edmund didn't get with the program, the program would spit him out.

Jo-Jo Pendleton looked down at the joke social studies paper which Ellen wrote for him last week.

Social Studies 1:00 p.m.

Mr. Thatcher

POSITIVE PEER PROGRAMMING PROGRAMS

Assignment 2-A

by Mr. Joseph Pendleton

Positive Peer Programming drug rehabilitation is good for three reasons: it helps people, it funds studying new ways to help people, and it makes punishment a productive experience for the drug user.

P.P.P. helps people. There are three examples of this. First, it educates people about drugs. Second, it teaches what drugs do to people's brains scientifically. Third, it involves the drug user in the community. Positive Peer drug rehabilitation is good.

Positive Peer rehabilitation programs are also good because they fund research. Three examples of this are: First, they let scientists study drugs, second, they let psychologists study people, third, they let counselors collect data from people. Positive Peer Programming funds lots of research, which is good.

Positive Peer drug rehabilitation programs are also good because they make punishment a productive experience for the drug user. There are three examples of this, as well. They help the community, because they rehabilitate the drug user. They help the drug user by educating him. And they help cut down on crime which the drug user would otherwise be committing. So drug rehabilitation programs make punishment a productive experience for the drug user.

In conclusion, Positive Peer programs are good in three major ways. Firstly, they help people. Secondly, they fund research. Thirdly, they make punishment positive for the drug user. Positive Peer Programming is good.

MACK LINK "HUMAN TOUCH" GRADER SYSTEM GRADE: B+

Jo-Jo, this is a big improvement—but there's a little more room for growth!

— Mr. Thatcher

Mr. Thatcher liked to throw a personal comment in whenever possible.

Cool, thought Jo-Jo. He looked at Edmund Green again. There was something about him. In his eyes was something that bothered Jo-Jo, the same thing Ellen dutifully covered up, but which Edmund didn't try to hide at all.

The bell rang and it was lunch time.

* * *

"Cop," shouted a kid.

"No shit," shouted about fifty others, and Edmund laughed.

Sheriff Buchannan's snug uniform was stretched like a tan rubber balloon over his belly. His gear was on a big holster strap, and his too-long boots made his turkey thighs look short. The sandy hair on his head was little more than a colorless stubble. Hiding unsuccessfully behind a big mustache and mirrored sunglasses that were too big exploded his tremendous, obscene, blood-shot nose. He ascended the podium in the school quad area to make his annual speech.

Buchannan mainly policed kids and taught a driver's ed class at the high school in the summer. The legends of Sheriff Buchannan were many and terrible, and the havoc he wrought on kids' lives was infamous over the ten years of his reign.

Edmund had been busted by Buchannan as he smoked pot on the hill of Eisenhower Park overlooking Middletown. But Edmund hadn't let him gloat. He stared Buchannan down with all the judgment of Jesus while Buchannan and his partner wisecracked about him sitting handcuffed in the backseat of their squad car. When Buchannan scanned his music discs, he had looked at Edmund, grinning bitterly. "Your lucky day, pot-head! These discs just got illegal yesterday." His grin vanished. "What the fuck's the matter with you, boy!" Tough love.

Edmund glared now at Buchannan as he addressed the sea of kids. Ellen Neville glanced back over her shoulder at Edmund while she held Jo-Jo Pendleton's hand. Edmund ignored her, though she knew he knew she was there.

"Your videos, your raves, your music, your drugs, your sex." Sheriff Buchannan was rambling into the bullhorn. Maybe he was drunk. "But what about when you grow up? What are you going to do?" He shrugged, like a Vaudevillian. "You've got to join the system, or the system will spit you out, baby! That's life in the big city! You just can't live in this dream world, kids, I'm telling you now. Who is going to run this country, who is going to make the world safe for your kids? When you're off crackin' up and rottin' your brains and gettin' pregnant and goin' on welfare and gettin' into gangs and dropping out and committing suicide. Who's gonna keep things going?"

After his “pep” talk, Buchanan left with a small entourage of cops, waving his nightstick and chased by a roar of grating laughter. He threw his hands up, laughing at the Principal, Mr. Badalamento, in sympathy.

Mr. Badalamento flinched in bug-eyed shock at the hideous, grinning policeman. He was not pleased by the riot he had almost incited with his insensitive speech. He quickly took the microphone. “OK, people, settle down! After school today, the Middletown Glee Club is going to do a jam session with the band in the quad. Everyone’s invited. Attendance is free, but there will be a bake sale to raise money for the Keep Our Campus Beautiful Student Leadership Council. Come on, people, show up, buy some cookies, and listen to some really good music. It’s for a good cause. I want to take this opportunity to announce the founding of the Middletown League of Future Leaders, a home-grown organization that will reward kids who achieve with Recognition, Respect, and Responsibilities in their community. Our own Johnny Lanier, who has thrown a touchdown or two for the Middletown Wolverines, is the quarterback of this team, too, though a very different kind of team it is. Jo-Jo Pendleton, who has thrown a block or two for Johnny, will be his Vice President. Let’s give a hand for these all-around role models and give them a cheer for the big game against Marshal High this Friday! Go Wolverines!”

The student body cheered weakly.

Buchanan went straight for Jo-Jo through the crowd. Edmund moved closer so he could listen. “Hello, Ellen,” said the Sheriff, elbowing curtains of fat into a smile. He shook Jo-Jo’s hand. “Keepin’ out of trouble, son?”

“Yes, sir, Sheriff Buchanan,” said Jo-Jo, like he was in the service or something.

Edmund walked away.

* * *

He watched Augustine, his Australian crab, hunting his African frog Pelagius.

Edmund named the frog after Pelagius who wrote a treatise on free will, persuading Pope Zosimus in 417 A.D. to reject the doctrine of Original Sin. Edmund had read this in the 1876 encyclopedia volume P-N which he had bought in a pawn shop. Saint Augustine pressured the Pope to overturn his decision and declare Pelagius a heretic, thus assuring the Church’s authority over man for a thousand more dark years. Augustine was sainted. Pelagius was nearly forgotten. His disciples

were slaughtered for centuries. None of his writings survived the Dark Ages. Edmund planned to write a book about him, someday.

Augustine the crab crept indirectly around rocks and plants, stalking the goofy frog, Pelagius. He fed them both and left his room, journeying into the living room where his parents were watching TV.

“Are you a Pack Rat?” asked the news magazine anchor. “Well, Molly Beatty has been one for forty-five years, but she added the straw that broke the camel’s back to her collection when she trundled a batch of used magazines and other knickknacks home from a neighborhood garage sale.

When she deposited the load in her house, the foundation finally gave way, dropping three feet, and giving Mrs. Beatty a rude awakening.”

Sitting on the couch, Edmund noticed the *New York Times*’ headline on the coffee table:

MACK SUPERLINK COMPUTER SYSTEM CALLED “CURE” FOR SLOW BUREAUCRACY

Next to this headline was another:

HUNT ROBOTICS FIRES THOUGHT TO BE ARSON Riot Control Units Earmarked for China Destroyed in Blaze

His parents changed the channel. Jane O’Shaw, America’s number one TV personality, was interviewing John Mack, the supercomputer genius.

“The Mack Superlink Computer System is the ultimate replacement for the human mind,” Edmund thought he heard John Mack say.

“But, surely, Mr. Mack, some might find that description a little disturbing. How many jobs will be lost if the government were to approve the Mack Superlink?”

“The beauty of this system is that the government could easily and intelligently control much more than it attempts to now. The individual can no longer be expected to attend to the increasingly complex problems of our society. The allocation of charity, the regulation of business, the education of children, the war on drugs, the management of our resources, the stewardship of our economy, the vigilance against crime, birth control, world hunger, the management of our land and lakes and

air and climate — these macro-problems have outscaled the individual, and can no longer be addressed in this global society by anything but a global mind.

“The Mack Superlink is that global mind, taking into account all the minutiae of data that need to be processed, flowcharted, and cross-referenced world-wide, in order to conduct the daily business of our world.” He paused in reflection. “When I was a kid, I always looked at the penny, you know, where it says ‘In God We Trust’? In a sense, this system makes that a reality, in that it is virtually omniscient. Not literally, of course. It has no spirit — the people provide that. But it can store and process more information than all the human beings who exist put together, more consistently and regularly and tirelessly.”

“But certainly, Mr. Mack, it will eliminate many government positions when and if it is activated.”

“Of course,” he smiled. “I’m hoping it will be activated, and that’s why I’m wearing a Pete Parson for President button. I’m a staunch supporter, like so many Americans, of the National Security Party. The present administration is hesitating, but I’m hoping that in time this system will be implemented. It will eliminate certain positions, yes, but it will open up vast new vistas of creative opportunities as governments gain the ability to monitor and regulate globally. So I think the initial cutback will lead to very rapid growth, on the global level.”

“I see. You predict a larger role for government with the Mack Superlink?”

“I certainly do. I foresee a Platonic man in my system, I admit.”

“A Platonic man? What exactly do you mean by that?”

Thank you, thought Edmund.

“I mean a man, in the symbolic sense of course, who holds up an ideal to all men. A truly democratic man. An ideal that reflects onto all men.”

“Just what do you mean?” Jane O’Shaw properly reflected confusion and concern.

John Mack looked up into the bright lights, seeing far beyond them, and after a pause, looked into Jane O’Shaw’s eyes. “In the sense that his perfect charity shines from above down into every inaccessible crag and fissure of human society, that his justice touches every man, that his omniscience orchestrates all of man’s industry for the least amount of waste, that his morality imbues every man with a harmonious course, balancing, modulating and regulating the biological needs of the world as a whole. Of course, people, as a reflection of the Mack Superlink, will be the ultimate link, the hands that join everyone’s hands across America and the world to a more complete, social and environmental awareness. We won’t be acting as individuals any longer but as agents of a greater

consciousness. That's my dream, and that has been my dream for some years now, and, it seems, it is finally on the verge of coming true."

"A noble dream it is," said the composite of earthy American womanhood, Jane O'Shaw. She was computer-generated. A syntactical program sifted through viewer e-mails and wrote her responses. A virtual audience voted on them and a synthesis of the top three questions was fed into her mouth. "But hasn't most of your system already been implemented, Mr. Mack? The CSB towers in each city are linked by your network, public education is largely tied into the network, public transportation, of course, and many private-sector regulatory agencies are linked by your systems, as well as virtually all law enforcement and military agencies. How significant is this final step you propose?"

Mack grinned. This was a question he had had planted in return for doing the interview. "Very significant. As you know, I've already sold the entire system to New Eurasia and China, and we're asking U.S. government help in installing them as quickly as possible, though the present administration seems bent on an uncertain and archaic sense of rivalry with these superpowers. These nations needed the Superlink most, of course, as they were beginning to lose hold on civil order and financial markets in many areas. But unless America follows suit we'll find ourselves far behind the standards of civilization the Mack Megalink will establish in other nations."

The cyber-anchorwoman sighed before the charming giant who sat folded, somehow unimposingly, in the chair before her. She cleared her virtual throat. "Mr. Mack, you and Sapphire Hunt both hold an unprecedented number of important patents over technology considered far ahead of its time by all other research groups. In this age of conglomerates and vast research foundations, when scientists are pooling their minds in richly funded collective efforts as never before, it's difficult to account for the giant strides both you and Sapphire Hunt have made individually. And while acknowledging your genius, many claim that it's unfair for two individuals to hold exclusive patents on so many crucial technologies, such as molecular circuitry and micro-superconductors. Do you think the recent arson fires that have plagued Sapphire Hunt Robotics are an expression of public resentment, and do you fear such reprisals?"

John Mack looked startled, but held his expression steady. He was able to see his computer-generated host with the special contact lenses they had him wear. After a moment, he shrugged. "I have no comment," he said. "Except to say I was under the impression Miss Hunt herself had those fires set. If so, that is a very grave offense, possibly treason. Riot control units that were urgently needed in China were destroyed in those fires. Of course, it's up to the authorities to establish the truth."

“Thank you, Mr. Mack. Have you thought about running for office?” Jane smiled.

John Mack blushed. “No, I’m not a politician.”

Jane O’Shaw shook her head at him, ineffably impressed. She turned and looked at Edmund out of the TV screen. “John Mack, the supergenius of American enterprise, proposes to use his revolutionary computer technology to bring about a new unified vision of our increasingly complex nation and world. I thank you, Mr. Mack, for your fascinating visit with us today on Trend-Setters. And I thank you, the viewer, for joining us on the brink of this extraordinary moment in history.”

Jane O’Shaw suddenly morphed into Marilyn Monroe and took a long sensuous drink from a bottle of Noca-Cola. She winked and blew a kiss. “Want a sip?” Then she morphed into a whiskered Humphrey Bogart in his “African Queen” costume. “Here’s looking at stew, kid!” Bogie took a hearty spoonful of Looby’s Stew and winked. A super appeared on the screen asking viewers to decide whether they liked Jane O’Shaw with red hair or with blond hair with the show’s mak.mail address and phone numbers listed for casting votes.

Every time Edmund looked at the TV, he felt like he was the one surrounded by glass and the people on the other side were arranging his whole life and future, as if he weren’t real, as if he were the computer-generated character trapped in a sitcom.

Edmund went to his room and sat on his bed.

The red eye of the Mack Link THC sensor watched him.

He pulled on his coat, pulled up his window, and jumped out into the night.

* * *

It was raining hard by the time he returned from the mean quarter of town where the houses were dark with broken windows like sunken wrecks on ocean bottom. He climbed over the ledge of his window like Spider-Man.

Safe in his room, Edmund shut his door all the way and pressed it closed for an instant, closing his eyes, too, as if he could mentally lock it. He pulled his heavy bookcase a few inches over the carpet to block the edge of his door. The CSB flashed “JUST SAY DON’T!” as he closed the blinds.

His father tried to open the door and shouted, “Hey, why did you block the door?”

“Because I want to be alone!” shouted Edmund back, with such righteous violence his father backed off without another word. Ironically,

only a classic symptom of drug abuse could scare him off, thought Edmund. He imagined his parents in the living room with eyes as big as saucers, speaking in hushed tones, wondering if they should notify the authorities. Still, it bought him a few moments of peace.

He tied a sock tightly around his wristband. The light of the fish tank rippled over the room. He felt like he was in a diving bell of light, submerged deep under a weight of murk. He drew a deep sigh and pulled a metal pipe from under the mattress. He produced the little ball of foil he had just bought, and peeled the silver fruit. He pushed his short, wet hair back over his head. Lying in his hand was the small chunk of hashish. Hash. Edmund looked at it quietly.

He broke a flake off and set it in the bowl of the pipe. He anxiously drew the smoke into his lungs with a lighted match. He blew the smoke out the window and drew another breath through the pipe, as though it were a hose that reached above the sea into the air and sunshine somewhere above. After desperate breaths through the pipe, he found the surface glinting in the distance. He swam upward and climbed out on a sun-drenched shore.

He imagined he saw, rumbling over the indigo crag of a horizon, preceded by an ominous corona of horns, a great man.

It wasn't a bad trip or a psychotic delusion. It was merely a hope, a hero Edmund needed to see. He crested the edge of the world on a chariot behind a team of horses. He was the omen in the midst of a vision, wild, reckless, and gigantic. His straining steeds, tall as mountains, drove walls of foam before them as Edmund painted him with his courage. He rose behind the waves, his purple robes thrashing, his eyes burning bright. His arms cracked a whip as his face laughed in untroubled joy.

Edmund wrote him down like a painter in his book.

He is coming to smash the machine.

He won't be programmed; he thinks. He won't be pushed; he reaches.

But from the ocean comes an army of red-eyed crabs crawling out of the foam, dressed up like rock stars and politicians, teachers and priests, doctors and philosophers, sociologists and critics, artists and actors, reporters and lawyers, writers and housewives, geniuses and thugs, in a long picket line waving the same sign: "WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?"

The horses scream, their nostrils snorting and eyes bulging as the army marches over their arching backs and down the reins to the Man's arms, and more of them climb onto the chariot and over the Man's legs, holding needles, electrodes, test-tubes, microscopes, computers, chains, tape, hammers, saws, pencils, guns, badges, robots, instruction manuals, bibles, diagrams and manifestos. "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?" say their signs, waving over His heaving body as they put a yoke on His shoulders, strap down His ankles, tap into His spine, drain DNA from His brain, and plug wires in His temples. They tie the reins to His wrists and His feet and drive His horses in different directions as He lifts His head one last time, crying thunder into the sky. And as His arms and legs pull from their sockets, the little people point out His helplessness. As His heart rips from His ribs, they criticize his heartlessness. As His eyes squeeze from His sockets, they denounce His blindness. As His brain pops from His skull, they lament His ignorance. They laugh and laugh, pointing as the giant sinks in the crimson sea, and they all wave the same sign over their heads: "WHAT DID YOU THINK YOU WERE?"

And the crab-people gather together his dead parts and try to use His arms to reach, His legs to walk, His heart to love, His brain to think, and His eyes to see. They think that altogether they are the giant now, and that the man could not exist without them. But they don't add up to a single human being.

Edmund fell asleep, drowning slowly under his blankets.

* * *

Jo-Jo, Ellen, John Lanier, and Jennifer Bowlings handed their tickets to the usher and walked into the lobby of the 36 screen movie theater.

Three dozen worlds to escape into lined the hallways. Posters depicted caped vigilantes blowing the brains out of scumbags, heroes that broke all the rules and didn't go to prison, heroes in space, heroes in the wild past, and heroes in fantasy worlds where they could still be heroes without breaking 600 laws and regulations and getting sentenced to counseling, education and community service. There were critically acclaimed movies with rich Hollywood stars playing losers and crying out for yet more social and community activism from middle class people.

And there were slasher horror movies by the bucketful. Of course, they were going to see a slasher horror movie, Jo-Jo's favorite.

The movie was ironically called "Charly's Revenge," in which the immortal Charly and his gang of motorcycle killers would slaughter 666 more innocent victims in imaginative, drawn-out, super-gross ways, and, of course, get away with it.

Uncle Sam and the Domination Lords, among others, had done the soundtrack. The movie went right into it. The audience booed all around Ellen when a pretty young girl appeared to be getting away from Charly's gang, cheered when one of them sprang around a corner in front of her with a buzzsaw and a goofy mask, booed when her boyfriend smashed him over the head with a frying pan, and cheered when the boyfriend was skewered on the leg of a chair by Charly himself.

Six hundred and sixty-four more victims followed, in groups, mostly.

The final victim, a young, beautiful girl, walked home, school books under her arm, after dark. She whistled a happy little tune. The audience caterwauled and whistled in anticipation. Ellen looked at the girl's face. She had green eyes and dark long hair, much like Ellen under the dye and bleach and make-up and contacts. When they cornered her and the audience cheered, Ellen felt like screaming at them, but there were too many cheers. The girl ran and ran, putting up a good fight, which only teased Ellen's heart. She begged for her life and the audience jeered at her. At last they caught the girl and Charly injected her with some knock-out drug.

The girl woke up as the camera pulled out from a closeup on her eye to reveal that she was on an operating table. Her arms and legs had been amputated. The stumps wiggled.

The camera zoomed in on her scream, a yawning blackness. The audience reeled and laughed and screamed. The gang surrounded her on the operating table, grinning and pressing the barrels of guns and the points of other weapons to her body. They began the traditional countdown. "Ten, nine, eight..." The audience joined them.

On "one" the screen went black, kids screamed, and red letters spelled: "Watch for Charly XII — Twelve Charlies."

Ellen couldn't move. Her breath stopped like hardened cement.

Jo-Jo had to pull her out of the seat. They left the theater.

"Charly's the coolest, man," said Jo-Jo in the parking lot. "The baddest of them all, man!"

"No way, Dude," said John Lanier. "Pighead's badder."

Jo-Jo turned to Ellen. "Hey, what about going over to Johnny's? A little hot-tub?"

"Take me home," said Ellen.

"What?"

“Take me home or I’m taking a taxi.”

“Jeez, Babe, what’s the matter?”

“I feel sick.”

“Jesus, it was just a movie. Lighten up.”

“I’m calling a taxi.”

“No, God. OK, I’ll take you home, all right? Does that make you feel better?”

“Not really.”

Jo-Jo shook his head.

She waved at a passing taxi and it stopped. “Bye,” she said. She got in and closed the door.

* * *

Coming down from the Blue Fire he’d smoked on Lookout Ridge, Jo-Jo lay on his bed in his room at home, thinking about the movie. He was still angry at Ellen. He thought about Charly and his motorcycle murderers.

He put on his VRs and checked out some 3-D videos of tribal cult rock bands bashing skulls with tomahawks. The more violent the image, the longer he stared. Invariably, the bands surrounded a slave woman, or several slave women with some kind of collar, but usually one. One seemed better somehow. There were long-haired rockers with bone-white skin and skeletal bodies in black leather and snake skin, and black Rollers in post-apocalypse flotsam — derbies, broken off Mercedes hood ornaments, crucifixes, Stars of David, shattered yuppie glasses strung on chains like the shrunken heads of modern civilization. They climbed over heaps of bones and brimstone and twisted girders steaming with radiation. Fuck yeah, laughed Jo-Jo.

Everything Jo-Jo did was planned for him. Every pass-route was drawn by somebody else for him to memorize. Crime made him feel alive. A thrill shot through his veins when he thought about murder. When he fantasized about killing people, all the millions of laws and rules were shattered, and he was finally free, making his own mark on the world. Everything else was already planned out by coaches, colleges, councils, congress and cops. Everything but crime.

Charly was an American hero because he was the only free man in America. American heroes couldn’t create anymore. All they could do, without anyone stopping them or telling them how to do it, was destroy. That’s all “freedom” meant now. The President, of course, was talking about banning horror movies — but you couldn’t ban horror itself.

Jo-Jo thought of the girl at the end of the movie. She looked a little like Ellen, somehow, that bitch.

He closed his eyes, cranking his earphones, unable to fall asleep. When he did sleep, Jo-Jo never dreamed. There was a long, merciful blackness until he woke and found himself lying there, again.

* * *

Ellen sat in her father's leather chair as the spacious living room fell dark. Stars sparkled in the long row of windows on the far wall. The make-up felt thick and hot on her face, like a rubber Halloween mask.

She stared at her silent piano. It made her sad to look at it now, but she had never closed the fallboard. She sat as still and lost as a star in the darkness, the distant CSB spewing like a Roman Candle in the window.

She gasped as the telephone screamed on the desk. Before it rang again, she answered it.

"Honey?"

"Hi, Dad."

"How ya doin'?"

"Fine, fine. How are you guys doing?"

"Very well, Honey, very well! Listen, we'll be back at 12:30 p.m. tomorrow afternoon."

"OK."

"Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Is Jo-Jo there? Let me say hi to him."

"He's not here."

"Oh, I thought for sure you guys would be taking advantage of the house."

"No."

"Well, I hope nothing's wrong."

Rage flashed in her brain. "He's out with some friends."

"Well, nothing's wrong then?"

She closed her eyes. "No. He's with John Lanier. The mayor's son?"

"I know Johnny's the Mayor's son, Ellen. Good, well, good. Your mother says hi, and the car keys are in the pencil holder."

"Yeah, I know."

"She found them, Dear! OK, see you tomorrow, Princess."

"Yeah. Jo-Jo was on the CSB the other night."

"I know, Dear. Proud of your boyfriend?"

"Yeah. Bye."

As she hung up the phone, she glanced irresistibly at the thing she hated most about this room and about her father. It was a long, varnished fraternity paddle with an inscription that read:

NO MAN IS ONE MAN

Her father was so happy she was going with Jo-Jo now. He had a movie star's face, a football player's body, ideas that were an average of everyone else's, and only did what everyone else did. He was the perfect guy, according to her father.

She sighed and turned the TV on.

"— not guilty by reason of negative programming, after raping, torturing, murdering, and eating at least twenty-seven women in the tri-state area over the last ten years."

She turned it off and slapped and smeared the face paint, eyebrow pencil, mascara, and lipstick over her face, mixing it with tears and hair. God! What was being human, she wondered. Nothing?

She hated horror movies, although it was wimpy to admit it. The senseless, invented inevitability of murder in them and the grinning voyeurism in almost everyone she knew who liked them entranced her, and nullified her hatred with true fear. Everyone in America was a mass murderer now, vicariously through Charly and Chainsaw and Pighead.

In the dark living room, looking out of the glass, she felt like a specimen among millions, suspended in a jar of cold alcohol, paralyzed but preserved and still able to see out and feel fear for the tiny, precious diamond of life inside her. Was she the only one who still possessed that tiny diamond? She felt that if they knew it was there, they would smash the jar, slash her open, grab it and crush it on the ground.

She poured a glass full of her father's Napoleon brandy. In four gulps she sucked it down. Laughing, coughing, crying, she ran away from the white Steinway upstairs to her room. She climbed under the covers without undressing, burying herself in the blankets. She dreamed she was falling, naked, her hair brown, her eyes green. The world came rushing toward her.

* * *

John Mack rotated his steel chair. His window overlooked the upper east side of Manhattan and the East River.

The American Mack Link was symbolized by an array of 480 floating displays that remained centered in his vision no matter where he looked. Contact lenses displayed them, and he could reach out and touch one to get a closer look. Security camera feeds from likely places she might go were displayed on some, demographic bargraphs breaking down likely suspects on others, and on the rest a multitude of readouts from an arsenal of search programs sifting a tera-haystack of data to find the one person Sapphire had chosen to keep Free Will.

He knew this person must have earned Sapphire's deepest respect. That was a short list. He knew the individual could not be associated with

her in any way. And, most important, he knew this person was not aware of the power of the device Sapphire had entrusted to him, because she had told Mack that she had not revealed the secret. The truth would be too fantastic to believe, anyway. This was his advantage over whoever held Free Will, as long as he could keep Sapphire from reaching whoever that was.

He pulled the thick gold chain of his Swiss watch and looked at the precious face of it. Thirty-two jewels, 100 years old, not one second fast or slow for six years.

He had given the authorities everything he knew that wouldn't incriminate him in order to assist in the capture of Sapphire Hunt. If they caught her, it would give him time. It was not in her interest to expose him.

And no one can hide from the eyes of the Mack Link for long, he thought. The machine compiled its lists and shortened them at God-like speed.

What was she up to? What counter-strategy was she hatching? He looked at his beautiful watch. It was exactly midnight, time to go home. He leaned back in his chair, pressed two fingertips on his temples, and two on his eyelids making the black behind all the monitors turn red.

* * *

Sapphire Hunt stood in the dark before John Mack's desk.

She looked younger than her years. In fact, she was.

Twenty-five years ago, she and John Mack had detected a new kind of energy wave while manipulating micro-electricity fields for their molecular computers and devices. This wave could be polarized and focused in such a way that it nearly stopped the passage of time as atomic activity ceased by any measure. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle was shattered. They found they could manipulate molecules atom by atom with term waves and patented their breakthrough technology.

Something they did not reveal, however, was the machine they created to focus term waves into a spherical field. Any item placed inside this field froze in time. Food could be indefinitely preserved with a fraction of the energy now used for refrigeration. Living things could also be preserved, put into a virtual deep-freeze, and when the term-wave was disengaged, they emerged, continuing their last motion as if not a moment had passed.

They continued to test their revolutionary discovery in total secrecy for any side effects. They feared that if the government got hold of this technology, it would confiscate it and use it for unspeakable evil. Confident that the principle of manipulating term waves and their

understanding of their properties was sound, both John Mack and Sapphire Hunt installed units in their residences. Three nights out of every week, they slept inside a focused orb of term waves. They were aging, therefore, about 1/5 less, or four years for every five, in the fifteen years since they had started testing the wave. Sapphire was now forty-nine. John was fifty.

She opened a clear plastic vial and shook silicon dust into his giant jet-black master keyboard. He still liked keyboards, great big wired keyboards like church organs. Like microscopic dust mites the silicon particles righted themselves and crawled down into the workings of the machine in search of preprogrammed targets within Mack's personal server to the Mack Master-Link.

Sapphire looked at her watch. It was three in the morning, bitter cold, and still dark in New York. It would take four and a half hours for the first microbotics to reach their positions. Sapphire slipped out of the office, and inserted her key to his private elevator through which she had entered his building. She knew that he would not have changed his locks yet. She counted on his confidence. She smiled to herself, and to the security camera in the elevator which she knew would be erased before he saw it, as well as all records of her entrance.

She got out on a parking level and sent the elevator back up. Then she took a flight to Denver and promptly turned herself in for arrest.

* * *

"You're not asking Jo-Jo? I suppose you're going to ask Edmund Green then, huh?"

Edmund stood silently in the high school library, suddenly attentive to the conversation of the two girls in the next aisle.

"Edmund? God, give me a break. He's too weird. Jo-Jo hates him."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Anyway, there aren't enough dances to waste them like that, Suzy!" It was Ellen Neville's voice.

Suzy prodded Ellen, laughing. "Well, you said he hit on you the other day!" Suzy's brown hair was too short, her figure too plump, and her make-up pathetic, but her popularity eclipsed all of this. Her love life was an open wound of rocky setbacks — catching popular guys off the rebound from stormy break-ups was her specialty. She was tolerated for two reasons by the socially elite: she worshipped them, and she provided them with an object of perpetual pity. Both were roles Suzy had perfected.

God, do I have to deal with this? Edmund groaned. Hit on her! He had only said "hi." He strode from behind the book shelf. Giggles slipped from their lips. "Hi," he said, again, already regretting it. He was dressed in plain, sky-blue slacks with invisible pockets, a white T-shirt over his

lean chest, and canvas sneakers. He put his hands in the pockets of his long green coat to hide the plastic band on his wrist. Edmund had let a caress into his voice when he said "hi," though he could not admit it to himself. Ellen was very beautiful underneath it all, he imagined. "That Backwards Dance is coming up, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Ellen said, her eyes evasive behind blue contacts.

Edmund realized she was afraid he was going to ask her. He felt far away from her like a proud peasant standing before a gilded castle. Her perfect tits and ass must seem very important to her, he thought, bitterly. "I know the girls are asking the guys this time, Ellen," he said, "but can the guys ask the girls, if they want to?"

"If they want to." She shrugged, staring into his blue eyes and surprised that she couldn't scare them away.

"Well, I'll be leaving," said Suzy, already savoring the reaction she would get when she fed this into the gossip mill. Edmund was nice-looking, but she knew he was considered "weird," purgatory in the high school inferno.

Ellen busied herself with a calculus textbook. Not nervously, though. She just acted nervous to stop Edmund, he could see that. She was actually confident that he would ask her. She must have gone through it many times before. Then she'd spread it among the others in her group, and they would all have a laugh. Edmund stood closer and her eyes met his. "Fuck," he whispered. He looked away and ran his fingers back through his hair. "I sure wish I could think of someone worth asking. I'll see you in class, Ellen."

As he walked away, with Ellen looking after him, he wished that some girl, even Ellen, might someday be worth it. Forget it, thought Edmund, sternly capping the geyser of pain that began to erupt. Forget it forget it forget it what was the English homework oh that paper Ms. Monroe will kill me so what — forget it!

* * *

Jo-Jo Pendleton, Ellen Neville, and Edmund Green sat in class while Ms. Monroe closed the cover of *Lord Jim*.

Doris Monroe was a former high school prom queen, thirty-two now, and the top-rated English teacher at Middletown High, teaching Senior Honors. She surveyed her Honors English class, pushing her black-framed glasses high up on her nose, and sighed. The power of the ending of Conrad's *Lord Jim* never failed to move her. *Lord Jim*, Joseph Conrad's troubled hero, completes his obsessive quest to prove his courage after selfishly saving himself during a disaster at sea. He redeems himself by offering himself up as a human sacrifice to a primitive tribe after failing to

live up to their divine expectations. "What does Lord Jim teach us, people?"

Edmund looked down at his battered copy with the rendering of the blond Lord Jim that looked creepily like Jo-Jo Pendleton on the cover. "That it's noble to just die," he said very softly, to himself, not wanting her to hear.

A flashbulb of anger blinded Ms. Monroe for a moment before she focused on the unusual and bitter boy who had troubled her all semester. He seemed to profane everything she held sacred. "What was that, Edmund?" She managed to smile.

"I don't know. I think Lord Jim is a coward who just makes it harder for everyone else to be brave."

Ms. Monroe frowned. "Because he was willing to sacrifice his life to honor his commitment to society?"

"Yes. That's it." Edmund stared at his hand, at the tiny quadrangles wrinkled in the skin.

Ms. Monroe nodded. "Very well. Edmund raises an interesting question, class. What do we all think about this?" It was a good question for them, she thought publicly, and a good answer for Edmund, she thought privately. "What do we all think the purpose of life is, people? Andy? What do you think?"

Andy was her standby. "Well, I think that people should... make sure they go through life making as many people happy as they possibly can and use their talents to help the community and protect the environment. And just help out wherever they can, a lot, in their free time and stuff, as much as possible, I guess. Right?"

There was an eruption of nervous laughter. God, it was strange to hear the public school schmooze scooped into a heap. "Yeah, let's all be forest rangers and help each other have self-esteem!" Edmund laughed bitterly.

"Edmund, please!" said Ms. Monroe. "That's good, Andy. Joanne, what do you think?"

"Man should try to do everything he can to advance mankind."

"OK. Maria?"

"Humankind, I'll say, should help the sick and elderly. And the homeless!"

"Very good! Billy? What do you think?"

"He, or she, yeah, should help the community and protect the environment from big corporations."

"James?"

"Every one should work toward making society a better place and help people with their talents so that everyone can have self-esteem."

Ms. Monroe glanced at Edmund. "That's nice. Chandraya?"

"Just Say Don't." Chandraya hated mankind openly. She was a Christian Punk, tough, militant, and smart. There was a nervous group nod and laugh.

"OK. All right," smiled Ms. Monroe, saluting her, to laughter and applause. "Jo-Jo? What do you think?" Ms. Monroe smiled warmly at the Vice President of the Middletown League of Future Leaders.

"Yeah, sure," said Jo-Jo. "I mean, that's right. What Andy said, we should all stick up for the community," he said, suddenly like a macho patriot. He nodded at Ellen. "Yeah, the community should help the poor, and whatever, the homeless and the environment, and fight for the country. You gotta be willing to give up your life and whatever you might want for the community, like Lord Jim."

Ellen felt cornered between Jo-Jo's eyes.

"Thank you, Jo-Jo," said Ms. Monroe. "Ellen?"

"Well — " She giggled nervously. What was the purpose of life? It seemed like something a million miles away, a million years ago, something only God knew for crying out loud, and something, for some reason, she did not want to answer. "Like what Andy said, I guess. Man should use his gifts to serve the community as best he can and try to help wherever there is suffering, or something." She recited the litany in a bored, sing-song voice.

"What?" Edmund didn't want to talk, but as he watched Ellen mechanically spouting words, he snapped. "Maybe the purpose of man's life is life!" he said.

"What about a woman?" teased Ellen.

"Jesus, of course!"

She glared at his unflinching eyes.

Jo-Jo wasn't quite sure what Edmund was saying, or why Ellen cared.

"But that's what I just said," said Ellen. "We should all live for life. I thought I said that, didn't I?" Ellen hadn't wanted to say anything to begin with, and now this creep was arguing about it.

"No, that's not what I meant." Edmund shook his head.

"So what's your purpose then, Mr. Perfect?" she shouted.

"How do you define life? What do you mean by it?" he shouted back, much more angry than she was.

"How do you?" asked Ellen, pouting her full, metallic gold lips at him.

She was shocked, Edmund could tell. No one spoke to her like this. He felt mean, embarrassed, and pompous.

"His own life, Ellen," sneered Chandraya. Upside-down wooden crucifixes dangled from her earlobes, and her hair was shorn, bleached white. She looked right at Edmund, squinting. "The Bible says, 'Mind not high things but condescend to men of low estate.' It doesn't say you

should go around living for yourself, Edmund." She curled green lips at him. "Man has been doing that for far too long. It's time he paid something back to the Garden of Eden."

"Yeah, that's in the Bible!" said Ellen, though she didn't particularly care about the Bible either.

"What's the matter with you, man?" said Jo-Jo, red-faced. "This country isn't good enough for you or something? You don't like the Bible? You don't want to serve the community? You don't think the community's helped you?"

Edmund searched Ellen's eyes, looking for the green he noticed once beneath the blue contacts. He wet his smiling lips and shook his head, shrugging.

"Edmund? Lord Jim's seems like an extraordinary gesture of love, devotion, courage and responsibility," said Ms. Monroe. "He's willing to give up his own life, which few people have the courage to do." She smiled at the class in a shrugging proposal.

"Everyone does it, all the time," said Edmund.

"Yeah right!" said Chandraya. "What planet are you livin' on?"

Edmund looked at her. "The Bible says it's a sin for a girl to cut her hair." Chandraya made a face and Edmund rolled his eyes. "And would you like to know why you can't see anything wrong with giving up your life, Ellen?"

"Yes," said Ellen, dizzy in the spotlight and laughing with the others at Edmund Green.

"Because you don't have anything to lose."

Too harsh. Way too harsh. He winced. The room rocked and jeered and groaned. "The purpose of life? What a crazy question, man! The purpose is to live," he said. "The purpose is being alive! It's not saving endangered coyotes, the Ten Commandments, or our neighbor's neighbor's neighbor. It's not the community, not God, not the environment or mankind. Life isn't something out there somewhere, and it isn't something you can donate to some cause." He looked at Ellen. "You are life, Ellen! Rare and beautiful, mortal and precious, filled with possibility! The purpose of you is you."

She glanced at him and he caught an edge of green this time. Then she looked at her finger, stroking the glue-on fingernail.

"What?" laughed Jo-Jo.

Edmund laughed, and it chilled Jo-Jo. What a dick, Jo-Jo thought. "Where do you get off, man? You just think you know more than — Jeez, I mean, come on! Like you know how to write a book better than Joseph Conrad? Come on, man, who are you to judge Joseph Conrad like that? Right, Ellen?"

Ellen shrugged.

"He's a great writer, man!"

"Why'd you call him a great writer if we're not supposed to judge him, Jo-Jo?" said Edmund. "Why'd you even read this book?"

"Why did I read this book?" Jo-Jo blinked rapidly. "Because it was an assignment, Dude!"

The class laughed.

"That's quite all right, now, Jo-Jo," said Ms. Monroe. She put her hands on her hips in a practical manner. "Edmund, do you agree that it's better to give than to receive?" She smiled in broad, intellectual curiosity. There was an intrigue behind those black-framed glasses, a challenged pedagogue with a rare opportunity for a field exercise.

"No." Edmund looked around, catching himself. "Yes! I mean, it's better to love than to be loved. You act as though it's better to give up loving to be loved by everyone you don't even know. Do you think it takes more courage to die for others than to live for yourself, Ms. Monroe, like Lord Jim?"

"She didn't say that," said Jo-Jo.

Ellen watched Edmund.

"Why don't you teach something real, Ms. Monroe? Why not some Aristotle? There's something real. He teaches how to keep your life and make it great instead of giving up and throwing it all away before you've even made something out of it. He teaches about living a good, rich, whole life with all the virtues practiced by individuals instead of some blind machine." Edmund punched a glance at Jo-Jo and jabbed one at Chandraya, ignoring Ellen now.

"Aristotle? Well, Edmund." Ms. Monroe smirked, puzzled. "Aristotle believed it was proper for the magnanimous man to have slaves, as I recall."

Jo-Jo laughed loudly.

"No, he didn't! He said that people who can't think for themselves are natural slaves because they're better off doing what others tell them to do. You think they're model citizens, Ms. Monroe!"

"Got busted for pot and now you think you're Joe Rebel, huh?" Jo-Jo was reading the white plastic wristband that was sticking out of Edmund's sleeve.

"Jo-Jo, shut up," said Ellen softly.

"What? Jeez, Babe," said Jo-Jo.

Edmund saw his wristband showing, and it was too late to hide it. It might as well have been on the CSB:

THIS BODY CONTAINS THC

It ended the argument. He felt the girls looking away from him, sympathetically now. Edmund felt sick. The class shuffled papers and shifted chairs.

"Well, sorry, Dude, but you needed it. You gotta get off your high-horse, man," said Jo-Jo, quoting his father.

Edmund looked at his hand, humiliation swirling around his head. He was trying to think of how he could make them see it, but it was like trying to make them see sight itself.

The bell rang, and everyone left except for Edmund. When he finally got up, Ms. Monroe watched him. As he pushed open the door, the kids in front of him shouted and pointed at the CSB tower.

The lights on its walls were strobing. All over the school, people froze and looked at the giant malfunctioning machine. For the first time in memory, the tower went dark. As everyone stared, tall green letters rose over the brick gymnasium one row at a time:

EDMUND

"Whoa," shouted Jo-Jo.

I AM NOT DEAD

Edmund heard them whisper.

I AM COMING

They fell silent.

TO SMASH THIS MACHINE

The Tower went dark, broken and cold in the sky as granite clouds converged over Middletown and lightning cracked the sky.

* * *

Edmund huddled in his coat, blowing a ball of steam into the gray. He pushed his hands into the silk pockets of his moss-green overcoat, his eyes downcast. The path was wet, but not muddy. It was such an old path; he had known it so long. The dark big trees moved in the air around him. This old, stony road to the cemetery, he thought, and kicked a plastic Noca-Cola bottle.

He stopped on a bend and looked down at Middletown, preparing for rain. Cold wind thrashed his coat. The CSB was still dark. Vandals must have broken in and programmed the strange message into it. It couldn't have anything to do with him — a freakish coincidence. He smiled. It was fun to see the others wonder, though. As he looked, the

tower blinked back to life. They fixed it. He turned and walked up the path, his hands in his pockets.

To Edmund, the CSB, even more so than the black box in his room, was the symbol of what he called the “machine.” It was the face of the hulking cyborg that had stolen all the virtues of man away and left the depraved and dried-out husks that scudded along the dilapidated streets of Middletown. And John Mack and Sapphire Hunt, Edmund thought, were its inventors right down to the shackle on his wrist. Without his supercomputer mind and her superrobotic muscle, the American government could not effectively perform the calculations or monitor compliance and enforce the regulations that were necessary to run the Employment Registration Agency, the National Insurance, the Demographic Eligibility Office, the New York Stock Exchange, the Department of Education, the IRS, the FBI, and myriad other institutions. Politicians were always quick to point out that such systems had grown too large and complex for individuals to oversee ever again.

The President, in the wake of the worst purge in China’s history and the civil chaos in new Eurasia, was promising and subsidizing the rapid installation of John Mack’s supercomputers to “stabilize the crisis” in Eurasia and China. John Mack would probably deliver the President’s promises punctually and efficiently. Then he would build the American Superlink, and finally the Mack Megalink, where all the programs could be homogenized and standardized, running the world like a gigantic aquarium.

After the strange sabotage of the CSB, Edmund wondered if John Mack might still have some intelligent enemies left. But there were no heroes anymore. Nobody believed in himself enough to fight for himself. Everyone had given up.

It drizzled. Steam rolled from his mouth as he reached the top of the road and the small park of monuments nestled in the side of the hill. He sat on his bench and looked fondly at the tombstones.

This old green cemetery was his favorite place on Earth. From his bench, the words on the CSB were indistinguishable. He greeted his impervious friends. Mr. Onasis died in 1892. Mrs. Onasis died in 1893.

Mr. Helstrom lived to be sixty-seven years, five months and two days old. Mary Wren died at the age of seventeen, drowned. They faced him amicably, exchanging greetings; they hadn’t changed. Their stone faces were more honest than living people. They claimed their existence, and didn’t try to deny it. The dead had more courage than the living.

He looked at Mary Wren. She looked at him, set apart from the others. He got up and kissed her cold stone, and then lay back on the bench, his hands on his forehead, the black clouds filling his eyes. The leaves, the grass, and the spirits rustled and a gust of rain fell on his face.

Tears suddenly welled from his eyes, disguised by the falling rain, and Mr. and Mrs. Onasis, Mr. Helstrom, and Mary Wren pitied him silently.

He sat up, angered by his weakness, amazed by it. Then a chill ran down his spine. "Coming to smash this machine," he whispered.

Those were his words! They were in his book at home. He had forgotten to take it with him that day. What in the world could be happening? Was he insane?

He ran down the hill as fast as he could, and smelled the scents of the earth rising in the rain.

* * *

Jo-Jo pulled the Camaro off the road on Lookout Ridge and turned the engine off. He felt weird. Below, the CSB was still dark. He felt alone, sticking out, weird. Finally, it glimmered again under the charcoal sky, and he felt relieved for some reason.

NATIONAL INFO WATCH

A CAREER AS A FRY COOK!

MANAGED INITIATIVE COMPLIANCE

REGISTRATION INFO:

555-109-8787.mak

FOOD HEALTH EDUCATION INFO:

555-522-0099.mak

LICENSING, FEE FILING, AND

CERTIFICATION INFO:

555-219-1492.mak

SCHOLARSHIP, AID INFO:

555-615-1215.mak

DEMOGRAPHIC ELIGIBILITY INFO:

555-527-2777.mak

COMMUNITY SERVICE CREDIT, REGISTRATION

AND ENROLLMENT INFO:

555-696-6912.mak
SMART-TAX WORKSHOP
“HOW TAXES CAN WORK FOR YOU!”
555-121-1191.mak

He looked at each word flowing over his eyes, but his mind was blank. The world would take care of all its bullshit, he thought. The world, his father, Ellen's father and Johnny's father were doing all that shit, getting together in meetings, and planning it all out. The words scrolled up the tower and over his eyes as he pulled the twenty piece from his pocket.

Whatever the future had in store for Jo-Jo Pendleton, whatever the world had planned, the world could take care of, he had no doubt. In the meantime, he was getting a blast. He sucked the glass pipe slowly, filling his lungs with the sudden white mist. For a moment he disappeared, and only the world existed, the tower glimmering in the distance, the smell of the earth rising in the rain. Everything continued without him, peaceful, whole, ordered, perpetual, unbroken, and perfect to the horizons.

Then he reappeared like a rock through a window as he saw himself in the mirror staring in horror at Middletown. He felt weird.

Let them do whatever they wanted. Let them try. He took another hit.

He disappeared and the world erased him with its rolling words in a blur. He felt like he might not exist. Jo-Jo Pendleton felt like he had never existed at all.

But he appeared again, like a big noise in the middle of the silence, and he hated himself suddenly. He always came back, sticking out in the middle. And something was laughing at him. Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha!

He sat for a while, grimacing, scowling, wringing the steering wheel. He pulled out and tore down the road toward home.

The image of Ellen pinned underneath him smoldered and ignited his mind. He would fuck her, he thought, and the idea soothed him as the rain pelted his windshield. Fucking Ellen was like revenge against that little part of him. It seemed he could fuck it, too, while he fucked her. He grinned cruelly, gripping the steering wheel and pumping the gas.

* * *

The rain drenched the darkness outside. Edmund lay on his bed. His writing book had been pulled from the bookcase and placed on top of his PCA, and his window had been slightly ajar.

That was all.

To Sherlock Holmes, this might prove something. But to Edmund, in reality, it didn't prove anything. His mother and father could have moved his book, but they would angrily deny it, or say he just imagined it. That was far more likely than anything else he was thinking.

"Are you a Pack Rat?" asked the goofy local newswoman on TV that night; she was real, in theory, at least. "The Federation of Clinical Psychologists say that ten percent of the population may suffer from this seemingly innocuous behavioral disorder and the federation has asked for funding for further research into..."

Edmund shook his head, numb.

"Not a lot of people pay attention to conspiracy theories. But one Internet pirate, known as the 'Protein Prowler' because of the way his home page is encrypted, has been warning people that Sapphire Hunt and John Mack are conspiring to pull the plug on their vast computer and robotic networks. Though authorities and spokespersons for Hunt Robotics and Mack Industries have called the theory unfounded and ridiculous, the recent malfunctions of CSB towers have started a buzz among Internet conspiracy theorists."

Too good to be true, thought Edmund. The next story was about Sapphire Hunt, who was in jail pending trial in New York for National Insurance fraud after torching her own building and factory in Middletown. They interviewed John Mack. He was at a loss to explain what had gone wrong or who had sent the strange messages through the CSB towers across the nation.

It was too strange to comprehend. Edmund listened to the rest of the news, more laws and crimes, more social programs and killing sprees. He finally left and went to his room.

Edmund pressed his pen to the page of his book, his hand trembling as a confusion of thoughts flooded into his fingers, struggling to find order on the piece of paper. He closed his eyes, sorting through the violence and hope within him, and from the demons that haunted him, Edmund chose the most innocent: his love for her overwhelmed his anger and urged his hand across the page.

Her hair woos me, even in contemplation. Brown with a plating of thin gold, as if the thinnest, thinnest sheet of gold-leaf, pounded to an impossible transparency, had lighted and settled over her nocturnal mantle. Nocturnal. Yes. I can feel her in a dream-life, lying beside me in a conspiracy with the night, the pacifying tumult of the Pacific, the stars, the sand, the heavy air, the breeze that croaks with the sound of gulls far away. A grand and complex conspiracy to hold me and let me rest in the many arms of the evening; but her arms are enough...

He opened the window and stretched back on his bed. A cold gust moved over him and the street lamps supernovaed in his eyes.

* * *

Ellen read:

There is an immense amount of pleasure to be derived from the sense of ownership; every man bears love toward himself, and I am sure that nature meant this to be so. Selfishness is condemned and rightly so, but selfishness is not simply love of self but excessive love of self. So excessive greed to acquire property is condemned, though every man, we may be sure, likes to have his bit of property. And there is this further point: there is a very great pleasure in giving, helping friends and associates, making things easier for strangers; and this can only be done by someone who has property of his own...

The abolition of private property will mean that no man will be seen to be liberal and no man will ever do any act of liberality...

There comes a point when the effect of unification is that the state, if it does not cease to be a state altogether, will certainly be a very much worse one; it is as if one were to reduce harmony to unison or rhythm to a single beat.

She closed the book of Aristotle, amazed. It was called *The Politics*. She chose it because of her father.

Ellen gazed at the storming city of Middletown below her. The CSB was a sizzling neon pillar, rising to the clouds. She lay back, naked under her down comforter, thinking about Edmund Green.

She secretly dreamed about the kind of world Edmund Green would live in; and it seemed it must be a very different place. She smiled, feeling that thinking about Edmund Green was an impossibly private indulgence, knowing that she was probably the only one in the world thinking about him at that moment. He was probably asleep now, and no one could ever guess she was thinking about him or understand why — not even she did, though she knew there was something real about him,

something like what she would be if she had not feared being treated the way he was treated.

He excited her, and frightened her, too. She decided to watch him, from a distance, in disguise.

* * *

Names!

She had tricked him and sabotaged the entire Community Service Broadcasting System before turning herself in.

But she had given him names!

John Mack watched the Mack Link compiling the names from the CSB towers in each city. Were there any cities more likely than others, he wondered? Irresistibly he looked at the name from Middletown.

“Edmund,” he murmured. But she would never keep it in Middletown! She was never that reckless. What he would give to see through Sapphire’s eyes now. He used to have eyes like hers, eyes that saw what she could still see in human beings.

He studied the Mack Link’s many eyes, instead, scanning the charts and compiling biographies at lightning speed. He leaned back and checked his watch, sighing as the golden tick of the second hand soothed his pounding heart.

* * *

Tom Neville looked out the window of his office at the man who worked at the hotel across the street. The man was not wealthy, but there was a richness about him, an easy handsomeness. He was not even an executive at the hotel, but a doorman who greeted guests. He was not waiting for a limousine, but he stepped onto the bus and smiled at the driver as though the driver were a trusted family chauffeur. The bus driver gave him a warm salute which chilled Tom Neville.

In a boutique in Washington, Tom had bought a sharp black topcoat exactly like the one this man wore. He bought a gray one, too. It was a very expensive coat. He couldn’t see how a doorman could afford it on his salary. Both coats, black and gray, hung on a coat-tree in his office. Once, when Tom had to leave for an early banquet at the hotel and the man was standing outside at the bus stop, he had worn the gray version and walked by him. He felt the man smiling without suspicion and it made him hate the man even more. He saw his wife come to greet him once. She was his own wife’s age, but she looked as though she had

walked out of girlhood, clean and strong. She had kissed him because she wanted to.

The bus drove away down 1st Street in the crisp twilight as rain began to fall. Tom reached for his black coat and noticed his daughter standing by the door of his office, watching him. He grinned broadly as he saw her and gave her a bear hug. Ellen was such a dazzlingly trendy girl. He soaked in her confident fashion sense. She had every accessory in triplicate, and yet didn't put nearly so much of herself into her clothes as the guy at the bus stop did into his coat.

"You were looking at that man out there, weren't you?" said Ellen.

"What man?"

Ellen stared at him curiously. "The one who has the same coat you have."

Tom's eyes popped at her, a loose smile hanging on his face. "I don't know what you mean."

"Are we going?" Ellen flicked her elbow with her nail.

"Yes, yes, Dear, we're going. Thad and Jo-Jo are already there. Whatever did you mean?" Tom laughed, patting her shoulder. He hung his coat back on the hook.

"Aren't you going to take it?"

"What, Dear?"

"Your coat."

He smiled. "Hmm? It's not too cold."

Ellen raised her eyebrows. "You'll get wet."

"That's OK." He laughed.

"How long is this banquet, Dad?"

"It's the press conference officially announcing the founding of the Middletown League of Future Leaders, Princess! It's going to be at least a couple of hours."

When they emerged on the marble steps of City Hall, Tom Neville looked around for the impoverished homeless and street transients who orbited the city offices. He wanted to show the doorman why Tom Neville was a politician and the doorman was only a doorman. His eyes embraced one ragged man in his thirties, shriveled by alcohol and clad in tatters.

The panhandler lifted a hand toward him. "Can you spare a few dollars, mister?" he said.

It warmed Tom Neville's soul. "My man," he said, "I will get you more than that, I assure you." He smiled as he passed him by. The man cursed and turned away.

Ellen shuddered as they crossed the street to the hotel.

* * *

“Come on, buddy,” said Thad, holding the door of the Pendleton factory as his son hurried behind him. “Got your patch in the right place?”

“Yeah, Dad.”

Thad laughed, squeezing Jo-Jo’s neck.

Jo-Jo didn’t like where his mother had sewn the green patch on what looked like a Grand Master’s jacket. It said “MIDDLETOWN LEAGUE OF FUTURE LEADERS — VICE PRESIDENT” on his left lapel in grass-green letters on a field of white. It stuck out too much. Charles would laugh.

They descended the granite steps of the factory to 1st Street. An old black man extended his palm. “Can ya help me out, sir?”

“I gave at the office, Buddy, boy did I ever,” laughed Thad, not even looking.

Jo-Jo angrily glared at the black man, nodding. “Dad, is everyone gonna be there? The Mayor? Johnny? Ellen?”

“Yep. It’s a big affair, champ.”

“Hmm.” Jo-Jo shrugged. Maybe this was cool after all, as a goof, anyway.

* * *

“I thought of this program,” said Councilman Neville behind the podium, “as a way of saying ‘thank you’ to those community-conscious, environmentally aware, selfless and drug-free young people in our city who serve our great community. Such outstanding citizenship in these troubled times deserves our rewards, and this program will include leadership roles in the community, scholarships, demographic priorities, and special consideration for opportunities from local businesses, as well as incentives to employers to join in our recognition of these upstanding youths who comprise the Middletown League of Future Leaders.” Tom Neville laughed bashfully. “I’m even outlining a plan for the future President of these United States — I won’t name a name — to include this program in a nationwide drug bill I and others are sponsoring in order to reward our youth across this land for choosing the path of responsible citizenship and drug-free service. Someday, I hope to add another color to the CSBs of America: Green, for our youth and the American League of Future Leaders. But for now, let Middletown be proud of its vision, and for giving this program its birthplace. History will remember Middletown!”

There was applause, and the representatives of the League, led by John Lanier, joined Tom Neville on the stage for photos. National press

and TV were covering the event. Everyone lined up in front of the flag of the National Security Party, Old Glory, and the state flag.

Thad Pendleton leaned over to Ellen. "When are we going to see you up there, Princess?"

Ellen shrugged and shook her head, but something inside her screamed and thrashed like a maniac in a straitjacket.

* * *

It was a surprising Saturday, beautiful and clean-skied. The wind was hard and the clouds on the horizon were moving fast.

"Do you two want anything, dear?" her mother shouted from inside.

"No, we made some Bloody Mary's," shouted Ellen.

"Oh."

"I love your folks," said Suzy.

"Please, not now," said Ellen. She sipped her Bloody Mary, looking over the terraced backyard of her house in the North Hills, overlooking Middletown. She could see the city hall where her father worked in the valley. Between it and her were factories, a railroad, and a golf course, which acted as a buffer zone for the posh North Hills Estates landscaped on a ridge pointing down toward Middletown.

Three redwood patios descended to a long green lawn, surrounded by wind-stirred trees. The air was sweet, and the tomato in the ice-cold drink put a fresh tang on her tongue.

"So what about Jo-Jo? You've got to tell me! Did you?"

"Yeah," shrugged Ellen indifferently, though she could still feel bruises from the jerk.

"Oh, wow! God, what a stud!"

Ellen looked at Suzy in disgust.

"I mean, God, Ellen, that's great! You're so lucky! I can't believe it, the hottest guy at school. Every girl would die to have Jo-Jo Pendleton!"

Suzy was overdoing it, as usual. Ellen looked at the trees that were mopping the blue sky.

"Well?" Suzy asked.

"Well, what?"

"What do you think?"

"I think Edmund Green is a really weird guy."

"Edmund Green — Ellen!"

"Have you ever talked to him?" Ellen asked absently. She knew at the same time that Suzy would never talk to Edmund Green.

"No, but he is weird, isn't he?"

“Yeah. He’s in my Honors English class. He said some things to me that were — and then the CSB. Did you see it? Wasn’t that weird?”

“You don’t think it was talking to Edmund Green, do you?”

“No! No, but it was —”

“Weird. Yeah. What about Jo-Jo?”

“What about him, Suzy?”

“All right, all right, if you don’t want to talk about it, it’s OK.”

“I don’t want to think about it. What do you think about Jo-Jo? Honestly?”

“I think he’s a super stud. He’s really cute, and nice, and funny, and he’s got a hot car, and he’s rich —”

“But what do you think about him?”

“Uh, I think you lost me, Ellen. You know, you think too much about things. That’s your problem.”

Ellen laughed, taking a cold sip of the Bloody Mary, and turning her glass on the patio table. “Yeah.”

“You’ve got it all, Ellen.” Suzy’s eyes swept over the manicured lawn, the house, the town far below. “I envy you so much. God, it’s like you don’t even seem to care. I wish I had what you have!”

“What have I got, Suzy?”

“You look like a goddess, you have the most outrageous hair, you’re so skinny, your dad is getting you a new car, and you fucked Jo-Jo Pendleton.” She took a gulp of her drink. “Do I have to go on? Because I’m not really enjoying this.”

Ellen sighed. “You envy too much, Suzy.”

“I know.” Suzy readily admitted to all flaws one might suggest.

“There’s more than that, a lot more. My hair is really brown. My eyes are really green.” Ellen sighed and her geisha make-up made her look like a sad harlequina.

“But some things can’t be faked.”

“Oh, stop putting yourself down. Just lose some weight and be yourself. You don’t have to look like me, you know. Look at me. I look like me, and look at me!”

“I think you just want too much, Ellen. I would be happy if I were you.”

“Maybe everybody else wants too little.” Ellen looked at the town. “All Jo-Jo wants is my hair, my tits, my blue eyes—”

“Oh, God, I’d have an orgasm if he wanted mine.”

“He doesn’t want me. He wants mine. I’d give it to you for someone who wanted me. Except I don’t think anyone like that exists. Did you know I play the piano?”

Suzy laughed. “Yeah, so?”

Ellen nodded. “I want to write music. I always wanted to write music. But there was never any reason to.”

“Well, why don’t you?”

“Who cares. It’s just a drag. Jo-Jo wishes I didn’t even play the thing. It only gets in the way.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“No.”

“Well, give him a chance, Ellen.”

“If he had something of his own, he would understand how I feel. Something he did, by himself, if he just didn’t care what other people think all the time. I feel like I’m with everybody at school when I’m with him, like they’re all watching me out of his eyes.”

“Uh, you lost me, Ellen.”

Ellen sighed. “I think I lost me, too.”

* * *

Jo-Jo and his parents came over for dinner. Thad Pendleton and her father spoke ceaselessly about the election, about the robotics bill that would get Thad’s factory tooled at everybody but Thad’s expense, and some trade bill that would block South Korean and Chinese shoes so Thad’s factory could “save American jobs!” Ellen wondered if they feared they were being bugged, the way they talked around everything without ever quite saying what they meant. She looked around for a hidden microphone.

Barbara Pendleton and her mother traded gossip about Washington wives and country club scandals. Evidently, the salmon at Samantha Dye’s luncheon was bad. Three old women had to go to the hospital. They laughed.

Jo-Jo played little kid games under the table. He kept lifting Ellen’s skirt with a carrot stick.

Finally, as the cook and maid were clearing off the sorbet plates, Ellen lit up a cigarette. There was a brief pause as she blew a smoke ring up over the table, casting a sidelong glance at Thad. He grinned. Thad liked her.

“Why don’t you kids go into the living room?” said her father.

“Run along with Ellen, son,” said Thad.

“OK, Dad. Come on, El.” He looked at her with everyone’s eyes.

She walked out on the redwood deck and he followed. She ignored him as he groped her body. Finally, the adults entered the living room for coffee and brandy and Jo-Jo had to cool it. He was all puffed up, she noticed. “You’ve been cracking again,” she said.

Jo-Jo’s father called him in, and her father came up behind her. “So have you asked Jo-Jo to that backwards dance yet, honey?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

She shrugged.

“Ask him tonight, dear.”

She shrugged.

“I noticed you drank all my Napoleon brandy.” He laughed.

“Yeah. I guess so.”

“Well, that’s OK, kiddo. Listen, Princess, I have something to show you. Why don’t you come out front.”

She followed him in and he announced to everyone that it was time to come see Ellen’s surprise. They all looked at her, half-smiling because they knew what it was. So did she.

Sitting in the driveway was her new car.

Everyone oohed and aahed, but as she looked at the car it seemed plain and naked to her. It was cobalt blue, a relatively expensive and sporty car, the model she wanted, but plain with no accessories. For an inexplicable second she thought of Edmund looking at her in it, and she shivered. “Dad!” She frowned.

“What, Princess?”

“I wanted white! Jennifer has a white Silhouette! With white tinted glass and rear mag wheels and a spoiler fin and I wanted pink and turquoise racing stripes!”

Barbara and her mother laughed and Thad shrugged, looking at Tom.

“Well, back to the dealer!” He hugged Ellen. “Oh, don’t you worry, honey, we’ll order it, but it’ll take a little while. I wanted to surprise you by getting it a little early, but if you can live without a car a little longer, we’ll just send it right back and get the right color, OK?”

“And all the rest,” she said.

“And all the rest,” laughed Tom Neville, schticking a grimace at Thad. “Just make a list, sweetheart. Why don’t you look at it, though, just to get an idea?”

“OK!” She opened the door, relieved that she would have all the details, all the world’s fashion to hide in as she drove around — in front of Edmund Green.

She had no idea why she felt this. She just knew she couldn’t be plain in front of him, so she could watch him, safe and hidden. She had to be in the best disguise, the best. No one could suspect her. Least of all him.

Later that night, in gratitude to her father, she asked Jo-Jo to the dance. He nodded, arrogantly, as though he had been told to expect it. His eyes seemed to eat her as he grinned and stared at her white skin and golden mouth.

* * *

Jo-Jo breezed into the Holmes' apartment, slipstreaming Charles Holmes. It was late afternoon after school. His dad had given him fifty bucks, and it was going to be gone in about fifty seconds.

"Hey, Mute."

The blank-faced boy looked up from his book in the corner of the room.

Charles gave Jo-Jo a hard glance.

"Whatcha readin', Mute?" Jo-Jo laughed, shaking his head at Charles, who didn't look back at him. The boy cringed between tall stacks of black market Korean disc players, pulling off a set of headphones. Jo-Jo saw two shotguns in the closet, a .357 magnum on the table, and an automatic rifle under the table. One clip and two boxes of bullets were on the bed.

"You gonna do some of this up this time?"

"My friends are waitin' out there —"

"Shit! You always doin' that, man!"

"Next time, I swear."

"Here," said Charles.

"That's fifty?"

"Shit, man!"

"That ain't fifty, man."

Charles looked at him. He took it out of his hand and put another blue-white pebble in his hand. "Satisfied, home-boy?"

"What kinda fifty is that, man? Jeez, I mean, c'mon Charles, that's the same size as the other."

Charles just stared at him. Very slowly, he picked up the pebble and put down another that looked slightly bigger. "How's that there, Jo-Jo?"

"Yeah, sure, Charles, OK. Nothin' personal, man, it's just that this ain't my money."

"Yeah," nodded Charles, rolling his eyes.

"Is that an AK-51?" asked Jo-Jo.

"No. AK-49. Old gun. Don't shoot too good."

"My dad collects guns."

"Yeah?"

"What's goin' down?"

"We got business. Just takin' care of some business."

"How is business?"

"Good, real good!" Charles laughed. "Ya see, they keep bustin' all the Toker gangs. It ain't easy to hide weed, you know."

"Oh, drag."

“No, that’s good, man. Biz up! ‘Gonna have me a whole lot more customers before the winter’s over. A whole lotta white boys like you that ran outta weed!” Charles laughed again. “And this stuff, man. Yeah. I’m gonna have me a new crop of regulars, solid.”

“All right, man.” Jo-Jo looked down at his little brother. “Drawin’ a frog. For biology tomorrow, eh Mute? Pretty good, there. Maybe you can draw one for me some time, I’ll spot you for it. Well, see ya, Charles. Say hey to Ghost.”

“Right, right.”

“See ya in class tomorrow, Mute.”

Jonathan Holmes just stared at him.

*Grab it, then pound it, then crack it,
Then burn it, then kill it, then trash it,
Then grab it, then pound it, then crack it,
Then burn it, then kill it, then trash it
'Cuz what there is is what I want
And what I want is what I take!
Guess what?
YO-YO-YO-YO
Guess what?
YO-YO-YO-YO
Guess what, little honey
YO-YO-YO
Uncle Sam
YO-YO-YO-YO
Want you!
YO-YO-YO!*

Uncle Sam and the Domination Lords. Roll kings. Their monster hit, “Is What I Take” pounded and splintered the neighborhood, block after red brick block. It blended with the car alarms, the gunshots, and the sirens.

On the streets of the projects, U.S., as he was called, was the current patron saint of youth, the messiah who pointed out the bottom line: Gang up and take it. “Gang Up and Take It” was the hit that battered its way into young American hearts and launched U.S. to national dominance. Women’s groups were furious at his early hit “Rape Rap,” but when the words of “Culture Rupture” hit the streets, he was back in the driver’s seat.

*Mr. Biz is a rummy
He’s just a big dummy
Got milk in his veins*

*Lies in his brains
Time for big business
To go down in flames
Time to drown Mr. Biz
In his acid rains!*

*You all work for your money
And it's all pretty funny
'Cuz you spend it on romancin'
Your rich bitch dancin'
'Cuz for one thin dime
While you're wastin' your time
We be swimmin' in the women
And burnin' what you're earnin'
You lookin' at me
You just ain't learnin'!*

*Rome's burnin', Nero!
Why you tryin' to be a hero?*

The Mute closed his eyes.

He was afraid of U.S. He was hiding from U.S. U.S. was a huge screaming voice attached to no body, and he was a scrawny little body with no voice.

He hated U.S.

The Mute tried to block the noise in the street and in the building out of his mind by concentrating on the diagram he was drawing. The neighbor's baby was crying in the living room, and a television set was blaring. His mother and two friends had slammed some smack. He put on earphones from one of the black market boxes in the room to block out the noise.

Until last night, Jonathan's mother had been OK. She hadn't disappeared to smoke Fly for three days. Now she sat silently with two older, quiet men, her baleful eyes still, reflecting the white television people as the heroin put her somewhere else and made the world a distant echo. When his mother disappeared, it was for days, appearing here and there with two or more dangerous-looking men who walked quietly. They smiled at Jonathan and spoke softly, politely, but sometimes stood menacingly at the window and door for hours at a time. After the Blue Fire, his mother would look at Jonathan with a grin that would snap into rage and spite. Then loud words would punch the air in a flurry, his older brothers and mother screaming. Jonathan would act like a retarded kid who was unable to judge them so he would be invisible, so he could go to sleep.

Jonathan, the Mute, shared the room with his brothers, and didn't like to be in it. If they came home, he was safer in the living room. If they caught him studying alone in the bedroom, it was worse. There were no curtains in the bedroom, and if they came home, they always used his mattress to block the window.

Jonathan finished reading the chapter in his biology textbook.

His mind was his refuge, his private study in which he pondered the mechanics of life. Science, to Jonathan Holmes, was a door into a room of peace and solitude, the freedom of thinking, the justice of truth. The laws of science meant opportunity to him, solid ground on which his mental feet could propel him forward in a slow, sure sprint. He folded his diagram and closed it in his book. Tomorrow was the in-class dissection. His diagram was perfect.

He went to sleep, holding his toy gun under his pillow.

* * *

Jonathan woke at a hoarse scream, a screeching breath that reached from a dream into reality. He opened his eyes and heard quick steps tapping the street below. It was three in the morning. Another breath whistled, too scared for a voice to come out.

"Get that pussy, get that pussy!" said several voices. Hard steps converged from several directions in the street below. He heard a door being rattled, and a desperate whimper.

He jumped out of the blankets and kneeled, looking out the window. A young mulatto girl ran as fast as she could up the steps of the apartment building across the street. He recognized her. The pretty girl tried to scream again. Nothing came out, just the hoarse breath. She tried the door. It was locked, of course.

Behind her rushed feet and snickering voices. "Get that pussy, get that pussy!" Two men approached from the right side of the moonlit street, four from the left, a car rolling behind them. They grabbed her. "No!" the pretty girl pleaded in a loud, voiceless breath.

Jonathan wanted to shout. The rage and fear inside him made him dizzy and sick. The car screeched to a halt in front of the steps.

"OK, get her down, man! Get her in!" They threw her in the car, bashing her head on the doorframe, and she cried as they all got in. The car squealed down the slick street.

The street was silent.

Jonathan's heart pounded and pounded.

He stared at the ceiling.

There was no phone.

What could he have done, all by himself?

It happened all the time.

What could he do?

He knew the girl. She was about his age, fourteen or fifteen. She was very pretty. He had fantasized about saving her from the street, swinging down on a wire and pulling her out of the chasm of the projects up to his hidden attic high above with his supercomputers and super weapons against the scum. But it was a dream.

The cops wouldn't help her. They busted her instead. And if she went to them, she'd be dead as soon as they looked the other way. She was gang property, and she was always on drugs.

There was little else for a girl that pretty, young, and poor to do to wipe out the violence that converged on her. The scum ruled here, and they ruled her in particular.

They had the money and the guns and most of the cops in one hand, and the dope that was the antidote to the terror they caused in the other.

He wasn't sure what gang got her this time. No one might ever see her again if it was the wrong gang. No one would care, but him, because she was a Fly whore. She was illegal.

She had fallen down the manhole, he thought. He squeezed his toy gun, firing bullets of rage into the guys who were raping the pretty girl he loved far away.

* * *

They passed out the specimens, packed in formaldehyde.

"All right," whispered Jonathan.

Edmund nodded. Edmund liked Jonathan. The rest of the class was a circus. Science got no worse a drubbing anywhere than in the American high school biology classroom. It was an easy science requirement. Jocks and gang members padded out the riotous class of one hundred students.

Jo-Jo was in this class, too. His lab partner was his quarterback, John Lanier. John Lanier looked up at the CSB in the long window at the top of the wall. "Hey, look! It's a bird!"

"It's a plane," said Smoke, the black linebacker.

"It's Johnny Lanieeeeer," shouted John Lanier as his mugshot rolled up the CSB in the window.

"And," shouted Jo-Jo.

"Jo-Jo Pendleton," shouted Lanier. Then he farted.

Edmund laughed.

The substitute teacher, young and frail Miss Hatch, toed toward the class after signing her name on the blackboard. She waved her arms high in an imperious intellectual's appeal for attention.

Bedlam reigned. There were perverted snickers and frantic fart noises from the ugly spazz-out runty boys with immortal boogers in their noses — genius math and chess club members. Already, John Lanier had flicked an eyeball from the baby swine he and Jo-Jo had special-ordered onto the back of one of the runty spazz-out boy's drab shirts in front of him. For the moment the ugly, greasy-haired genius, out of horror and hatred, chose to neglect it. Let the shit-heads look at it. They deserved it, like boogers and fart noises.

"Class, please!" yelled Miss Hatch. She got them for a second. Hold on, coaxed Edmund, half-heartedly rooting for her.

"Now, I know you're used to your regular teacher, but you're going to be graded on this dissection, and citizenship will count most of all. I'm going to pass out the dissection kits."

She was strong, but Edmund wondered if she was strong enough.

"Can I probe your parts, Rebecca?" whispered John Lanier out of the corner of his mouth. Rebecca wiggled and whispered to her lab partner.

"Do our football stars want these dissection kits passed out, or does the class wish to study this period in silence instead?"

John Lanier shook his head at Smoke, who shook his head at Joker. "No, ma'am, I'm sorry. The class does definitely not want to study this period in silence instead," said Joker.

There was a belch of laughter, but Miss Hatch let it go as if she had total submission. The kits were passed out by a sympathetic, very drab girl. She was an excellent track runner who could have been pretty, but who deliberately drabbed down and wore bowl-cut hair. At least she had the guts to help pass out the dissection kits, thought Edmund.

"I've got my own," said Jonathan. Edmund saw the deluxe leather dissection kit Jonathan was unzipping on the white-speckled black formica lab counter. "It's much better. Here, I'll show you what's what in this thing. I've dissected these before. Dead snakes and a cat, even." Jonathan nodded. "I bought this kit a year ago." He unfolded the sharp, detailed diagram of a frog he had prepared for them. Jonathan Holmes waved a hand over the display of surgical instruments. "It's too bad the frog isn't alive. We could pith its brain and see its heart beating. Wow, is that something to see!"

Edmund smiled. He grunted appreciatively, like Watson to this unlikely Holmes.

Chandraya, the Christian Punk chick, marched through the aisles pinning buttons on black kids. She came to Jonathan and stuck a button

on his sweater. Jonathan stopped her. "What is this?" he said. He took it off and turned it so he could read it.

"Non-White African-Americans for NSP Earth Animals."

Jonathan puzzled over the button. "No," he said, giving it back to Chandraya.

"What's wrong with you, man?" Chandraya yelled. "Dissecting is vivisecting!"

"I don't want that button," said Jonathan, turning back to his diagram.

"Fuck off, Chandraya," said Edmund.

Chandraya just stared at Jonathan. "OK, Tommy!"

"Frogs have one of the most analogous biologies to Man, except for all the reproductive fatty tissue stuff," Jonathan said to Edmund. "Human embryos resemble polliwogs very closely in one early stage."

Edmund wished Jonathan would keep his serious words low; this was biology lab!

Jonathan handed Edmund his sharp German scalpel and then crucified the pickled frog with long stainless steel pins beaded with blue glass, two in each splayed hand and foot. "Cut from here to here." He traced from the bottom of the jaw to the groin with his finger. This was the man Edmund would trust to cut his appendix out. "Just slice a slot under the chin and use the scissors after that." He started laying out his tools.

There was no real instruction now that the real thing was here. The kids were on their own, more or less. They were to write a little identification paper, lab notes in a faint form, describing how they felt about their experience. Miss Hatch threw her hands up and let them go where they would.

The din was uproarious. A hundred teenagers had little dead bodies and butchering instruments. Miss Hatch began to show the fatal signs of panic. Pig anatomy was airborne, in tiny increments. The runty boy geniuses wiggled the pieces of their frogs and tore at them in spastic ecstasy. To them, they were little models of football players and gangbangers stuck with pins in their brains and pencils up their noses. Girls who found piglet giblets in their hair flung frog guts back in hysteria. Still, to Edmund's amazement, he and Jonathan continued their dissection without interruption, and for Jonathan, without distraction.

Edmund didn't expect it to last, but it did. He watched Jonathan's hands working methodically and heard his voice narrating the procedure as body parts hit and bounced off the counter.

"Hey, Mute," shouted Jo-Jo.

To Edmund's surprise, Jonathan looked around.

"Hey, Idiot Boy," said John Lanier.

In the corner of his eye Edmund saw John Lanier's arm swing. He would have blocked it if it wouldn't have deflected into Jonathan, but a baby pig's head hit the crucified frog on the dissection pad and crushed it.

Jonathan froze. He set his tools down and looked where the frog had fallen. He walked over and pulled out his pins, leaving the broken cadaver on the floor. He replaced the pins in his kit and closed it without a word. Then he crumpled the diagram he had made with one, emotionless gesture, and dropped it into the waste can by his stool.

Jonathan stared blank-faced at the blackboard.

The teacher gave everyone a "C," because it was each citizen's duty to keep his neighbor's behavior in check, and if they didn't, they must all pay equally. "That's life," she shrugged, laughing.

* * *

"OK, Edmund. The moment of truth! The next President of the United States!" His father gloated as he changed to the clearest network. He swigged his beer. "Yep! We're going to see a few changes in this damn country now!"

Edmund shrugged, but he was afraid. He expected the politician to come out with machine guns firing. Maybe he should have six beers so he could cheer Pete Parson on, too.

"OK, here it goes. Shut up, shut up! Listen to the man." His father turned the volume way up.

"My fellow Americans, I have heard your mandate, the world has heard your mandate, and as your newly elected President, I will deliver it with persistence, optimism, kindness, and fairness to all peoples in this great land without discriminating against those who have been singled out for race, creed, color, handicap, sex, occupation, sexual preference, age, privilege, poverty, or any of the myriad ways people are so often persecuted by others who would deny them their full opportunity to enjoy the American Dream."

Applause erupted from the crowd.

"And furthermore, I will fight to restore decency in this great land. From drug use, to cigarette use, to guns, to vice and the black market, and even, I hope, to alcohol, sugar, meat, soda pop and automobiles I intend to gather the nation's groups and commit every effort to suppress and ultimately eradicate these physically destructive forces in our society. I seek to restore not only America's physical health, but also its spiritual health! And tonight I ask every American to make that small sacrifice of his indulgences in order to restore the moral health of the nation, as well. I take each and every vote cast for this presidency as a sign of frustration with the status quo, which has failed to make any real progress on the

problems crippling our society, and as an endorsement of the strength of the measures for which the National Security Party stands. It's high time that God, country, family, tradition, heritage, community, decency, and the work ethic find their way back into art, college campuses, movies, television, books, and music. Today, I say that not only businessman, but also the artist must bear the responsibility of a moral society!"

A nervous, overwrought applause cooled off the red-hot politician. There were many Hollywood stars in the audience, clapping in close-up.

Ed Green felt a strange knot forming in the pit of his stomach and he frowned over his beer at the President.

"No man should fear that society is too selfish to supply him with subsistence, a job, a home, a skill, an education, healthcare, and childcare on the one hand — and a moral society, intellectual guidance, decent leadership, moral art, and mental health on the other. The National Security Party joins the hands of each American in a prayer that has finally been heard. My fellow Americans, we are now bestowing all of these benefits I spoke of upon the inmates of our correctional institutions. Convicts receive every one of these benefits! Isn't it time that we consider these the basic rights of *all Americans*?"

The crowd erupted in a volcanic ovation.

The tall, carefully ageless, menacingly neighborly man cocked one elbow out, his hands fingering the edge of the podium with imperious neutrality. A deeply religious man who never drank or smoked, he now smiled a soft, folksy smile. "For these are truly the rights of every man and woman, no matter what race or creed he or she may belong to, no matter his or her abilities or age, no matter what man or woman would hold these human rights back from him or her, young or old, black, brown or white, in these progressive United States of America." Applause, of course.

"The important resources of this country have fallen into disarray. Tonight, I say to you that this administration will strengthen its control over the nation's forests, coastlines, rivers, harbors, deserts, air, lakes, environment, wildlife, roads, schools, banks, securities and bond markets, industries, utilities, hospitals, medicine, sciences, television, movies, books, and arts."

An avalanche of applause.

"Comprehensive slush funds will be established to include all members of every industry, every science, and every art where harm by negligence and irresponsibility may damage or undermine our precious American resources. Everyone must bear equally the responsibility for these natural and cultural resources, and this administration will see to it that everyone, by law, will indeed be responsible not only for himself, but for his neighbor, as well. That, my friends, is the difference between *Just Say No* and *Just Say Don't!*"

He paused for applause and got thunder, instead.

“Shall America forget any of these concerns individuals have so obviously forgotten as they consume themselves in work? My fellow Americans, as your newly elected President of your United States, I am compelled to witness the truth of our time: the age of the individual has ended. He was given his trial, and he is guilty. He cannot attend to the needs of our time! Indeed, his freedom has damaged us. His selfishness has failed us. Look what the individual has done with his freedom! But now, America has spoken, and America doesn’t want him to do drugs anymore! America doesn’t want him to smoke cigarettes anymore! America doesn’t want him to own guns anymore! America doesn’t want him to drink alcohol anymore. America doesn’t want him to drive cars anymore! America doesn’t want him to feed his greed anymore!”

“Sorry, Edmund,” said his father as the people on TV roared with applause.

Edmund saw John Mack clapping firmly and nodding as the camera panned to him.

“It is time to embark on a new mission, with a new vision,” proclaimed the quintessential politician. “Our founding fathers were inspired, my fellow Americans, but they underestimated the willingness of Americans to be social citizens. This administration will not fail to recognize our progressive values or to take the full responsibility for seeing them implemented to the fullest degree!”

Edmund felt paralyzed. “Hail to the Chief,” he murmured. He went to his room and stared at his book. He couldn’t think of a single thing to write or a single reason to write it.

* * *

Ellen stared, slackjawed, at the television screen.

“Bravo!” said her mother, swallowing her Dom Perignon.

“To the President-Elect,” toasted her father.

The champagne glass clinked twice in her hand.

“Well, dear, we made it.” Her father kissed her mother.

The phone rang.

“Hello?” He put his hand over the phone. “It’s Thad Pendleton! Yes indeed, Thad, what did I tell you? He does, he does, very Presidential! He’s gonna shake some trees, that’s for sure! This time the public’s behind it. What? Absolutely!” He held his hand over the phone again: “He wants to know if we’re throwing an Inauguration Party,” he laughed to her mother. “Are we throwing a party? Gee, I don’t know. Of course, you’re invited! Get your wife to call Betty. It’ll be too big an

affair to plan by herself! Looks like I'll need that tan after all, Thadster. OK, talk to you later!"

Her father came over to her, his cheeks rosy. "Jo-Jo says hi, darling. Well, little Princess, you and Jo-Jo will make a date, for the party, right?"

She didn't say anything.

"You know how Thad loves you, darling." He laughed, rubbing her head.

"Yeah?"

"Give me a great big hug, Mom," he said. Her parents waltzed around the living room, laughing as the crowds cheered on the TV to a worn-out replay of "Happy Days Are Here Again."

* * *

"Well, Jo-Jo, that's it, boy!" Thad Pendleton slapped his son on the back.

Jo-Jo nodded, happiness stirring his senses faintly, on the outside. This was evidently going to mean good things for him. "Yeah, all right, Dad."

"You bet!" Thad Pendleton squeezed Jo-Jo's shoulder, welling over with confidence and happiness for his son. "I love you, son. This is great news. To President Pete Parson!"

His wife Barbara and his youngest son toasted the President.

Jo-Jo wished he could leave, now that everything was arranged, so he could Fly up on Lookout Ridge. He would have to wait a little bit, though. "All right, Dad," he said. "Great! Can I go out with Johnny and Sammy now?"

"Just a second, son. I want to talk to you in my office."

Jo-Jo followed his father into his study and sat in the chair before his big, dark desk.

"Jo-Jo, it looks like our man is going to the White House. You know what that means?"

"What?" Jo-Jo shrugged.

"It probably means that the Middletown League of Future Leaders will become the National League of Future Leaders, son. And as vice president of the first chapter, you're going to be in a very good position. You'll learn to appreciate the importance of belonging to the right associations, in time. But take it from me, there's practically nothing more important." Thad Pendleton interlocked his fingers on the desk. "Scholarships and special consideration for all kinds of key positions, from fraternities to political institutions. All of it will be easier for you now because of this title, so don't blow it. You'll need all that pull to run

the business when you take over from me. I want you to realize the importance of this membership, and I want to make sure you understand. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

"Yes, sir."

Thad stretched back in his chair impatiently. "Tom got Sheriff Buchanan to give you a break last time, Jo-Jo. And Betty got Ms. Monroe to give you special consideration for the Honors English class. Your grades aren't too hot in that class, but you have to stick with it. At least one honors class is required if you're to be an executive member of the League. Now, I'm glad Ellen is helping you in school, but what are you doing about the other thing?"

"Dad, I'm OK. Have I been doing any drugs around here?"

"No. You haven't, son, and you God damned better not. If I find that you're getting into that crap after the strings I pulled to get you out of that last thing, I sure as Hell don't ever want to find out that's happening, again, God damn it! Son, this is very important, to you and to the business. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes!"

"Good. Now how are you and Ellen doing?" Thad smiled proudly at his son.

"Fine. She's acting a little strange lately, but she always does, a little."

"Really? Hmm. Well, I know, son, she's a bit flighty. So was your mother. Ellen's quite a doll, don't you think? What a sweetheart! I'd sure like to see the two of you get married someday, son. I really hope to see that."

"Yeah, Dad. I know."

"All right. No man is one man, Jo-Jo. I know you've heard me say that before, but you're going to need as many friends in high places as you can get. So just do as I say, and don't get into any trouble, all right?"

"Yeah, Dad. OK." Jo-Jo smiled bashfully. "Thanks."

"You bet, no problem at all. You know I love you, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know."

"All right. You go with Johnny and the boys and have a good time. Say hi to Johnny for me, OK?"

"I will."

"OK, 'atta boy!"

Thad watched his perfect, strapping son run athletically out of his den to meet his perfect, strapping friends, feeling a paternal pride and power that rewarded the long years of work and the many investments in people he had made through the years.

* * *

Edmund scuffed down gray streets of Middletown, burrowing his hands in the pockets of his overcoat, perspiring in the muggy heat of this strange autumn. It was Saturday, and he was going for a haircut. The President-Elect's speech rang in his mind. Pimps, pushers, Johns, tricks, and gangsters stepped casually in and out of the buildings, conducting their business all around him. Sleazy cops hovered around a few corners, gabbing, threatening, and rolling on by. Poor Jonathan lived somewhere around here, he thought.

Four liquor stores in two blocks had sprung up on Broadway, already looking like they'd been there for decades. A new sign had appeared on Mr. Dusett's pharmacy window. Closing sales were the only way to compete with the black market's prices. The stores on Broadway were dying off, boarded up and shut down, sprayed with graffiti, claimed by the streets, inhabited by Fly dealers, pimps and bums, destroyed by vandals. Some were finally bulldozed to make space for huge, gray government offices and "youth centers" with 3D vid-games and counselors and community service programs. Those that remained mostly sold escape: videos, porno, torn clothes, booze, bongos, music discs — to eager kids who thought that was life now, who thought that was freedom. Naturally, Bills were moving through the legislature to outlaw all of it. Then entertainment would join the bullet-riddled black market with all the other cheap and dangerous and illegal and now necessary things.

If they could outlaw the will inside each person, thought Edmund, then they could finally put the fire out. If they could take everyone's brain out of everyone's head and replace it with a standard part, with a little machine, everyone would be predictable, manageable, and controllable. Everyone's essays and houses and businesses would be exactly the same. But there would be no need for the machine then, thought Edmund. No need for anything.

* * *

That afternoon, his hair freshly shorn, he opened his leatherbound writing book and wrote:

The problem is: When someone is good at something, something else gets credit — talent, luck, good fortune, good genes. If someone does wrong, he doesn't get the blame, either. Instead something else is blamed — a stage, the Devil, insanity, hormones, drugs, guns, music, TV, etc.

He nodded, humming as he smirked at the CSB in the window, feeling as though he were defusing it now with his mind.

To the machine, there is no virtue or vice because there is no soul — there is no such thing as free will.

Edmund threw a dart perfectly into the center of the bull's eye and lay back, laughing. He was only seventeen, and he could see it! He looked at the CSB churning in his bedroom window, and even as he wished it would happen, even as he defused the machine in his mind, the tower started strobing like a Roman candle. It went black, and a gray swirl of smoke twisted around it. Tall green letters rose up its sides.

EDMUND

“Man!” he gasped, grabbing the window and opening it to see the words more clearly as the next line rose:

YOU ARE NOT INVISIBLE TO ME!

“No way,” he breathed. “No way!”

LOOK IN THE BACK OF YOUR BOOK

He stared as the tower went dark and the sky seemed to light up gray above it.

With shaking hands, he took his book and slowly flipped the pages to the back. On the last page, in blue ink, was somebody else's handwriting:

Find the tomb of Sumner.

S.H.

* * *

After dinner, the TV news rolled on in the living room as his parents sat, vicariously participating in the world. Edmund's mind was a trillion lightyears elsewhere.

“Are you a Pack Rat? A coalition for Pack Rat Rights launched a nationwide protest asking for treatment programs they say the government has long denied them.”

No way, he didn't look up.

"And in New York, officials are still investigating the disappearance of robotics genius Sapphire Hunt, whose escape from solitary confinement has left prison personnel baffled. Her escape, described as impossible by security experts, must have occurred during the early hours of the morning, and... "

"Who does this gal think she is, anyway?" said his father. "She doesn't think she owes everything's she's ever gotten to this country? Where else could she get so rich, anyway? She burns down her factories and laboratories when America needs all her robotics shit, and puts all those people out of work, right here in Middletown! Plus, she's just jeopardizing our safety by screwing with China!"

"What else did she do?" asked Edmund, trying to derail his father's invective.

"Well, she sure made President Hooper look bad, but that was pretty easy to do. And she's sabotaged the whole damn country. She's gonna let the Japs get way ahead of us. Hell, the Russians will now. And now she escaped from jail? Right! Pete Parson won't let this kind of thing happen after he's sworn in, you can bet on that. These mega-billionaires really think they're something. You can't let people get that rich. They think they own the world! If I had her money, I sure wouldn't use it to screw everybody."

Edmund heard the TV in the background. "For the second time in the last month, the CSB Towers in every city across the nation were commandeered by a mysterious saboteur."

Edmund froze.

"A different individual in every city was addressed by first name only, and authorities are concerned, since the list of names addressed by the bizarre messages totals over fifty thousand. Speculation of an underground conspiracy, completely unknown to officials, is buzzing throughout the law enforcement community, and certain conspiracy theorists are saying 'I told you so!'"

Edmund looked at the CSB in the living room window. There were others in other cities?

"Oh, Edmund, I wish you could take my shoe into town to get it fixed. The repair shop is open on Sunday. The heel broke and I have no other nice shoes in the house," said Edmund's mother.

"All right." He looked at his mother, who must have chafed her soul for forty years to make a face that looked so much like a callus. Long ago, thought Edmund, her foundation had sunken and buckled, like the heel of her shoe. Ever since he had embarrassed her in church, she had withdrawn to an unforgiving distance where she had been suffering stoically and perpetually and punishingly.

“And remember, your second cousin Kimberly from Minnesota is coming to visit us on November twenty-seventh. So try to help Dad fix the house up. We haven’t had company in a while and I don’t want my cousin Elizabeth to find out what kind of shape it’s in. I want you to mail this letter to Kimberly tomorrow.”

“OK, Mom.”

He went to his room and stared out the window.

His mind raced with an alien drug called hope, which seemed far more dangerous than all the rest.

* * *

Tom Neville was campaigning even now at the dinner table.

Good God, no, thought Ellen. She lit a black market Russian cigarette and blew a smoke ring over his head, smiling prettily. He didn’t notice. He didn’t notice the glitter she had sprinkled on her cleavage, or her geisha makeup, or her gold lipstick. If she came to the dinner table in a leopard-skin G-string with electrician’s tape on her nipples, he would probably smile and pat her head.

She closed her eyes and tried to wring his words out of her head. Nothing was making sense, after what Edmund said to her: “You are life, Ellen!” It resonated through her head.

“Do you really think you can stop drugs?” she muttered, distracted.

“I do, indeed, honey! Now that Pete Parson is President, this country will finally get serious about the War on Drugs.”

Ellen laughed. “I’ve heard that since I was a baby, Dad. Grow up!” She had never trusted her father or the fate he had in mind for her. She felt she had nothing to do with it, as though she were in some Russian novel and her parents were taking care of all those little things like her future. She trusted nothing, which was why she had enslaved herself to fashion. It was a refuge, a camouflage of cloth, dye, leather, and paint, a code that changed before it could be decoded.

But as her thoughts came back to Edmund, the one who had seen her hiding, she felt an impulse to strip everything off in order to meet him on his own, clean level. It confused her. She wore the uniform as a protest, not a preference, and she was not ashamed of that protest. She just hadn’t expected to find someone real...

“Little girl, if American resources are seriously committed —”

“What? Like more guns, more prisons, more cops, more helicopters?” She shook her head at him. “It won’t work. It doesn’t matter how much of everyone’s money you spend, it just won’t work.”

He smiled and sipped his wine, laughing a practiced, political luncheon laugh. “Little girl, no matter how much money it takes, it’s the best investment in America’s future anyone could make.”

“The more you and your friends crack down, Dad, the more people will want to take drugs.”

“Oh!” He laughed heartily and glanced at her mother in surprise. “Princess, the kind of people we’re fighting now are murderers — hardened criminals who are very powerful. Innocent people are being killed. Hundreds of cops every year. Don’t you think we owe it to them to win this war?”

“I think you’re crazy, Dad. Is anyone getting killed over your chardonnay? You’re making sleazy gangbangers rich, and everyone else poor!”

“Now listen to me —”

She had finally nicked a nerve, and she smiled.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but these drugs are being peddled by ruthless gangs. They’re potent, addicting, expensive, and dangerous, they are immediately available to kids, and they’re making the lowest sort of men rich! These drugs are the poison that is killing this country.”

“Drugs are the antidote, Dad. To the war on this, and the war on that, and the whole fucking war on everyone. Drugs fake happiness. You should pass them out with all your programs.”

“I’ll tell you what —”

“Dear, let’s not get into this,” said her mother.

“No! I’ll tell you what! People who use drugs, Ellen, are the enemy. They’re just as responsible for the innocent blood running in our gutters as anyone else! That’s why I’m pushing for mandatory government service for our young people! These kids need some discipline!”

“So you’re going to throw everyone in prison, huh, Dad? To teach them a little discipline?”

“If that’s what it takes!” he shouted and pounded the table.

“God! Why are you doing all this?”

“Are you crying? What has gotten into you?”

“You want me to be some society woman, sweet and stupid, standing next to you, justifying everything with my pretty face. God! I think you may have ruined me already!” She wouldn’t have cared if all existence were wiped out in that instant.

“What? Baby, how could I ruin you?” asked her father, pale and truly concerned now.

“What have I done to myself? Look at me! Look, look, *look* at me, Dad!”

“What do you mean, sweetheart?”

“God! I wear these clothes, I cover my face and do this —“ she caught her breath between sobs — “to my hair. It’s because I hate it! I hate what you want, what the whole world seems to want. I hate what you’re doing, I hate it, it’s a prison, it’s stupid, and you keep making it worse, and what you are telling me — me, your *daughter!* — what you want me to be, what you think I should be happy with... Oh, God, I need to think!” She turned and gripped her forehead. “When are you and Mom leaving for Hawaii?”

“Kauai. November twenty-second, Honey.”

“You’ll be gone for my birthday?”

“Yes, Darling, but you can throw a party while we’re gone.”

“I’ll think about things while you’re gone.”

“OK,” he said.

“Excuse me.” Ellen threw her napkin on her plate and rose.

“Ellen, Dear,” said her mother.

“Yes, Mom?”

“Remember to pick up your ballet slippers at Mr. Hohner’s tomorrow.”

“Yes, Mom.” Ellen left.

Betty Neville looked at her husband and swallowed the rest of her wine, closing her eyes and smiling for him. “It’s OK, Dear. She’s got to get ready for the dance. Let her get ready, now.”

He nodded. He hoped that with some time to think, she would come around and snap out of this crazy stage. It could be her period, he thought optimistically.

Tom pardoned his daughter when he saw her dressed for the dance. She was a jewel set in a Sapphire silk, off-the-shoulder gown. Her blonde hair and rainbow bangs, blue eyes, hot pink eyeliner, metallic gold lipstick and white face-paint, were stunning, smashing. His daughter was going out with his frat brother’s son! Betty took pictures of them both at the doorstep. Then they piled into the limousine and snorted some coke.

Jo-Jo mauled her in the back of the limo, in front of John Lanier and Jennifer Bowlings. She focused her mind far away and giggled to establish the cover, and the excuse, of an airhead.

She knew there was no way to avoid sex that night without Jo-Jo blowing the whistle. She needed a little more time. She kept thinking about Edmund, the last question mark in the galaxy. She couldn’t give up before finding out.

Jo-Jo pulled her dress down far enough for John Lanier to see her nipple. Ellen saw them wink at each other.

She closed her eyes, receding into herself. One night, she thought — it would buy her some time.

* * *

He pushed the shop door open with a flurry of jingling bells, like silver watchdogs leashed to the doorframe on a chrome rod. Edmund smiled at their frantic yet cheerful warning to the shopkeeper.

A TV was blurring: “...promising to set up slush funds that would—” An old man turned it off with a quick hand and looked up.

Edmund recognized the owner as soon as he rose. He had seen the bald, bespectacled old man on the path to the cemetery on his hill, whistling to a bluebird on a branch. It was out of an old movie. He turned to Edmund and said “*Guten Tag!*” with a smile that underscored his words so unassumingly it seemed a separate entity from the man, pure and indestructible. It reflected a soul, plainly and honestly, and a miracle of happiness on a well-weathered human face. The old man smiled as he recognized Edmund, adjusting bright silver glasses that ended in two bars of short, silvery hair above his ears. “Ah, *mein Herr!* What may I do for you today?”

“*Meine Mutters Schuhe brachten ein... ein...*”

“*Ausbesserung?* Ah! Well, *Gut!* *Sie sprechen Deutsch!*” The old man’s spectacles flashed eagerly as he leaned forward over the counter.

“*Ein Bisschen!*” protested Edmund, laughing. “*Zwei Jahren.*” Edmund pointed vaguely towards the high school where he had completed almost two years of German. He had pulled bored B’s, but could barely speak it at all. He had learned how to say “only a little,” though.

“*Gut* pronunciation. Ah. So. A minor repair on this tiny little woman’s shoe? Your *Mutter* *ist* a very tiny woman, *nicht wahr?*”

“*Ja,*” nodded Edmund, smiling. He had never thought of his mother as a small woman. She was, though, he now realized.

“I can fix it in ten minutes. Will you wait? I have coffee.”

Edmund laughed deferentially but impulsively nodded.

“*Gut!* I’ll work on this counter and you can watch. Maybe you can be a *gut* cobbler yourself some day. They would have to assign me an apprentice, though, so I’m sorry about that. So silly, eh? Oh well, you watch. Our secret.” He winked.

Smiling in surprise, Edmund watched his old brown hands.

“My hands are permanently this color. You see them? It is from dying the leather. They’re my gloves. They match my shoes. See? I make shoes for the rich, who still want handmade shoes. In Germany I dyed much leather, too. When I was your age. Or a little younger, *ja.*”

“You make a living by making shoes?”

“*Nein.* Across town, there is this big company that makes crappy shoes. Here, I repair Pendleton’s shoes. I make a good business, eh? Ha!

But I love cobbling.” He said this last with such confidence that he and Edmund laughed.

“Do you really?”

“Of course! It’s my life.” Mr. Hohner worked leisurely, yet economically. “In every shoe, I put two soles — my own and its own. That is a *gut* joke, eh? Ha! But it’s true, *Junge*. My soul walks down many roads! There is another one. Ha! No one can put more of himself into a shoe than I. My wife, I’m afraid sometimes she must use a shoehorn to get me to bed!” Another silver scale of laughter filled the little, shoe-walled shop.

Edmund laughed and shook his head. “Um, how old are you?”

“Me? Are you ready? I am ninety-nine. *Ja*.”

“Wow! I mean, cool!”

“*Ja*,” said the man.

“Do you ever wish,” Edmund began wistfully, but he stopped, embarrassed.

“*Was ist das!* Speak up. You can say it, boy!”

“Do you ever wish you were rich?”

Mr. Hohner stopped his working and a low, ominous “ooooh,” emerged from his lips. “Rich? Like who do you mean?”

“Well, like Sapphire Hunt is rich. You know her?”

“Yes. I know her.” The man smiled, looking at him as though he knew what he was up to. “Rich like Hunt? *Nein!*” He grunted, and he continued to work.

“Well, my dad wishes he was rich, but he doesn’t like rich people. Why don’t you want to be rich?”

“Because, boy, to be rich like Hunt, I would have to do what she did. It must be that, boy. It’s not just money. Money is something you do, not something you just get, unless someone else got it for you.”

Edmund smiled. “Huh. That’s just what I think.”

“Everyone hates Sapphire Hunt now. But if they tried to make me give tanks to China to kill Chinese, I’d burn my factory down, too. By the way, if you sweep up my store, I will give you fifty dollars. Do you want to be fifty dollars richer?”

“Sure!”

“OK, then.” Mr. Hohner winked and then sneezed into his hanky. He sighed, putting the hanky back in his shirt pocket. “Just our secret.”

“Just this once,” winked Edmund.

“*Gut!* A democracy of opportunity, boy. An aristocracy of achievement. Those are Thomas Jefferson’s words. *Gott* damn it, I didn’t come here for Karl Marx! There are plenty of places to go for that.”

Edmund swept the floor, looking at the old German cobbler as he worked. “What was America like when you were young, Mr. Hohner?”

“You know, kid, when I was young — when America was young — I’m so glad you ask it. The kids did all kinds of things in these streets right out here for money — any price, eh, no laws, *ja*, selling fruit and pies and chickens — even frogs they caught, for money, *ja!*” He shook his old head. “When booze was illegal there were gangs and there were machine guns, and the kids went bad. But that all changed as soon as those laws were taken away. Then America filled up with so many more laws, and the kids — the kids filled up with the drugs, and all the crime came back. They started killing again. Kids were happier before! So much energy, running around, making all their plans, working so hard, thinking ahead, dreaming and falling in love, racing each other up and down this street right out here outside my shop, wearing out their shoes, *ja*. Business was good! The kids used to brag about their ideas, Edmund, *ja?* Their big ideas. Not their crimes.” He shook his head, a warning in his old eyes. “Now it’s all muscles, no brains.”

“The government thinks for everyone now,” said Edmund. “The Big Brain.”

“The government is a muscle, not a brain. It doesn’t think, it just stops people from thinking!”

Edmund was amazed to find an adult saying things like this. “You’re a great old guy,” he said, using Mr. Hohner’s old push broom to sweeping the area beneath the work bench, which hadn’t been swept for some time, and he got under the counter where a lot of ancient trash had accumulated.

“Oh, thank you, thank you,” said Mr. Hohner, surprised. “I’m not great, I’m just old, and my eyes have seen too much.” He winked and looked back down at Edmund’s mother’s shoe.

Edmund smiled at him. “I’ll save the world. Don’t worry, Mr. Hohner.”

“*Gut*, boy! I believe you.” He laughed, gently. “You’re a *gut* sweeper, too!” Mr. Hohner nodded, grinning a tall grin. “What’s your name? You’re not like the other kids, are you?”

Ellen Neville opened the door and was startled by a wild reception of jingling bells. She curled her lips at the rattling silver things, and was startled to see Edmund Green behind the counter of the shop.

He was sweeping or something.

She took her eyes off him and looked at the shopkeeper. She was glad she had a conveniently bitchy purpose to shield her beating heart. “I’m here to pick up my ballet slippers,” she said, with exaggeratedly blind audacity.

“Well, well, my dear. Sit down. That’s why I put the stools at my counter. Some coffee? How about some mocha-Java ice coffee!”

“OK.”

Still somewhat startled to see Ellen, Edmund said nothing, even to himself.

Mr. Hohner had somehow coaxed Ellen into it. She sat on the soft leather stool and Mr. Hohner placed a very adult coffee in a very nice big clay cup in front of her with his old hands. The shop used to be a malt shop eighty years ago. This was good, she thought suddenly. She would be able to find out what Edmund Green was doing while she drank the cold coffee. She couldn't appear out of character.

Edmund finished sweeping the workshop floor and put the filings and scraps in the trash can. He felt Ellen watching and continued monastically, knowing what it was worth to him, even if to her it must seem beggarly.

But Ellen was looking at the shrewd movements of his arms, the proud bend to scoop up the fillings, and the deft, single tap on the edge of the can. Edmund took a fifty-dollar bill from Mr. Hohner, under the counter and out of eyeshot of Ellen, who emphatically praised the job he had done. As he left, nodding to Ellen as he passed her, she covered the book in her purse — *The Pocket Aristotle*. She grabbed an envelope in her purse. "Wait! Edmund!"

Edmund turned.

"Here," she handed him the envelope, casually.

He looked straight into her eyes for a long moment and then took the envelope. He shrugged and left, not wanting to show her any foolish hope.

"Here are your shoes. Perfectly matched to your feet. Please try them on, my dear."

"I will at home. Who was that? The young man you employ here?"

"Oh, his name is Edmund. He's the best sweeper I've had. Very intelligent young man. But you must know him, Ellen?" Mr. Hohner laughed. "Just sit down on the chair, there." Mr. Hohner rounded the corner and positioned his chair in front of her, setting down the slippers and bending to undo the laces of her Pendletons.

"Do you know anything about him?"

"*Der Herr?*" Mr. Hohner looked at her. "Well, I know only a little. Are you working for Equal Practices now, Ellen? Demographic Eligibility maybe? Apprentice Enrollment? Child Labor?"

"No! I'm just wondering. What do you know about him?"

Mr. Hohner took a sealed letter from the counter. "Oops! He left something. He must have wanted to mail it. To Miss Kimberly Nussbaum. I better call him. Or should I mail it? I'll have to call him, maybe."

"What else?" Ellen insisted.

"You like him, maybe, eh?"

She hung her head.

“What’s wrong, dear?”

“Oh nothing.” She scrambled to change the subject. “It’s just math, Mr. Hohner. I’m just burning out on math.”

“Why?”

She looked at him in surprise. “It’s just pointless,” she sighed. “Everything’s pointless.”

“Math? Pointless?” Mr. Hohner pulled a paper napkin from his pocket and flattened it on the table by Ellen’s chair. He put three points on the napkin with a felt-tip pen. “Arithmetic for measuring one dimension — one, two, three,” he counted. He drew a triangle between the points. “Geometry and trigonometry for measuring two dimensions, like this!” Then he wadded up the napkin. “And calculus and analytic geometry for measuring three dimensions, even this napkin, in motion.” He tossed it to her.

She caught it. “Yeah...”

“So since we can turn everything into numbers, we can use algebra to boil it down to formulas for how everything works. You see?”

“Yeah!” Ellen laughed. “I’ve never really heard it tied together like that.” She squeezed the napkin in her hand. She laughed in soft misery. “Thank you!”

“You mean your teachers never told you?”

“They just dish out the next problem, Mr. Hohner.”

He dabbed his eyes and shook his head, putting his glasses back on, and he stooped to fit her ballet slippers.

Ellen kissed his head, leaving a crown of gold lips on his bald spot. She got up and walked around in her ballet slippers.

“How do they feel?”

“Perfect,” she said, standing on a toe. She pirouetted. “Did you say her name was Kimberly Nussbaum?” She danced toward him.

Mr. Hohner blinked. “Oh, the letter?”

“Yes.”

“Ja!”

“Can I please have the letter, Mr. Hohner. I can give it to Edmund. I see him in class tomorrow.”

“Well... Why, my dear? Do you like Edmund, maybe? You have a class with him, too? Why don’t you just talk to him, Ellen?”

“Because I can’t. The letter will give me an excuse.”

“My dear, you do like him, or you hate him very much! How can I be sure?” Mr. Hohner frowned.

Ellen thought a moment. “Oh, I’m sorry!” she said. “Please forget it. It’s impossible. Everything’s impossible!” She rushed toward the door in her ballet slippers.

“Oh, my child, come back.” After all his years, he was still a sucker for a woman’s tears.

She turned.

“Oh, come here,” he said.

She tiptoed to the counter.

“You can give him the letter.” He winced.

She took it. “Thank you!”

She left the store in a flurry of fluorescent colors, ringing the bells on his door wildly and leaving old Mr. Hohner scratching his head. “Not in your ballet slippers!” he shouted, but he was too late. “Kids,” he murmured. “But good kids.” He smiled, hopefully.

* * *

She decided not to, but as soon as she got home, she steamed open the letter. It was from Edmund’s mother to his second cousin:

Dear Kimberly,

I can’t wait to see how you’ve grown up! Your mother and I haven’t seen each other in — can you believe it? — TWENTY-ONE YEARS!! You weren’t around then! All I have of you are baby pictures, so please send me a recent photo for my album. It will make it easier to spot you at the bus station! Please also send bus information, etc. Can’t wait to see you, Sweetheart! Your second cousin Edmund says “Hi!” Say hi to your mom and dad and Uncle Stewart!

— Louise Green

She resealed the letter, her mind racing. Finally, still thinking it was a crazy idea, she hurriedly penned an imaginative letter. She included a two-year-old photo of herself with her natural brown hair and green eyes, addressed it to Kimberly Nussbaum, then drove to the post office and mailed both letters. It was done.

As Ellen drove home she felt a wild electricity she had never felt inside her before; she laughed as if she and the sky were sharing a gigantic conspiracy.

* * *

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO A SCHOOL DAZE
 PARTY!!!
 NO PARENTS ALLOWED!!
 IN RAVING HONOR OF MY PARENTS' MUCH
 NEEDED
 VACATION IN KAUAI!!!!
 AND MY LAST WEEKEND OF BEING SEVENTEEN.
 A DRESS UP OR WEAR NOTHING AT ALL AFFAIR
 CALL AT 8:30 P.M.
 LIVE BAND, 5 KEGS
 TWO RENTED HOT TUBS
 PLUS ONE — BUILT-IN, BABY!
 BE THERE!!!

Ms. Ellen Neville
 213 Starlight Dr.

Edmund laughed, falling back on his bed as the aquarium light waved over him. The politician's vacuum-headed daughter was inviting him to her party?

He would go, he decided. And he would invite Jonathan to go with him, and they would check it out and have a laugh. What a joke!

* * *

Ellen stared at him in class. She had told Edmund that Mr. Hohner said to say he had mailed his mother's letter for him, and that he would know what that meant.

Edmund had shrugged. He was staring out the window at the CSB now. The bars struck down between another prisoner and her family's hands.

**YOU COULD GO TO PRISON!
 PROSTITUTION IS A CRIME!**

"And so it was necessary for the government to pass regulations limiting the exploitation by the Robber Barons," droned Ms. Winter, their Government class teacher. "Any questions?"

"I still don't get that," said Edmund.

“What, Edmund? What don’t you get?” Ms. Winter stifled her urge to roll her eyes. The Government class ground to a halt.

“Those were government railroads!”

“Government railroads?” laughed Ms. Winter.

“The text book says that Southern Pacific and the Union Pacific were given land and money and vice versa. Only one railroad, the Great Northern didn’t get a penny or an acre from the government, and didn’t exploit Chinese workers. And that’s the only one that’s not mentioned in this textbook! And when that railroad was finished, James Jerome Hill charged one nickel to go from coast to coast. Robber Barons? The reason the government passed all of its regulations was to wipe out the Northern and James Jerome Hill. It just seems like every time a Rockefeller or Hill comes along and does it better, these politicians and their business buddies get jealous and use public schools and the whole government to make him sound like some evil monster so they can rip him off, wipe him out, and take credit for what he did!”

“Edmund, you don’t have to be vulgar,” said Ms. Winter.

“God, there’s so much B.S. piled on top of itself it’s just so crazy and none of us stop to ask questions.” Edmund shook his head. “Robber Barons?” said Edmund. “That’s not history, it’s propaganda, man!”

“What about oil spills and toxic waste and bank failures, Edmund?” said Chandraya, the black punk Christian chick, lobbing all the problems of the world at him. “Your businessmen are really responsible, aren’t they?”

“What do you think the National Insurance is, Chandraya? You, Chandraya, are going to have to pay for all those oil spills and toxic waste contaminations so these companies can go right on doing it, just like the government let them get away with exploiting Chinese workers and whole towns and charging outrageous rates on railroads. Ms. Winter, can I read a little bit of Aristotle? I know it’s not part of the curriculum, but it will only take about thirty seconds. I have a quote that’s very relevant.”

Ellen leaned forward and tried to conceal her interest.

“Well, all right, Edmund,” said Ms. Winter, surprised. She actually didn’t mind this. It was a nice break from the routine, which had gone smoothly in her other three classes for the last three years.

“‘The greater the number of owners,’” Edmund read, “‘the less respect for property. People are much more careful of their own possessions than of those communally owned. They exercise care over public property only in so far as they are personally affected. Other reasons apart, the thought that someone else is looking after it tends to make them careless of it.’ He said that over two thousand years ago. And that’s why the forests and the bays and the coastlines and schools and everything else the ‘community’ owns is falling apart. Individuals care much more about property than the government does. The government

and these textbooks are always trashing individual businessmen, and that means they're putting down freedom. This is a public school, and it's just lying for the government, man! They're saying they can't trust you to be free, that all you would do is steal and pollute and starve babies and exploit people. That's a crock of shit, you guys! You gotta stick up for your own brains or they'll just replace them for you with something much worse!"

"My God, who does this guy think he is?" said Chandraya, flicking her red crucifix on her ear and shaking her head. She was appalled. She looked at the teacher with imploring eyes.

"I hope you won't put that in your essays, Edmund," smiled Ms. Winter.

"That's all this sociology crap boils down to. It's a big lie. A big excuse for all this B.S."

Ellen laughed out loud, but then looked away, covering her mouth.

"Well, Edmund, it sounds like we have a young Right-Winger in the making." Ms. Winter smiled.

Everyone laughed, relieved to finally have a name that summed Edmund up. Only Ellen knew it wasn't true and didn't laugh. Edmund was Edmund.

"No!" Edmund shouted. It silenced the class. He shook his head. "I don't like that word," he said. "You want to turn me into a thing. Right-Wingers are just as bad as Left-Wingers or NSP's. Everyone is just hiding behind all these words so they don't have to think."

"Well, Edmund, what about the word, 'individual'" asked Ms. Winter, seriously now. "You spoke of individual achievements?"

"Right."

"I think you're hiding behind that word."

"What word?"

"The 'individual,' Edmund, is a product of society as a whole. The individual is a product of genes, environment, social background, economic class, ethnic beliefs, religious and cultural values, mores, traditions and, of course, education. Even man's biological evolution is a product of society. So, in the end, everything the individual is or achieves belongs, in a sense, to the society from which he or she came."

Edmund was silenced.

The class laughed uneasily, except for Ellen.

"Do you agree with Edmund, Ellen?" asked Ms. Winter.

"No, of course not," she said, bowing her head.

Edmund turned off his mind. He was afraid that if he thought a thought, something else would take credit for it. He wanted it to get no credit, even if it meant doing nothing, thinking nothing, being nothing.

When the tin bell frantically rang, he had to go to the next class. He hated marching with everyone else inside the grinding machine, but

he clung to a feeling inside him, a feeling hard as a diamond, precious and hidden, safe and invisible.

Ellen walked slowly behind him, her heart racing.

* * *

“Party time!”

“OK. The outside heaters are working, but it’s great that we got this heat wave. The five kegs are all set up on the decks. The hot tubs are heating up and the pizza is all set out in the living room. How much money did your dad give you for this, anyway?” asked Suzy in envy.

“His Diner’s Club card,” answered Ellen, absently.

“Oh, wow! This is great, Ellen! I brought some discs. The best! I’ve got the Shit Eaters’, the Rat Fuckers, the Vampire Thieves, the Goosepimples, the Mercy Killers, the Marx Mothers —”

“I made party discs,” said Ellen. “We’re going to listen to my music.”

“Oh.” Suzy knew that when the animals got there a different authority would rule. Everyone tried to dictate their own music, but deejaying became a democracy at the high pitch of the party, and pure anarchy toward the end. “Put this on while we get ready,” she said.

“OK.”

“God! How many bedrooms are in this house?”

“Five. But Suzy, if this house is trashed, my parents will kill me.”

“Yeah, I know!”

“Besides, I have special songs picked out for him.”

“Him? Edmund? I still can’t believe you like that guy.”

“What I like is what I like.” Ellen’s eyes blazed green under her red mascara and turquoise eyebrow liner. She applied her metallic gold lipstick.

Suzy looked at her worshipfully as she put in her blue contacts. “Jo-Jo’s going to flip out when he sees you invited Edmund. Did she get the letter?”

“Yes.”

“And... !”

“We talked.”

“And?”

“It’s all arranged.”

“Oh my God! I mean, oh my God, Ellen, it’s great, but I don’t know. Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” Suzy was flushed and excited, and wanted to tell everyone, if only to find out what to think about it.

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” said Ellen as she touched up the gold on her lips. It was the first time she had ever known exactly what she was doing, even though it was the most uncertain thing she had ever done in her life. Tonight would be her death-day party. Tonight she would show Edmund the worst of everything that stood for that false person she had hidden behind and she exaggerated her Geisha make-up to the point of lunacy so that the next time Edmund saw her she would be a total stranger to him.

“What exactly are you up to?” asked Suzy.

Ellen winked.

Suzy was beside herself, and went to the windows, looking down over the terraced backyard. The band was setting up on the far end of the grass. Suzy giggled. “This’ll be one interesting party,” she said.

* * *

Edmund dressed in tight jeans, a T-Shirt, a sweater, and his overcoat. It was a perfect night.

He was psyched. He wanted to lose his virginity tonight, and to make sure of everything for that mythical girl of his dreams. Emotions were allowed to be human at parties, so anything could happen. Drugs, sex, liquor, and rock and roll presided over a party like the last vestigial rituals of the god Freedom. All minor differences boiled down to the common desire to shout and make love and dance and forget the whole shitty world. That was the reason for his dad’s Aqua Velva on his neck. He had spiked back his hair with an extra coat of gel. Anything could happen.

He called a taxi and jangled out of the house without telling his parents anything. He would tangle with them later. The first stop was Jonathan’s. The dealers tried to sell him drugs, radios, cigarettes, eggs, and non-fire retardant paint. Finally, just as shots were fired somewhere in the distance, Jonathan came down the steps, but his brothers were with him. They held him on the steps for awhile, talking something over. Then he crossed the street and got into the cab.

Edmund gave directions to the cabby, who was crudely surprised at the address.

“I got you some masking tape. For your wrist,” said Jonathan. “There’s bound to be THC in the air.”

“Oh yeah! Thanks.” Edmund took the roll and taped over the holes in the device on his wrist. “Yeah. So now, plan of action for tonight: A guy just can’t score with another guy tagging along. First rule. So we’re going to split up. I don’t know about you, but I want to get laid! If you get hassled by anyone, tell the jerk you’re my guest, and if that

doesn't work, just come and get me and I'll fix it. But don't worry. Just mix, baby! Let's look at this like an experiment. We'll compare notes afterwards. What do you think?"

"Yeah, well, OK. I don't want to follow your ass around all night."

"OK. We split up," said Edmund.

The taxi wended its way through the posh estates of the North Hills. Finally, it reached a traffic jam of sporty cars in front of a large, patrician house. Kids were running up and down the street.

"Dis must be de place."

"Yeah, here it is," said Edmund.

It was good. It was almost nine o'clock. Girls were milling about on the drive in fishnet and strap dresses and pajama tops, sexier than anything they would dare wear at school. For kids eyes only. And the guys, too, were wearing ripped shirts and some wore tights and cod-pieces and capes without shirts, and Edmund grinned: It was great!

"OK, dude. I'll see you later," said Edmund. "If we get totally separated we'll meet at the curb at one o'clock, all right?"

Jonathan smiled and walked cautiously down the driveway.

Edmund swaggered down the pavement behind him to the bass backbeat and approached the scene, self-contained, and eminently ready. This was a place to celebrate things no adult could see and every kid could.

He imagined that his face was reserved and mysterious, as he glanced hotly at the girls whom looked back, thirsty for such a mysterious glance, and left them pondering and looking after him while he moved on through the crowd to find the beer.

"Led Zeppelin," shouted Sammy Pinkowski by the keg.

"The best, too," nodded Edmund, smiling as he took the spigot from him and refilled his plastic cup. It was 'Out on the Tiles,' one of Edmund's favorites. He felt Sammy looking at him, glad and approving.

"Sammy Pinkowski, partner, what's yours?"

"Edmund Green." Edmund shook the hand of his fellow American teenager vigorously. They were both on this side of fucking paradise, and to hell with the other side. "Who put this on? This is outstanding." Edmund filled his cup with the tap.

"I did, man! You're a Punk, or something? You're cool, man, I like you," said Sammy. He was already slap-happy drunk. "Hey everybody! This is Edmund, man! He's cool!"

Edmund sipped his beer and smiled. He looked down at his cup, more interested in the plastic cup than in the girls that made the situation so pressure-packed for Sammy. Sammy saw the eye of the THC sensor glowing through tape on Edmund's wrist. It was a symbol of rebellion taken further than Sammy would like to go. Edmund was cool.

Sammy toasted Edmund, laughing. “Hey, man. Where’re you from, dude? I’ve seen you around school. Are you European or something?”

Edmund laughed. “American.”

He jived with the jocks at the keg on the deck. He carefully avoided the eyes of the girls who he felt watching him, playing it cool. He had already chosen the one girl he would glance at, and only into her eyes from that point forward. He had already seen the rest of her, and was quite painfully fixated on her noble beauty.

At that moment, he caught Ellen staring at him from the upper patio. She looked shocked before she turned back into the house. Edmund knew she would be a bitch to him and wondered again why she had invited him. Ellen was dressed even more ridiculously than ever. A walking cathouse, thought Edmund. She had wanted him to be a joke at her party, he decided. Of course, he knew he wouldn’t be. He could fit in here better than she could.

“Must have gone to different elementaries,” said Sammy, confused as he saw Edmund and Ellen exchanging glances. “Hey, so this is Joey and Bong-Breath —” Sammy laughed as a big blond kid turned around and frowned. “OK, I’m sorry, Johnny. That’s Tigerface and Biggs! This is Edmund, guys.”

They all shook his hand in formal Masonic-like handshakes.

“All right, man!” they said in turn.

“So who’s got a pipe?” said Edmund, raising his eyebrows. There was an eager scramble.

* * *

“He came too late to hear my song and he instantly started talking to Sammy and Toe-Head, and even Bong-Breath, and they love him now! He’s a fucking idiot!” said Ellen to Suzy in a desperate, secluded moment.

“You loved him an hour ago! And if he’s popular now, that’s great! What’s wrong with that? That makes the whole thing cool, Ellen,” said Suzy. “It was the only thing stopping you before.”

“Oh, Suzy.” Ellen winced. “He’s making monkeys out of them, right in front of me. That’s what he’s doing. He’s just being an asshole.”

“I think you’re blowing things way out of proportion! Edmund’s just having a good time. I’d think you’d be glad. Maybe he isn’t such a nerd!”

Ellen frowned. “I don’t like what he’s doing.”

“Well, it’s your Edmund, remember?” Suzy smiled. “You sent the letter! You’ve already made your mysterious arrangements!”

“I’ll give him a chance. He doesn’t know yet. I can’t blame him.”

Suzy shook her head in delicious confusion.

* * *

Jonathan felt like a UFO invisibly observing an alien world. He watched the loud, happy, cheering white kids partying and making out and doing drugs, and he felt very far away.

But it was very interesting, he thought, stimulated by the dazzling excess. He moved around, incognito, and here and there he saw a pretty white girl looking at him and wrinkling her nose, but he shrugged it off. Rich pretty bitches, he thought. He was an intellectual, conducting an experiment, like Edmund had said. He didn't care what some painted white chick thought about him.

The house was a palace. Three redwood decks descended to the lawn where heaters on poles radiated heat. And it was a warm night anyway! The band was playing. The clothes, the perfumes in the air, the English rock music — it was all on a huge scale. It was the sort of thing that would intimidate his brothers, that would make them pissed off and surly, but not him. It was a fascinating glimpse at another world, one without all the violence and rage he was used to, everything unbroken, big, clean and running properly, and the easy spirit of pleasure that so naturally accompanied all of it... This is where he wanted to be some day and he didn't care whom or what he was betraying by wanting it.

He moved to the second highest deck and took in the view. A lot of the kids had dropped Ecstasy, the drug that awakened the sleeping kindness of human beings. Jonathan felt a sense of possibility in the air. His glasses and nerdy clothes might actually be appreciated in a place like this, he began to imagine. He drank a beer slowly. He looked around and caught a small, cute white girl looking at him in a curious, nice sort of way. She looked away timidly. Hmm! he smiled, and looked back to find her smiling back at him.

He moved to the top deck and overheard two girls talking as he sipped his beer.

"I don't like what he's doing."

"It's your Edmund, remember? You sent the letter!"

"I'll watch him."

Some guy screamed to the music blasting from the outdoor speakers.

"He doesn't know yet."

Three more guys screamed the next chorus of "Teenage Wasteland," a new cover by the Marx Mothers.

Doesn't know what? thought Jonathan. What was going on? He recognized the girl who said it — Ellen Neville. What was she up to? As he wondered, Jo-Jo Pendleton came up behind Ellen and squeezed her tits.

“Hey,” shouted Ellen.

“It’s me, babe!”

“Fuck you!”

Jonathan almost laughed in surprise.

“Come on! Hey, did I hear you talking about Edmund Green?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Did you invite him or what?”

“I invited him for a laugh,” said Ellen.

“Well, I don’t see you laughing,” said Jo-Jo. “Let’s take a hot tub.”

“I’m busy right now, Jo-Jo!”

“All right! Fuck you, too,” he shouted.

Jonathan looked away, not wanting to be noticed staring, and what he saw threw him back. Coming up the stairs of the top deck were his two older brothers.

They saw him.

He had refused to tell them where he was going. Now here they were. He saw them waving at someone behind him and turned.

Jo-Jo.

“Hey, Jo-Jo, what’s doin’ man?” said Geoffrey, high-fiving Jo-Jo as though he didn’t see Jonathan.

“I’ll be in your dad’s study,” said Jo-Jo to Ellen. “Don’t let anyone in there.”

Ellen just looked at him in disgust.

His brother Charles squeezed Jonathan’s shoulder. “Hey, so this is where the party is! What you doin’ tryin’ ta dis us, boy?” Jonathan could smell the rum on his breath.

Geoffrey turned to him. “Hey, come on with us, man.”

“Yeah, Jon, come on! We’ll get some off this white boy. We’ll fix you up. Come on!”

He was pulled with them, speechless, everything suddenly mixed up in his mind. Soon he was sitting in a rich man’s room, with gleaming brass, wood, and gilt leather book spines and models of sailing ships, smoking Fly with his brothers and Jo-Jo, the world in negative.

* * *

Far away, on the lawn, Edmund and a girl he didn’t know were looking into each other’s eyes.

“You’re so hot I can feel it on my skin,” he whispered, smiling at her and squeezing her hands in his, encouragingly.

The band caught its breath and started up, and Edmund danced with her again, and he included closenesses in the dance so he could brush against her nipples with his sweater briefly enough to conceal his motives, subtly slowing down the dance, and drawing it in close. She

matched his slowing step, moving in mirror image, liking him purely from his actions. She swung her long hair over her gently bowed head before him as they danced close, each move a taunting opportunity to touch or barely miss.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered over her mouth, smiling a smile just for her, and she laughed, as she accepted the invitation of his eyes.

She blushed. “So are you,” she whispered.

Edmund kissed her sweet lips with all the intensity his teenaged soul could convey.

Did Edmund love her? Yes, universally, as Girl, Edmund loved her, he cherished her, he worshipped her! But no. She did not know him, and he didn’t want her to know him. They knew enough to know they both wanted to escape right now and that they could be trusted to guide each other to some other place that was better, if only for a moment, if only shared by them.

Nearby, Ellen danced with Jo-Jo, glaring occasionally at Edmund and his newfound cause. Her devastation only made her more determined.

Edmund glared back at her, right over the face of the girl he was kissing, and then he closed his eyes and kissed her more deeply. He licked the inner curve of her molten lips as a sweet tear streamed from the girl’s eye. That’ll scar her, he thought, thinking of Ellen as he stroked the girl’s soft hair.

Ellen returned fire. Catching Edmund’s eye, she kissed Jo-Jo more sensuously than ever before. Jo-Jo didn’t think such a kiss was possible, and wondered afterward if it had actually happened, and why.

Ellen opened her eyes, found Edmund watching, and squinted cruelly, turning her mouth back and forth, screwing gently and hungrily into Jo-Jo’s dazzled lips.

Edmund kissed the girl with a crescendo of intimacy and license, his tongue a living spirit devouring her breath, until he left her numb, her mouth open, her eyes a blur.

Ellen and Edmund locked eyes again.

That bitch, he thought.

That fucker! she screamed inside her head.

The next time they kissed, only for a moment, their eyes were wide open and watching. For an instant, it seemed they were kissing each other before their eyes flashed away.

* * *

Edmund learned what Suzy the spy had already told Ellen: Edmund's girl was visiting a friend. She went to another school. It was impossible — so it was inevitable.

They went into the garden shed without words, and fastened the door from the inside. They sat crosslegged and looked into each other's eyes as they unbuttoned each other's shirts. Edmund's inexperienced eyes fell in religious awe to her breasts — tan domes held tight by pink lace cups. She looked at his chest and squeezed the thick muscles, which were obviously made for her fine fingers.

She took his hand, giggling breathily, and showed him how to unhook the clasp between her breasts. She revealed herself to him like a sacred treasure, and he sighed to see the simple, celestial gift of her flesh. She trembled to feel his eyes drinking her. They embraced and swayed, breathing against each other.

In silence, in the language of flesh, desire tempered with careful patience and unhurried attentiveness, they showed each other the wonders of their bodies. She gripped him, hard in her soft hand. He felt her delicate petals moistening and blossoming beneath his gentle fingertips. At last they coiled around each other and wrestled with rambunctious naivete. They wrung from each other the ecstasy they knew was there inside, and when it happened, it was like a miracle.

They parted with the desperate kiss and the wry smile of co-conspirators, knowing their limitless moment had been limited to a moment, and if it was a lie, it had made the rest of the world look fake. For one moment — a moment their parents, teachers, and government would no doubt call immoral — they had shown each other what life might be at the pinnacle of existence.

* * *

It was after one a.m. when Edmund wandered back into the party, over the beer-soaked decks, as he looked for Jonathan. He reached the house, and heard a jumble of shouts.

“Cops!”

“Cops!”

“Pigs!”

Edmund entered the house and walked toward the front door. The police were already pushing in through the crowd. He turned and walked up the stairs, putting his left hand into his pocket. If they saw the tape on his wristband, his probation would be broken.

Upstairs, he started pulling the masking tape off the wristband. He heard Sheriff Buchannan's voice behind him. He put his hand back into the pocket of his coat.

A door opened down the hall, and Jonathan looked out.

“Hey, come here,” said Edmund, but Buchanan and two other policemen barged past him. They backed Jonathan into the door as they went into the room.

“Hey, Holmes!” Buchanan laughed.

“Hey,” Geoffrey said.

“What you boys doing in here?” shouted Sheriff Buchanan.

“Nothin’, man,” said Charles.

“Fuck you, nothin’, man! Get up against the wall, all of you niggers! Jo-Jo, get outside in the hall!”

Jo-Jo walked in a daze past Edmund out into the hall.

“Hey! Not him,” shouted Edmund, pointing at Jonathan.

Buchanan looked at him. “What, punk?”

Edmund looked at him, paralyzed. Then he realized how crazy it was. Buchanan wasn’t “helping” Jonathan. What had happened here tonight, Buchanan could never understand, and was none of his business. He was nothing more than a mugger attacking Jonathan in a moment of weakness. He would not “serve and protect” this kid, he would fuck him up and destroy his life, and not even remember it five years later. And Edmund was Jonathan’s friend. “I said not him. He’s with me.” Edmund slapped his right hand on his chest. “He’s not with the others, he’s with me, Buchanan. Let him go.”

Buchanan looked at Edmund as if he were trying to remember where he had seen him, but there was too much going down. Buchanan shrugged. “OK, you can go,” he said to Jonathan. “And you, too, Punk. Get out of here!” He waved an arm at Edmund.

Edmund took Jonathan’s wrist, squeezing as hard as he could, and led him down the hall.

He called a taxi in the living room and took Jonathan outside to wait. They sat on the curb, watching the stragglers dispersing as the party dissolved.

“What the hell were you doing?” said Edmund.

“Fuck you.”

Edmund grabbed Jonathan’s face in his left hand. “Is this my fault? Huh? Is this my fault?”

Jonathan looked at him with wide, furious eyes for a moment, and then burst into tears, and butted his head into Edmund’s chest. “Edmund, God, I don’t know, man, I don’t know...”

“Jonathan!” Edmund said. “Hey, hey, what are you doing?” Edmund pressed his forehead to his, a tear spilling from his own eye now. “We shouldn’t have split up! You idiot!”

“I’m not an idiot!” he screamed. “I study ‘cause I thought that at school — but then it doesn’t matter. They let those fuckers in. They don’t even want to be there, but they let them in so they can fuck with me.

Why, Edmund? And then they come here — I don't have any place to go, there is no place... ”

What a fucked-up world, Edmund thought. How could anyone care about anyone or anything in this fucked-up world? He thought he had escaped it for a moment, before the police and dogs came. “You've got a lot, Jon. It matters to me. Don't do that shit anymore.” Edmund watched the swaggering cops throwing crying, handcuffed girls and boys into patrol cars. They each faced hundreds of hours of counseling, thousands of dollars in fines, thousands of hours of community service, wristbands, house arrests, positive programming, mind-numbing conformity, mood-flattening drugs, discipline, obedience, and duty to a future full of orders, commands, and penalties — and disqualification from the Middletown League of Future Leaders.

The taxi came. They got in.

Jonathan finally sat up straight and gripped Edmund's hand as they approached his apartment building. “You know, that Jo-Jo guy really hates you. Watch out for that fucker, OK?”

“Yeah?” Edmund laughed.

“And Ellen, I think she was just using you to get Jo-Jo jealous.”

“Fuck that whore,” said Edmund. “Jo-Jo's a pimp and she's a whore. And Buchannan's a pig. And your brothers are highly paid assholes. What a fucked-up world, Jon.”

The taxi came to a stop. “I don't want to stay here too long,” growled the cabby.

“Thanks, Jonathan,” said Edmund. “Take care, man. Don't let anyone fuck with you.”

“OK. Bye, Edmund.” He smiled, closing his eyes, his hand on his forehead. “Friends? For real, and fuck all the rest?”

Edmund clasped his hand. “Yeah.”

“See you in class. I'm OK.”

Edmund smiled as the cabby repeated his request.

* * *

Ellen pushed off a confused Jo-Jo after Edmund left. She could hear him burning rubber on the street outside. Some stupid white coke-heads were still playing ugly rap music in the living room at three in the morning, smoking the Blue Fire Jonathan's brothers had to leave, since they were now in jail.

She sat on the upper patio and stared at the sky. She was sad but tranquil, and more determined than ever before. The sky was black, but she knew that daylight was coming.

* * *

"I don't know what's up with Ellen and this Edmund guy."

"What? Are you in love with this bitch, suddenly?" Johnny Lanier laughed.

That little voice inside Jo-Jo laughed, too, and he was caught between them. "Maybe I am. What's it to you?"

"Oh, come on, man," Johnny shouted. "I mean, she may be a good fuck, Jo-Jo, but don't tell me you love her. There's plenty of parts in stock, cowboy!"

Lanier really cut loose a laugh, like a buffalo fart.

Jo-Jo kicked a rock off the cliff into the canyon and watched it bounce into the depths.

"Ah, settle down. She's all wacked, Jo-Jo. You don't need that bitch! It's like my dad says, man, they're all mental. What do you think of Veronica? Nectar! Not too mental, either. And she wants you, Dukey! I'll get her if you don't!" Lanier grinned as though he already had gotten her and Jo-Jo was roadkill. "I'm givin' you fair warning, Dude!"

Sex with Ellen, both stubborn times, had been more like revenge than love, which was what had made it so cool! Except that she was always such a silly fucking bitch, always making fun of him, as though her good looks and popularity gave her the right to put him down or something.

Edmund had walked by Jo-Jo at school earlier that day. It was like Jo-Jo was looking at himself for a second in a horror movie mirror, at that part of himself he hated, that part that laughed at him and thought it was smarter than he. Edmund Green in his long green coat just looked at Jo-Jo's jacket, at the green patch, laughing without laughing, without any expression at all really. "Shit. I feel like killing that jerk, Johnny."

"Edmund Green? Forget it. Lighten up, man! If she wants him, then let her have him! Don't waste your time thinking about it, Jo-Jo! Ditch the cunt!" He crumpled his beer can.

"Yeah, I guess." Jo-Jo downed his beer. "Let's go."

Jo-Jo jumped into his Camaro as Lanier chucked his can into the gorge beside the mountain road, hitting Jo-Jo's in mid-flight. "Will you not drive like a fucking idiot?" said Lanier, getting in.

Jo-Jo laughed.

"Oh fuck!" said Lanier as they peeled down the first curve of Lookout Ridge. "I'm serious, man!"

* * *

She took out the nail polish remover and sat naked on the counter. Wetting some cotton, she wiped the paint from each toenail. The chemical smell brought tears to her eyes. When she finished, she

removed her glue-on fingernails and wiped away the glue. She filed her nails until they were clear and she could see the blood beneath them when she lifted them from the tiles. Then she stepped into the shower.

She turned the hot water higher and bowed her head beneath the steaming jets and she closed her eyes as the water ran through her hair, rinsing it, rinsing it, rinsing it. She raised her head and felt the water melting on her face, and let it beat on her skin, over her closed eyes. After rubbing herself with soap twice, she rinsed off again from her head to her toes and turned off the faucets.

She stepped out of the shower and looked at herself framed in mist in the mirror. Her natural green eyes looked steadily into herself, and at her moist skin, clean of makeup and powder. Her long hair was now brown, straightened of kink and curl, the same color as the soft curls between her legs.

She saw herself, naked and new, glowing with a beauty that was honest and alive and brave.

An hour ago, Edmund's cousin had called her to go over the last details.

She opened the bathroom door and walked nude through the house. It was warm. She had turned the heat up. Even the soles of her feet seemed to feel the thick nap of the carpet intensely. She dimmed the light and crossed the living room when the phone rang. She stopped in the middle of the room in the light of the fire, as the stars were just appearing in the row of windows over Middletown. The phone rang three times, the message played, and Jo-Jo's voice was on the phone. "Ellen, uh, OK. It's me, I want to talk to ya. All right? What was up with Edmund the other night? Well, everything's OK, right? I mean, could ya give me a call, all right? OK. Bye."

Cute. And dumb. He was dumb to be cute. It was all he knew, all he had ever been rewarded for.

She went to the fire. She knelt and stoked the logs, her naked body glowing like wax before the embers. She rose, smiling, squinting in the delicious light, and went to her piano. She sat before the ivory keys of her Steinway, where she had practiced for nine years without knowing why. She turned through her music books and chose a piece to play. She read the firelit pages as she pressed her fingers on the keys, feeling them trembling and vibrating as the cold pedals reverberated under her toes.

She felt the music she was making as though the notes were her own emotions. She played the piece more furiously and beautifully all alone and naked in the dark than she had ever played it in a gown during a recital, and she felt an emotion she realized people called joy. As she finished, she kissed her own hands, opening them at the stars in the window.

* * *

Edmund heard commotion in the house. He remembered some girl, his cousin from Minnesota, was coming to visit on her way to a wedding in Goshen. Edmund chuckled. What a miserable place for her to have to stay. Was she his first cousin or his second cousin? He put on a wry, defensive look as he peered out his door, down the hall.

It hit him in the gut like the fist of a ghost: she was beautiful.

But as he stared in eager awe, he scolded himself. She was probably like Ellen, and all the rest of them. Mindless, with pretty eyes connected to nothing, an abysmal gulf away from his lonely heart.

Edmund hesitated as he looked at the lovely girl. She did look like Ellen. She looked amazingly like Ellen. Edmund puzzled for a moment, but then shook his head slowly. This girl had no makeup, her hair was simple, brown, cut straight, she wore tennis shoes and jeans, and a T-Shirt over a bra. Simple, real. She looked at him with crystal clear eyes and smiled.

He felt hope stirring in his heart as he looked at her, and yet he shut the door of his room bitterly, blocking it out and not knowing why.

He let the tide of the night slowly claim all the world except for his corner, in which he had lit a small piece of the weird incense that helped keep his spirit alive. He could trust hash. But the world was too treacherous a place to risk the kind of hope he started to feel.

* * *

She sighed and put her suitcase in the corner of the little bedroom. The twin bed had been freshly made.

The door opened.

“Oh, I know you must be tired, dear. I’ll get out of your way in a minute, but let me just show you. If you’re cold, there are more blankets in the closet, and you can hang your clothes in there, too. I put some hangers there for you.”

“Thank you, Aunt Louise,” she said.

“How is your Uncle Stewart?”

“Oh, you know Uncle Stewart!” She laughed. “Same as always.”

“Oh. He’s getting over his stroke all right, then?”

“As best as can be expected.” She nodded gravely.

Mrs. Green nodded. “Good. He was always my favorite. Good night, dear!”

“Good night, Aunt Louise.”

The door closed.

She waited until the footsteps died away.

She pulled her tennis shoes and jeans off and waited a while in the modest room. When the house grew quiet, she went to the hollow door and opened it gently, looking down the dark hall at Edmund's room. She tiptoed down the hall in just her bra, panties, and a green T-Shirt. She tapped on Edmund's door.

After a moment it opened and her heart almost burst.

"Oh, hi. Yeah?" said Edmund. He was in a blue T-Shirt and briefs.

"I'm sorry, Edmund. Where's the bathroom?"

He stared at her for a moment and then blinked, smiling. "You passed it. It's down to the right." His voice was warm, and kind. He pointed.

She squeezed his hand. "Thanks," she whispered. "Good night!"

"Sure. Good night."

* * *

Edmund sat quietly at the breakfast table. Sunday shone in the window like a postcard. His shock of short straight hair pointed back over his head like a rooster's comb, still wet. His posture was somehow proud but relaxed. In measured precision his hands worked the silverware on his breakfast: black market bacon and eggs instead of Facon and Eggz; his parents were puttin' on the Ritz,

"Bob's son just got promoted to Warrant Officer, right over there at New Haven, you know," mentioned his mother. "He's a good boy. You could learn something from Georgie, Edmund. Couldn't afford college, but a fine boy, who always respected his folks and his country, and God. He's a good Christian boy. Quite the respectable young man." She smiled at her niece, nodding.

"Solid kid," said Mr. Green, his mouth full.

Mrs. Green looked back down at an article which she had pinned down with her finger in the *Middletown Crier*. "Well, it looks like the City Council blocked that new shoe factory they were going to build downtown. They're going to put in a children's petting zoo instead. Oh, that Tom Neville is the only Councilman who seems to care about Middletown."

"I'm all for this No Growth thing," said Ed Green.

"What's wrong with growth? What do kids have to look forward to if you shut everything down?"

Edmund didn't say that. He looked at her.

"Kimberly! The petting zoo is for kids," said Mrs. Green.

"The petting zoo is for city councilmen," said Kimberly. She looked right at Edmund, and he held her green eyes in wonder.

“Maybe when we all grow up, we can work at petting zoos, Kim.” He shrugged.

“Oh, Edmund,” Mrs. Green cast a weary glance at Edmund’s father.

There was a silence as Edmund’s father conducted a symphony of repulsive noises with his spoon. He looked up, feeling the eyes congregating on him, a spindle of scrambled egg on his red chin. He shrugged. “What?”

“Don’t you think the community should have a say if a new factory is going to be built, Kimberly?” asked Louise Green.

“No. Only if they own the land it’s going to be built on.”

Edmund laughed in amazement and she smiled at him and winked. His jaw fell in surprise.

“Well, honey, if people could do anything they wanted, things would go to hell pretty fast, don’t you think?” asked Ed Green.

“Things have gone to hell, Dad,” said Edmund.

Edmund’s father was just about to begin a lecture when Kimberly laughed charmingly, and Mr. Green backed down, embarrassed somehow. He withdrew to his eggs, grumbling.

Kimberly looked at Edmund’s father, then at Edmund, smiling a secret message that seemed to apologize if her words would make things worse for Edmund once she was gone. Edmund wondered at this beautiful girl whose face could convey so much, and at the soul who trusted him to see it.

Edmund fired an approving look at Kimberly, then looked down at his plate. He ate the last piece of black market bacon covered with illegal egg yolk and looked back up, meeting Kimberly’s eye again. A thrill swept through him. “Let’s go for a walk, Kimberly,” he said. “I’ll show you my favorite place on the planet.”

“OK,” she said. She looked questioningly at his parents.

“Let’s go,” said Edmund, and after an insignificant nod from his father, they each grabbed an apple from the basket on the counter and ran out into the sun.

* * *

“Did you mean it?” asked Edmund.

“Did you?” she asked.

They knew the answer and they laughed.

“Ohhh,” said Edmund, embracing himself. It was part moan and part sigh. “This path is the only stretch of Earth I like. And what it leads to.”

“Good,” said Kimberly. “I’m glad we’re hiking up. I like the view from high places, Edmund.”

“I have to climb up out of that town to get some air sometimes. This hill isn’t high enough — I wish it was a mountain that reached up to another planet. Then I could leave it all.”

She smiled, looking at her clear toenails peeking out of her sandals as she walked. “There’s a graveyard I go to when I feel like that. The people there are the only people I can stand sometimes. And my river —”

Edmund turned to her. “I —” He slowly shook his head, amazed.

“What, Edmund?”

“I’m taking you to a graveyard.” He laughed and started to run. “Come on!”

They both ran until they reached the green glade with its dark slate stones and sat in veneration on Edmund’s bench, which was being shared for the first time. They looked pleasurably at each other, as they caught their breath and finished their apples.

He looked at Kimberly’s face and hair. A bead of sweat held a few strands of hair to her brow. She deserved her beauty, Edmund thought, which made it somehow more real. Her skin was olive and smooth. Her wise and vital eyes were green like leaves against the sky. Her hair was mahogany, soft, and shot with strands of amber.

“How old are you?” he asked.

She laughed. “It’s my birthday! I’m eighteen.”

“Really? Happy birthday!”

“What about you?”

“Seventeen.”

“I love it.”

“What?”

“Your favorite place, Edmund.” She looked around and flashed a smile at him.

“You remind me of someone,” he said.

“Really?”

“No, I mean you look like a girl I know. Well, you don’t look like her really, but you sound like her, but you don’t sound like her, either.”

She laughed.

“You’re more beautiful than she is, actually, by far.”

“Why, thank you, I guess,” she smiled, bowing her head.

He looked dreamily down at Middletown and the CSB tower, spellbound by this girl like some strange daydream that was impossible in the light of day. “I think about things down there up here,” he said. “I talk it over with my friends.” He presented the proud slate headstones.

The cemetery took over the conversation for a while, with its gentle rustles and whispers and gusts, as the last few flaming leaves swirled from the fall-scorched branches. When they looked into each other’s eyes, it seemed the world was lit up and pushed miles away at the same time.

“Why are they so bitter?” she asked, as if she had known him always.

“My parents?”

“No, yes, all of them, Edmund. Everyone.”

She was so familiar to him, Edmund thought. She must remember him from some childhood meeting, as he seemed to remember her. Edmund shook his head.

“Do you know?” she asked. “Do you know why?”

He leaned his head back and ran a hand through his hair, looking at her. “The older generation is lying about what's wrong,” he said. “They point at kids. They should be asking why we're escaping, but they're only concerned with how. It's the mentality of the old Berlin Wall. Remember that, from when we were kids? Just build the walls higher, more guards, more search lights, more rules, more prisons.” He pointed at his wristband, shrugging.

She nodded, kindly. “But why?”

“Kids are trying to escape. Everyone is, in some way or another.”

“Why, Edmund?”

“Because everyone's invisible,” he said, ironically feeling visible for the first time. “If you want to know what I think.”

“I do, Edmund. I want to know what you think. My father...” she said, “wants to tell everyone what they should think and what they should do. Why do people want to do that to each other, Edmund?”

“Sometimes I think people don't really want happiness. Maybe they don't think it's real. So they want power instead of strength and money instead of achievement and sex instead of love and names without meaning and fame without pride. They want to be charitable with other people's money, and work, and ideas. And they put on clothes and causes to be hip without something inside them to express. But, Kim, even though they have their power or money or sex or fame, even if they wear their clothes and fashionable causes like badges, they're empty. When people don't believe in themselves, they can't believe in anything, really.”

She touched his jaw. “They're hiding in words and causes and clothes, Edmund. They're hiding behind someone else's identity, someone they don't even really know. They're afraid of what would happen to them if they stood naked as themselves.”

He smiled at her, moved by her tears. “There's a diamond inside you, Kim.” He squeezed her shoulders, gripping her soul through her muscles, firmly and yet tenderly. He dove into her green eyes, seeing there what he had never seen outside a mirror. “They try to make us think it's ugly, try to make us feel ashamed of it and guilty, as though we don't deserve it, as though it is dangerous —”

“But you can't let them,” she said, gripping his sides.

“That’s right.” Edmund stroked a few strands of hair back from her eyes.

She wanted to melt into him, but she turned away. “I’ve always thought... ” she said measuredly, “that if you own your life, then it’s robbery when someone else *does something with it*. No matter how noble or moral or smart they think they are, they’re just thieves, the worst kind of thieves. They steal people.” Her beautiful face seemed hurt and tired.

He wished he could demolish the world that threatened her brave spirit, and he brightened his eyes, instead. “There’s your mistake, Girl! You don’t own your life. God owns it!”

She turned to him in surprise and saw the pompous frown on his lips. Her tears turned sweet and she poked him in the stomach. “No, Boy! Society owns you!”

He laughed. “No, silly girl. Your community!”

“Your family!”

“Your fellow man.” He wagged his finger at her sternly.

“No! The government, my boy!”

“The poor!”

“Animals!”

“The environment!”

“The community!”

“I said that!”

“Your gang!” She made a fist.

“Your ethnicity,” he insisted, raising a professorial eyebrow.

“Your heritage!” She turned up her nose.

“Your culture!” He shook his finger.

“Your generation!”

“Your hometown!”

“The Devil!”

“The ecosystem.”

“The state!” She saluted.

“The past!”

“The future!”

“Your sex!”

“The food chain!”

“The people!”

“Your culture!”

“I said that! The future!”

“I said that! Besides, Edmund Green — you’re not even in control of your own life, so how could you own it?” She touched her finger to his forehead, laughing. “You’re a product.”

“A product?”

“Of your environment, silly boy!” she cried, spreading her arms out to the world.

“No, no — your genes!”

“Your culture!”

“Your experience!”

“Your hormones,” she pointed at his crotch.

“Junkfood!” He laughed.

“TV!”

“Tradition!”

“The media!”

“Instincts!”

“Lust!”

“Greed!”

“Your culture,” she screamed.

“I said that,” he shouted. “Your community!”

“I said that! Toxic chemicals!”

“Cheese!”

“Animal lust,” she wailed.

“Lust for cheese!” he grabbed her wrists.

“Cheese souffle.” She almost wiggled free, laughing wildly.

“Cheese stew!”

“Cheese spray,” she shrieked, breaking loose and she dug into Edmund’s ribs.

“Cheese whip!” Edmund pulled her off the bench, and she screamed as they rolled and came to rest on the grass with Edmund’s arms under her.

She looked up at him. “Cheese lotion.” She pouted, defiantly. “You’re a product of the all-too-prevalent use of cheese-based lotions, Edmund Green!”

“No, my girl, you are the product of the alignment of giant heavenly bodies of cheese at the moment you were born...” he said.

They kissed, and she stretched out her arms, clutching handfuls of grass as his hands reached under her sweater and over her breasts.

When he raised his head, gasping, her eyes were brilliant with tears.

“I wish I was on a desert island,” she whispered. “With nobody else, except you.”

He nodded, feeling her heart pounding in her breasts. He pulled his hands out and smoothed her soft brown hair from her brow, shaking his head softly, speechless, and she smiled, closing her eyes.

He licked her beautiful lips, feeling himself hard like a keel on her belly as they lay in the cool grass.

“No one would believe in you, Edmund Green. They will say you’re impossible.”

“I know. I know a girl who thought so, too, and almost made me believe her. Kim — you’ve proven her wrong.”

“Edmund,” she laughed and lifted his head. “I am Ellen.”

“I know.”

She closed her eyes. “When did you know it was me?”

“Just now. When you did.”

She kissed him and found all the complexity of her own soul in that kiss. “I’m going to write a symphony, Edmund,” she said. “No one seems to write symphonies anymore, but I’m going to write a symphony that will swirl around the world like a hurricane! I’m not afraid to write my own music. It’s what I always wanted to do. And I feel that if I write what I want, the world will want it, too! Because the world needs it as much as I do!”

He just stared at her underneath him as the world spun around him.

“I was fighting the whole world,” she whispered, “until I saw you, and I felt like I was fighting myself.” Tears welled in her eyes, yet she looked steadily into his. “It made no sense to fight you, Edmund Green.” She ran her fingers through his soft hair, as though it would be her last chance to do it.

He kissed a tear from her cheek. “Ellen?”

“We can do it!” She laughed. “I don’t care what anyone else says or what anyone thinks or wants me to do. Edmund, I love you, I’ve watched you for a long time, all alone, not giving in and I’m not cowardly enough deep down to not want to go with you. All we need is a roof and a bed, and I can write the music, and you can write the words.”

“Ellen,” he frowned.

“What’s wrong, Edmund?”

He hung his head. “The whole world looks beautiful now. What was I afraid of?”

“I know what you were afraid of! I was, too. But I’m not now!”

He squeezed her fingers. “Your folks are rich, Ellen. And mine are poor.”

She laughed. “That’s the first thing I don’t care about!”

“And you’re popular, and I’m — what will the kids at school say when they see you like this, with me?”

“That’s two things I don’t care about,” she said. “What else? Oh! What will your mother think when she finds out I’m not Kimberly?”

“That’s three!” Edmund nodded. “God.” He laughed. “This is fun... Ellen — God Almighty how DID you —”

“Let’s dream together, Edmund!” she said. She kissed him, unable to quell her triumphant laughter on his lips, and she traced his smiling mouth with a lavender flower and tickled his nose. “Smell,” she ordered, and he smelled it and laughed giddily, kissing her ear. They looked at the sky, lying in the grass, caressing each other and laughing convulsively.

She rolled on top of him. “We are young!”

Edmund nodded. “And the world is right there, right here!”

“I don’t want to lose either one.”

Edmund stroked her hair back from her face and looked into her eyes. “You won’t!”

They stood together in the yard of tombstones, pulling off their clothes, and they laid themselves completely bare to each other, exposed in the bracing wind in the graveyard above the world. He pressed his hard chest against her breasts burning in the chill wind and they felt their hearts pounding in rhythm as they pressed their cheeks together.

And the whole gray world disappeared.

* * *

Part II

The Triumvirate

John Mack's long fingers worked the silver wires of his beard, his eyes focused on the wall of eyes before him.

On his special contact lenses, the Mack Link rolled the names of every citizen of every city equipped with a CSB across America. Relentlessly, it hunted for each first name she had input and singled out any recorded acquaintance of Sapphire Hunt, every former employee of Hunt Robotics, and every notable, acknowledged, honored or respected man or woman in America.

He knew the individual she had chosen to guard Free Will must be a person of the highest moral character since he would hold in his hand the destiny of the human race, a thing of high value, one might say. He directed the Mack Link to tally the score of virtue and vice of every citizen in the United States and every other country on Earth, quantifying the merits of each suspect accordingly in order to narrow the field and adding variables of probability to the mix to eliminate blind alleys.

But certain things could not be measured by the Mack Link. These were the things his own heart could no longer measure and his own eyes could no longer see. The Mack Link kept delivering lists of men and women who had received Community Service awards, or had environmentalist affiliations, or made Pro-Life donations, or had high Popularity Poll ratings. It listed minority leaders, women's group leaders, Future Leaders. It isolated those who had received Oscars, Grammys, Pulitzers, Responsible Art awards and grants, socially accepted recognition and government subsidies, any official acknowledgment of excellence. John Mack watched the Mack Link's progress, afraid that America might be the last country on Earth where Sapphire might have found an individual whose virtues were unaffiliated, unrecognized, independent and totally invisible to his machine.

He had other search programs isolating every eccentric scholar, professor, journalist, artist, or politician who espoused freedom as an absolute moral principle, matching them to the list of names and communities. There was little to go on in this area. These days, such cranks did not gain great prominence, official recognition, or even easy employment. They left few traces of their existence for the Mack Link to pick up, except for the occasional webpage, which the Mack Link laboriously analyzed for “vocabulary signatures” of such radicals.

What kind of man or woman would she choose, he wondered. Like the forgotten identity of a familiar face, the question haunted John Mack.

All of Sapphire Hunt’s associates were under his surveillance, of course. With little effort, he could get to any one of them. But there was only one he must find, and only nine months to find him before Free Will would be hers again. Then, with one switch, one decision, one choice, all they had worked so long to construct would be destroyed, reversed, undone. The President’s men wanted to put pressure on her friends and their families to get to her, but that would be cheating, losing, in his mind. He could get to her without resorting to brute force. He had to, in fact, or he would be proven wrong. The President wouldn’t understand this; Mack had simply assured him that such force would be unnecessary.

Free Will was his brainchild. A naive, romantic, and reckless notion on a titanic scale, it consisted of a parallel, equally complex, and much more advanced system hidden inside all links of the chain he and Sapphire had welded together. He collaborated with Sapphire on devising each group of “Choices,” or default functions, that would be installed in each component of their system, from databases for bureaucratic regulation to “anti-revolution” weapons for militaries. Now he could barely understand or tolerate the assumptions upon which their myriad efforts had rested. They had assumed that when they threw their golden switch and a single day of freedom dawned on the world, humanity would seize its destiny. Once tyranny made too dependent on technology was toppled, a world of free-thinking, independent people would emerge. Virtue would return to mankind. The world would be reborn, crowned and ruled by free minds, obeying only nature as nature obeyed only reason, and the mind free to use it.

He had no faith in any of this now. The ignorant outnumbered the wise, and always would.

Though he had concluded that machines, or the lack of them, could not change mankind’s barbaric heart, he was sure his machine, the greater it became, was all that was keeping civilization from collapsing.

He imagined the damage Free Will could do as he looked at the display of the Mack/Hunt network spread over a spinning holographic globe suspended in the dome of his office.

In South America and Africa, they had many strong footholds. Yet the stronger the system in place was, the more damage Free Will could do. Special computer/robotic systems controlled everything in some of these countries, from armories, to tanks, to police records, to prisons, right down to the individual weapons of law enforcement. They controlled economies, personnel files, tax and criminal records, marriages, numbers of children, etc. The more iron-fisted and paranoid the system they had installed, the more chaos Free Will would unleash if it was activated.

China and Eurasia would subside into anarchistic bloodbaths if Free Will were triggered after the installation of the Mack Superlinks. The Superlink "Free Market" economic system would already regulate their entire economies from wages to prices to the stock markets, as well as education, environmental policy, military, security, arts, sciences, medical care, housing, transportation, population control, and agriculture. All of this would fail. If Free Will were activated, weapons and riot control units would cease to operate. Computer records would be burned clean. Political prison doors would actually open. Police weapons would cease to function. Government communications in all of these areas would be completely cut off. He had tried to get a shipment of Riot Control units shipped to China without their Free Will components, but Sapphire had destroyed them, along with the extremely sophisticated equipment that manufactured them, before he had a chance to save it.

In North America, the Canadian and American governments would be effectively neutralized by the shockwave of Free Will. All records pertaining to all citizens, except for those of criminals who had violated someone's rights, would be erased clean from all programs.

Payrolls would cease, bureaucracies would disintegrate, public education would collapse, and authority over all social activities and services, having been gathered into the government fold, would be thrown to the wind and scattered by chance. His social mechanism, John Mack's global work of art, would explode, leaving the world to the random whims of individual men and women. He could not trust such individual action anymore, certainly not after witnessing what people had done with his machines. The world he imagined without his machine controlling it was a nightmare.

John Mack glanced at the screen displaying Middletown as the Mack Link crunched the names of its citizens. The name that appeared in Middletown was "Edmund." A list of the Edmunds was isolated and rolled up one screen as the computer hunted down the list of his variables and deleted those outside his parameters. Edmund Elway, Edmund Granville, Edmund Green, Edmund Loman, Edmund O'Donnel, Edmund Phelps.

At the end, only four names sat on the screen before him. There was Edmund Anderson, employee of Hunt Robotics, but also chairman of

the City Committee for No Growth. John Mack shook his head. Edmund O'Donnell, sixteen years old, Treasurer of the Middletown League of Future Leaders; Edmund Phelps, Professor of Urban Planning at Middletown City College and recipient of the Hackman Award from the Earth Animals League; Edmund Rourke, former employee of Hunt Robotics, but serving a ten-year prison term for possession of the drug Ecstasy.

No, he groaned, shaking his eyes from the Mack Link. Not in Middletown. She would not be so obvious. She could not afford to be.

He sank back and sipped black coffee in his cavernous office while the Mack Link ran its search-and-delete programs, hunting for the grail called Free Will. He folded his long arms and smiled at her naive hope, expelling a long breath as he turned in his chair. From his lofty position he could see three more buildings burning in the distance, smudging the sky over Manhattan.

* * *

"It's time you know a great many things, Cody," said Sapphire Hunt as she looked at the floor before her, her beautiful brow reflecting an inner effort against rest. She shrugged and looked at him in preliminary apology.

"There's nothing you could say that would surprise me, boss. Just say it. You know I'd die before telling anyone."

"Cody, listen closely now. As you know, at a young age, my husband and I discovered several revolutionary technologies, some of which the world still does not completely understand. We decided to use them to demonstrate to the world the wonders of reason and the freedom which is its life-breath. We believed our achievements would finally be enough to convince mankind to cast off tyranny and superstition, once and for all. We were wrong, Cody. Instead of liberating humanity, we found that we had armed its oppressors with weapons far more powerful than anything they could have conjured or beaten out of reality by themselves. For the last fifteen years, my husband and I have planned to deactivate every device we have sold to despots, their bureaucracies, their prison systems, and their militias all around the world in order to give the human race one last chance to save itself."

"When?" Cody blurted.

"We were to deactivate the entire network next year, when it was completed."

"Why didn't you?"

"My husband was seduced by the power of the thing we built, and he abandoned our mission."

"John Mack?"

“Yes.”

“I thought so.” Cody shook his head.

“He has fallen in love with his Swiss watch. He’ll have it at the expense of the human race — even at the expense of me. We must not let John Mack acquire the one device we have that can destroy the system.”

“Free Will?”

“That’s right.”

Cody nodded. He drummed his fingers on the white arm of the couch. “I knew it was something I could never tell anyone else, anyway.” He nodded, and then shook his head.

She laughed. “No, they would think you’re crazy.”

“You mean I’m not?”

They both laughed.

“OK,” he said seriously. “What can I do, boss? What kind of trouble are you in?” He always felt able to protect her, but not now.

“Cody, Cody, don’t worry. We’re going to do everything we can. John Mack has a much greater enemy than he should ever have wished for.”

“But he’s out there,” said Cody. “He’s got the whole world on his side, and you have to hide in this place. What can you do?”

“Much more than you know. I built this safehouse long ago, in case I’d ever need it.” She closed her eyes in a doubtful insight. “I’ll need your help, Cody.”

Cody looked out the window that was carved in a cliffside overlooking Yosemite Valley. He looked back to her. “You’ve got it. I’ll kill him, if you —”

“No you won’t, Cody. Did you bring what I asked?”

“Of course.” Cody unzipped the top of his backpack and poured its contents on the crystal table between them.

“Good!” Of the strange and seemingly simple objects on the table, Sapphire chose a golden sphere that appeared black at certain angles as it rolled. She rose from the chair. “Come on, Cody. Let me show you something.”

He followed her down a set of spiral stairs at the far corner of the room. At the bottom of the stairs was a wide room, glowing in the twilight of many floating monitors. Sapphire led him to a cluster of screens arrayed in mid-air and they sat on chairs which sprang on cushions of air beneath them.

“You’re from the future. You must be. You’re not an alien, are you, boss?”

“No, of course not, Cody. These things are not alien. They are more human than anything else on Earth.” She lifted the golden sphere to the screen before her, and Cody grabbed her hand.

“I don’t want you to be from here, but I don’t want you to be from anywhere else either. I don’t want you to go back to wherever it is. You can’t, boss! I love you,” he said. They were the most powerful words he knew, but even they seemed weak.

“No one can go back.” Sapphire kissed him, and the contact was much more powerful than any words Cody could say. In a moment, her lips had left his and he nodded, speechless.

“We can only go forward,” she said. “It’s all there is for us now. We’ll leave the world a chance to make it better, first.” Her hand rose beneath the display screen and the gold orb disappeared as an image appeared on the screen before them.

It was a gray, stone room with a slab in the center and a carving on the wall. It seemed to be a tomb.

“You’re sure he got the last message?”

“Yes. He read it.” Cody shrugged. “I saw him.”

Sapphire motioned with a hand before the screen and the view shifted around the tomb. “Very good,” she whispered. “Edmund,” she said. The screen suddenly showed another room, a plain, ordinary room with a bed by the window in which a distant CSB tower scrolled words. She motioned again and the view advanced and rotated slowly, showing an aquarium on a bookshelf. “I can see again,” she whispered.

“Why did you give it to him?” asked Cody. “He’s just a kid. He’s not even a good kid. He’s a juvenile delinquent, Sapphire. He breaks the law, he smokes dope, he’s a rebel at school, his grades are bad, he doesn’t respect his teachers, the Mack-Link even says he may have some environment toxic syndrome, AYDS, RELNS, learning disabilities, he could be suicidal. I just can’t understand why you picked him, after everything you found out about him, after everyone else you looked at. I would have done it, Sapphire. You know that.”

“No, Cody, you couldn’t.”

“Why him, then, boss?”

“You just answered all of your own questions, Cody. All those reasons were why I gave him Free Will. Of all the people in the world, John Mack’s own computer is most blind to the Edmund Greens.” She raised her eyebrows, grinning as she studied the Spartan room of her chosen one.

Cody grimaced and shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“There are more than 50,000 CSB towers in America. Through each of them, I spoke a different message and named a different name. Only one of them was real, and only he will know it.”

“I hope you’re right, boss. I don’t know what’s going on, but I hope you’re right.” Cody Simpson put his big face in his hands in bewilderment. She ran her hand through the curly knots of his hair. “I failed to make the world all of this belongs in, even with all the magic you

love me for, dear Cody. There is a much more simple magic, but much more powerful. When set free, it's the source of all the rest. Maybe we can see the future I dreamed of. Would you like to see that future, Cody?"

Cody lifted his head and clasped her hand. "Wherever you want to go, boss."

She laughed; that was the first thing he had said when they first met.

* * *

Edmund stood with Jonathan in the quad under the Dragon of Eden and watched the kids heading home after class. A brisk Monday had resulted from last night's storm.

"I read an interesting thing in a book I stole from the library," said Jonathan matter-of-factly. "A certain kind of frog in Africa digs in the mud during the rainy season and hibernates during the dry season. It dries out like a potato chip in the dirt, and the next rainy season he expands and turns back into a living frog."

"Just add water," said Edmund. "Hmm!" Edmund looked back at Jo-Jo Pendleton, who had been staring at him from across the yard since he got there.

"And I was thinking, the theory behind cryogenics is that if you freeze the cells of the body fast enough, there won't be cell damage. But they can't be sure quick-freezing itself won't damage cells. See? But maybe quick-drying would work. I mean, if it works with these frogs, we could study —"

A girl with long brown hair over a black sweater walked up to Edmund and kissed him on the mouth. She wore olive green khaki slacks that looked very comfortable, and when she turned to Jonathan he saw her beautiful face and wide green eyes. She smiled at Jonathan, and then kissed the top of his head. "Hello."

* * *

"Look over there, Jo-Jo," said Suzy.

"Jesus."

"I told you."

"That's Ellen?"

Suzy saw her chance with Jo-Jo and couldn't resist it. For the first time, she felt more popular than Ellen Neville. "Ellen is crazy about him. Weird, huh? I don't see how she could want him more than you, Jo-Jo!"

Jo-Jo turned white as a bone as she kissed Edmund Green. "Shit," he said. "What the —"

“I can’t figure her out, either. I tried to talk her out of it, Jo-Jo, but—”

Jo-Jo just stared. Suzy felt the danger and the power in his anger, and it thrilled her.

* * *

“Hello, Jonathan. Do you recognize me?”

“No.”

“Ellen Neville!” She poked his arm.

“No!” Jonathan shook his head and waited for another answer. He peered closer.

“It is, Jon,” smiled Edmund.

“Wow!” He shook her hand boyishly. “I didn’t recognize you. Uh —”

“Edmund and I are lovers,” explained Ellen.

Edmund slapped her arm, laughing.

“Oh.” Jonathan nodded. “Lovers?”

“She means we’re in love.”

“We’re not in it, we’re doing it!” She kissed him on the chin.

“She means we’re—” Edmund blushed and shook his head, wrinkling his nose at her.

“I know what she means,” said Jonathan. “What — Where — How did all this happen? I mean... I mean... ”

“Well —”

They both sputtered into laughter.

Jonathan rolled his eyes.

“You’re coming with us now,” said Edmund. “We’ll tell you all about it. It’s complicated.”

“No shit.”

“Come on. The pizza’s going to be cold.” Ellen jumped up and down, pulling them.

Edmund saw Jo-Jo coming toward them. “Wait a second,” he said.

Jo-Jo walked right between Jonathan and Ellen and put his finger on Edmund’s chest. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he shouted.

Edmund just raised his eyebrows, wondering if he should let himself get mad, which was happening anyway, though he was scared. If he got mad, he would go crazy, and he was afraid of that.

“What are you doing?” shouted Ellen.

“Shut up, bitch,” Jo-Jo screamed in her face. “Look at you!” He pulled her hair. “Just shut your face, just shut up! God damn you! I swear you’re gonna wish you’re —”

Before Edmund knew it, he hit Jo-Jo on the side of the head so hard his arm felt like it was struck by lightning. Jo-Jo staggered and turned to him, raising his arms and sticking out his chin in time to catch Edmund's second right.

"Come on, you fucker," Edmund screamed. He punched Jo-Jo's chest with his left hand and Jo-Jo staggered and fell back on the ground. "Come on! Come on!"

Ellen and Jonathan took a worried step toward Edmund.

Edmund straightened up as he saw Jo-Jo's eyes go blank. "Is that how you want to do it?" asked Edmund. "Come on, then! You and me! Finish it, fucker! Right now! Damn it, get up! Finish it!"

Even as Edmund said it, Ellen knew it could never be that simple.

Jo-Jo shook his head. "Bitch, you're gonna die."

Edmund laughed.

"Ellen, what the fuck are you doing with this fuck?"

"You wouldn't understand, asshole," cried Ellen.

It was like a shotgun blast. Jo-Jo threw a hand at her and cursed. He shook his head, tears in his squinched eyes. "I wanted to talk to you!"

"You don't have anything to say, Jo-Jo," said Ellen.

"My dad said —"

"I don't care what your dad said."

Jo-Jo burned in hell. He shook his head and rose to his feet in a swaying leap. "Go fuck yourself, Ellen!" he screamed at her, and he turned away, glaring one last time at Edmund.

"Go fuck yourself, Jo-Jo!" Ellen screamed.

He kicked a trashcan over as he crossed the parking lot and got in his car. He left in a blue cloud of rubber.

"Making friends, already, I see," said Jonathan. "A regular homecoming king and queen!" Jonathan laughed and slapped his leg.

Ellen squeezed Edmund's stiff arm, looking up at him. "Are you OK?"

Edmund stared off. "Ah." He shrugged. "Yeah, I'm OK. I just broke my hand."

"Oh, you're writing hand, too," she kissed the back of his hand. "I think it's O.K."

"Come on, let's eat some pizza," Edmund smiled and closed his eyes.

Ellen ran ahead and they followed.

"You bashed his head, Edmund!" said Jonathan proudly.

"I hate that," said Edmund. A tremor of tears threatened to crack the dam of his anger. "Some fuckin' creep like that shouting at Ellen. I would've bashed a fuckin' brick in his turkey brain, I swear to God, Jon!" He looked at Jonathan. "He wants to fight? Shit, I'll fuckin' die to tear his guts out, that fucking shithead!"

“Cool the jets, baby!” said Jonathan. “It’s OK. He’s not worth it. He doesn’t give a shit if you fuck him up, man. He fucks himself up, all the time, I know! You shouldn’t care about Jo-Jo so much. You’re with friends now, Edmund. Forget about Jo-Jo.”

Edmund nodded. “You’re right. As of now, that stupid scum-turkey doesn’t fucking exist.” Edmund shook himself and exhaled. “Thanks, Jon.”

“Cool. Let’s go.” Jonathan patted him on the back as they reached the car and got in. Ellen pulled out of neutral and they rolled out of the parking lot.

* * *

Ellen drove up the access road and they parked behind the abandoned caretaker's house of the hill-top cemetery.

“You carry the pizzas, Jonathan. And you, sir, carry the wine coolers.”

They started up the hill.

“So are you two gonna tell me how you got together? And what you did to yourself, Ellen? You look so beautiful now.”

“Thanks!” She pinched his side. “Well, his parents think I’m his cousin, who is actually staying at my house.”

“What?” Jonathan shook his head.

Edmund did, too. “My parents still think she’s my cousin. So did I. She’s the culprit.” He tickled her ribs with his free hand.

“And you kissed your cousin,” she shouted, shoving his hand away.

“Yes, I did, Cousin Kim!”

She wrinkled her nose at him.

“Wait a minute,” said Jonathan. “You changed your hair, and eyes, and face, and everything so he wouldn’t know it was you, and switched places with his cousin?”

Jonathan put down the pizzas on the green wooden bench and rolled back in the grass, howling.

Ellen grinned.

“You’re something, Ellen. I always thought you were such a — well, I thought, just thought — wow, it’s great!”

“Have some pizza.” Ellen put a slice point-first into his mouth.

She sat on the bench beside Edmund.

“What kind of pizza is this?” mumbled Jonathan.

“Pineapple, sausage and garlic. The other is mushroom and pepperoni.”

“This is good.”

They consumed a great deal of pizza and they toasted each other with wine coolers.

* * *

“The rain rusted it.”

“Damn.”

“Can you get it?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, come on, Jonathan.”

“There, got it!”

The heavy iron door jarred open.

“Oh no.”

“Jonathan!”

“Light some of the candles Ellen brought.”

Edmund lit three candles and they slipped through the door, Jonathan first.

“There. See? That’s the slab. Let’s climb on top of it.”

“It’s big!”

They jumped onto the slab of polished stone that stood a little over four feet high. It rested on a pedestal of rough granite. They melted the candles to the stone around them and as the flames grew in the dank air, the image of a beautiful woman emerged reclining in relief out of a black wall. A Grecian nude, whose slim curves were young and athletic, was caught laughing in the stone, a lion reclining on her far side.

“She’s beautiful,” said Ellen. “Amazing — in a tomb... How cool.”

“Yeah, it’s great! She must have been incredible. Look at her laugh.”

“She’s as pretty as Ellen,” said Jonathan.

“Almost,” said Edmund.

“Thank you, sirs,” said Ellen, hooking their arms and squeezing them against her sides.

“This is the oldest part of the cemetery. I found this tomb about a year ago. It’s the only one that’s empty. I want to see if there’s a name on it somewhere,” said Edmund. “Look over here at this back wall,” said Edmund, breaking off a candle and holding it out.

Ellen read the engraved words out loud: “Here Lies Christopher Ambrose Sumner, Born 1787, Died — and Elizabeth Spencer Sumner, Born 1792, Died —”

“They didn’t die, I guess, “ said Jonathan.

“Sumner,” whispered Edmund. *The tomb of Sumner.*

* * *

“Look at this,” said Jonathan, holding his candle to the other wall.

Opposite the carving of the young woman was a nude, young, winged man, also carved in a Greek style, reclining with an owl on his arm. A swirl of winds crossed the sky above him.

“Wow,” said Ellen. “Check that!”

“These folks are lookin’ pretty fresh to be building tombs for themselves,” said Jonathan.

“Maybe they were young and romantic, and wanted their tomb to always show them that way.” Ellen grasped Edmund’s hand.

“And they found a way to escape death before they had to use the tomb.” Edmund smiled at her. “They look familiar, both of them, somehow. Don’t they? But, I guess she must be Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, but with a lion? And he may be Icarus, but with an owl? Maybe it’s Athena and Hercules, but they’ve exchanged gifts? But wings on Hercules?”

“Nice to have you along, Dr. Jones. It’s perfect, though. Courage for her, wisdom for him.” Ellen kissed his hand, smiling closely at him.

Jonathan held his candle up to the carving of the woman.

“When they were young they found a door, right in this room, and it lead to another world,” said Ellen, smiling as Jonathan examined the smooth body of Elizabeth Sumner, caressing her curves longingly.

“Where no one dies,” said Edmund.

“Hey, I’ve got some weed,” said Jonathan. “A tiny little torn corner of a plastic bag.”

Edmund laughed. “That’s one way to leave this world!”

“Darling, let’s get high in here.” Ellen looked at Edmund, grinning.

“OK, but let me get the old sock out.” Edmund fished a gym sock out of his pocket. He carried it to tie over his wristband.

“It’s got a light on it!”

“Yeah.”

“That’s creepier than this place, Edmund,” said Jonathan.

Ellen frowned, touching it as if it were a thorn stuck in his wrist, with a glowing bead of blood.

“I agree,” he said.

“That’s the creepiest thing I’ve ever seen. What will happen if it goes off?” asked Jonathan.

“I’m off probation. Then I do 5,000 hours of community service, probably in another country. That’s two and a half years, and before that, twelve months of substance abuse programming, and I’m also not eligible for college aid.”

“Shit, tie that knot real tight,” said Jonathan. “How did you figure out a sock worked?”

"I tried it," grinned Edmund.

Ellen stroked his hand as if it were hurt or threatened, thinking about her father for a moment. "That's so stupid, Edmund." She didn't like it on him at all, not with men like her father in the world. They smoked a little weed and sat back on the wide slab in the flickering candlelight, carefully feeling high on a warm white cloud above the world, their own world, feeling more alive and free than ever before though they were hidden inside this tomb.

Ellen whispered in Edmund's ear. "My parents have a Coleman heater thing. We should get it and spend the night here."

"Yeah."

"Is that you or Mr. and Mrs. Sumner making that whispering noise?" groused Jonathan.

"Us," said Edmund.

"Do your folks know about any of this, yet?"

"Nope."

"But we're telling them tonight," said Edmund.

"Not tonight!" whined Ellen.

"I'm going to bust up laughing if I hear you say 'Good night, Aunt Louise!' one more time."

"One more time!"

"OK." Edmund couldn't resist her pleasure. "We'll ham it up, then, Cousin Kim!"

"Is that you guys making smoochy-slurpy noises or Mr. and Mrs. Sumner?" groaned Jonathan.

"Mr. and Mrs. Sumner," mumbled Ellen.

"Oh, come on, let's walk to the top of the hill. You guys can get your Coleman heater thing and come back here later for that." Jonathan jumped down from the slab and put his hands on his hips.

"All right, let's go," said Ellen. "Snoop!"

"Exhibitionist," said Jonathan.

"You're right, I think I am." Ellen grinned.

"Leave the candles. Just blow them out," said Edmund.

"OK, OK," said Jonathan.

Edmund closed the door and pulled some vines over it.

"I can't imagine my mom's face when she finds out," winced Edmund, imagining it.

"I'll break it to her. After your cousin leaves tomorrow."

"How?"

"They'll just have to find out. I'll tell them. I did this," she said.

Edmund marveled at this wonderful girl again and nodded, amazed at how easy she made the impossible seem. Her very existence reflected on everything else in the universe, revising it and brightening it. Shadows shrunk everywhere he turned, as if lit by another source. The

world was not only as big as he thought it should be, it was bigger, suddenly. "I'm not too worried about my parents," he said. "But yours are going to be surprised to find a totally different girl when they get home."

"A happy girl, yeah, who doesn't care whether they like it or not, ever again. They didn't notice when I was miserable, when I looked like I used to look. God, I can't believe the way I used to look. Why should they notice now?"

From the top of the hill they looked at the three corners of Middletown from which they came.

"I guess we're all misfits," sighed Jonathan, his chin in his hands.

Ellen smiled and closed her eyes in the sun. "Yeah, it's fun to be misfits."

"It can be dangerous, too," sighed Jonathan. "No one out there is going to help us, Ellen."

"Well, we three misfits are going to stick together, Jonathan," Edmund said. "What should we call ourselves? The Three Muskrats?"

"The Triumvirate," said Ellen.

"Yes! We'll call ourselves the Triumvirate. And we'll meet here once a week at our temple, and review the world from Mount Olympus."

Edmund shook Jonathan's hand and Ellen kissed his forehead.

"If any of us ever get in trouble, we can meet at the tomb," said Jonathan. "I mean, the temple."

"Sure," said Ellen. "We'll put a box of munchies inside, like a bomb shelter. And I'll put a cellular phone in here."

"And when we run out of food, we'll just lie down and have a decent burial," said Jonathan.

Ellen poked his side. "You know, I used to care more about people I hated," she said. "I mean, I just knew everyone was a fool and the world was crazy, and I dressed up like a clown to give them what they deserved."

They lay beside each other in the grass, looking at the striated cream-and-blueberry sky.

"I'm going to give my clothes to Suzy," snickered Ellen.

"I have a toy gun," said Jonathan.

"Yeah?" laughed Edmund.

"No, I mean, it's my defense. It's like I've got this toy gun between me and... the world, I guess. I hold it at night, and it helps me go to sleep. I think if I get surprised one night by some of them, if they bust down the door, which they could do, and get in to shoot me, I just raise the gun. Just for a second, see, and it makes them understand what they're doing. Before they kill me." He shrugged. "See."

"Man. Someone might think it's real, Jon, and that could be bad news." Edmund squeezed Jonathan's shoulder hard.

“I know.” He hung his head. “I don't think I need it anymore. It just helps me go to sleep. I don't even care about it, now. I think I might throw it away tonight.”

“Good!” Ellen kissed the top of his head and Jonathan smiled at her. She turned to Edmund. “What about you, Edmund? What was your defense?”

Edmund looked at both of them and smiled. “Silence.” He gazed at Middletown. “Silence was my defense. I knew everyone was wrong, and that they used words to make themselves right. So I didn't use them. I wouldn't use their words. I just knew they were wrong and didn't listen, didn't talk. I guess that's why I decided to be a writer,” he laughed.

“You know something?” said Jonathan to Ellen.

“What?”

“I guess not all rich pretty girls are bitches.”

“Why, thank you, Professor!” She laughed, slapping his arm.

“Hey, Jon, tell us about evolution. It's incredible, Ellen, you can pick anything and he can tell you how it got here.”

A butterfly landed on her finger. “Butterflies!”

“Well, you see, Ellen,” said Jonathan, putting his hands behind his head in the grass as he told his “Just So” story of how butterflies got their wings.

They lay in the grass and listened to Jonathan's breathless Just So stories as Edmund wove wildflowers into Ellen's hair, postponing the world around them as long as they could. Tomorrow all the world would find out about them, and all the world would be against them. But today only they existed. They didn't care about tomorrow. This was truth, and it might be the only time and place where they could live as if it mattered.

* * *

Silver bells jingled on the door as Ellen, Edmund, and Jonathan entered the shop. Mr. Hohner rose from his workbench and put on his glasses. “Oh my!”

Ellen gave him a huge handful of wildflowers. Edmund had studded two fine braids of her hair with wildflowers, running down both sides of her face.

“Who is that?” said Mr. Hohner.

“It's Ellen,” she said.

“My dear! You look so different.” Mr. Hohner looked at her all over, then his ancient face blushed. “Very nice!”

“Do you have a vase?”

“The flowers are for me?”

“Yes, Mr. Hohner.”

“You look like a princess!”

“Do you have a shoe? We can put them in a shoe!” She giggled.

“Oh, Edmund, boy, are you going to tell me?”

“Well, you gave Ellen the letter to my cousin. It probably couldn’t have happened without you.”

“I can’t believe it. Tell me what you did, Ellen. I have not slept well about this! My cleaning lady asks me every night. What happened? She was convinced it must be a drama. But first, who is your friend here?”

“Jonathan Holmes, future Nobel Prize winner,” said Edmund.

“Is he a *gut* sweeper?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” said Edmund.

“Maybe he would like to sweep in my store some time. Would you, Jonathan? For fifty big bucks?”

“Sure!”

“It has to be secret.”

“OK.”

“Edmund is my best sweeper. Another Nobel Prize winner. I find Nobel Prize winners are the best sweepers.” Mr. Hohner winked and dabbed the corners of his silver eyes with a handkerchief.

“I’m a better sweeper than Edmund,” said Jonathan, quite seriously.

“We’ll see! You may be out of work, Edmund. Some coffee for everyone?”

“We can’t stay. I just wanted you to know everything worked out,” said Ellen. “Thanks.”

Mr. Hohner grinned. He reached out his brown hands and gripped Edmund’s hand. “Good, boy, you made it, see? Good! She’s a fine girl!”

“Thanks,” Edmund smiled.

After they left, Mr. Hohner laughed high and soft, shaking his head as the bells on the door jingled.

* * *

Geoffrey and Charles watched Ellen and Edmund in the Cadillac, dropping off Jonathan. They didn’t recognize Ellen until Jonathan kissed her goodbye in the rolled down window and said “Bye, Ellen.” As Jonathan approached them, Charles shoved him back by the chest.

“What up, little brother, what up with that?”

“What?”

“That pussy!”

“Was that Ellen Neville?”

“The City Councilman’s daughter?”

“The one who busted us?”

“The one who cut you loose?” said Geoffrey.

“You’re all fucked up,” said Jonathan.

“Oh, we are?” said Geoffrey. “We’re fucked up?”

“Ellen Neville didn’t bust you,” said Jonathan. “Edmund’s her boyfriend, and he got me out of there. Jesus! He lied and got me out of there. See?”

“Well, we got busted at her house,” said Geoffrey.

“Not bad, you didn’t have nothin’ on ya.”

Geoffrey grabbed him by the sweater and shook him. “Listen, little brother, we had to leave a 500 piece behind. Those homeboys smoked it up!”

“Then you want Jo-Jo Pendleton,” said Jonathan.

“Jo-Jo keeps braggin’ that’s his bitch, man!”

“She’s with Edmund now! Edmund just banged up Jo-Jo real good!”

“What, fool?”

“Edmund messed Jo-Jo up, man. None of us like Jo-Jo.”

“Well, what you runnin’ with these rich crackers, boy?” Charles shook his head. “Man, you just gonna get messed around. They are usin’ you, that’s all. They just havin’ you around for fun, that’s all.”

“That’s all,” sneered Geoffrey, shaking his head.

“That isn’t true!”

“Oh, that isn’t true, huh?” said Geoffrey, shoving Jonathan’s chest.

“Now, look! You gotta stay with the folks you’re with, Jonathan, at the level where you’re at,” insisted Charles. “You got no friends up there, boy. Now, Geoffrey and I need a spotter, and we were wonderin’ where you’re off to, and you’re off with that, man! You wanna join the M-13 someday? Well then you get your ass down to that corner and take your hat off when you see the po-lice, chump.” Charles put his cap on Jonathan’s head. “Can you do that for us now, fool?”

“No!” He threw off the hat and ran up the stairs.

“Who does that Mute thinks he is,” said Geoffrey, looking after him.

“He’s gettin’ all messed up by those cracker freaks, man.”

“Yeah.”

“No lie.”

“That’s right.”

“Shit!”

* * *

On the way back, Ellen stopped at a mini-mall and blindfolded Edmund with her scarf so he couldn't see which store she went into. "Stay here," she said.

He laughed and waited in the car. When she returned, she set a brown paper bag on the seat next to her and took off his blindfold.

"What's in the bag?"

"Silly boy," she said.

She parked the Cadillac down the street from Edmund's house and they went in.

"Well, you two had a big day," said Edmund's father, rounding up his charm.

"Yes, we sure did!"

"You two must be starving," said Mrs. Green, coming out of the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron.

"Not after two pizzas," said Edmund.

"Oh, you shouldn't have spent money on food. I made a big dinner!"

"Edmund's going to read me his story, and I couldn't eat a thing."

"OK, you two. But if you're hungry later, there's roast, potatoes, carrots, and string beans!"

"Thanks. Maybe we will, in a while. It sounds really delicious!"

Ellen followed Edmund.

When the door was closed, they muffled painful laughter against each other's shoulder.

"You're evil!" whispered Edmund.

"Not really," sighed Ellen, kissing his chin.

Edmund slid the bookcase in front of the door.

Ellen pulled a plastic bag full of water out of the paper bag, opened the top of Edmund's aquarium and poured fifty neon tetras into the tank.

"Oh my God," he smiled.

"Do you like them?"

"You should have introduced them a little slower," he said. He hugged her. "They're great!"

The bright red, silver and blue fish darted in unison through the water. The playful Pelagius leaped up through their midst in curiosity as Augustine observed them with inscrutable avidity.

Edmund kissed her. After he fed the fish, Ellen lay on the bed and Edmund sat in a chair beside her, raising an eyebrow at her, his first short story in his hands.

"I can't wait!"

"Shh. I'm nervous. I haven't read it to anyone. I sent it out to three magazines, and I'm nervous about that, but this isn't the same." He put his hand on her forehead. "I guess you should pretend I'm making love to you, because that's what it will be like for me."

She closed her eyes and listened to his story, a story about themselves, the Triumvirate, in a different world for one day, a world where they went to a beautiful private school that sought out kids like Jonathan Holmes like prospectors sought gold. A campus where humans could walk naked in public without being arrested, and where art celebrated the beauty and passion and reason of human beings, instead of denigrating it. And in the city outside the school, there were no victims in the crossfire of a drug war, no criminals getting rich, no cops turning bad or getting killed, no politicians being bought, no one running scared. The single day Edmund described in this world seemed so real, it could only be an impossible fantasy.

“Mmm.” Ellen sighed after he was finished.

He lay next to her, and they looked at the 50 neons turned, flashing in unison.

“If only the world were that free, Edmund.” She tugged his elbow. “Wouldn’t it be —” Ellen saw the red light on his wristband as he caressed the side of her breast. “That disgusting thing on your wrist. God, I wish I could pull that thing off you.”

“It’s OK.”

“No, it’s not!” She kissed him as he lay beside her. “The whole world seems bigger next to you.” A smile chased the anger from her face.

“I feel like you’re the other side of everything, El.” He kissed her throat, pulled the braids out of her hair as she stretched out, the flowers tumbling over the pillow.

After his parents said good night through the door, Ellen made him take off his clothes and lie still on his stomach on the bed. She explored and examined every muscle of his body and every square inch of his skin with her fingers and her mind, as if she were discovering her own body for the first time. And then he had her lie still and felt every tendon and curve of every limb and inch of her body, as though it were his. When they finally came together that night, they were like a single being awaking in its new body, feeling its farthest sinews and nerves at the edges of the universe.

They awoke with the sun, entwined in sleep and dream, and separated before the world outside discovered them.

And when Ellen shut his door, the 50 neon tetras splintered in the dawn’s early light.

* * *

“Who hit you?”

“Jesus, Dad. This fucking jerk who’s goin’ out with Ellen now!”

“What? God damn it!”

Jo-Jo stood before his strapping father who hit his desk, shivering the wood.

“Back up! A guy took your girl and punched you out?” His big head hung tilted on his thick neck toward Jo-Jo.

“He sucker-punched me, Dad! I was talking to Ellen. I didn’t even know he was there!”

“And what did you do?”

“I was jumped, Dad. I was stunned. He popped me!”

“Ellen — you say she’s going out with this kid?” asked Thad, thinking, strangely, of all the money he had donated to Tom Neville’s campaign funds through the years.

“Yeah.”

“How the Hell did that happen?”

“You should see her! She looks like a hippy or something. This guy’s a drug addict, Dad. He wears one of those wristbands, you know! He’s some kind of crazy reject from school. He’s a wacko, Dad, you should hear him!”

“Jesus Christ. Well, I’m going to have to tell Tom about this. What in the Hell has gotten into Ellen, I wonder? God damn it, a great gal like Ellie?” He shook his large head and planted his fist on his desk again, softly, squeezing it and bulging his arm against the tourniquet of his rolled-up shirt sleeve. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, son!”

* * *

Ms. Monroe pointed at two names on the board:

1. Lord Jim
2. The Reddleman (The Return of the Native)

“Now, what can we find in common and in contrast between these two characters?”

Jill raised her hand. “When the native returned, he broke the traditions of the community and brought disaster to his lover and the community.” She read from her spiral-bound notebook. “Lord Jim gave up his own life to observe the customs of the native community. So, the Reddleman is selfish and lacked loyalty and caused harm to others, and Lord Jim was brave and good for giving his own life for the community.”

“Class, this is an excellent analysis and comparison of the themes of these novels,” announced Ms. Monroe. “Thank you, Jill.” Ms. Monroe glanced at Edmund for a reaction shot.

Ellen raised her hand.

“Ellen,” said Ms. Monroe, perplexed at her completely different appearance. She seemed naked somehow, obscenely intimate, as though

she hadn't bothered to get ready for school. Of course she was much more modest than usual, overall. Ms. Monroe's mind was stained with confusion and tinted with suspicion.

"Lord Jim is brave because he gives his life for the community. The Reddleman is selfish and doesn't care about the tradition of the community." Her voice had the monotone of a robot. She winked at Edmund across from her.

"Very good, Ellen." Ms. Monroe glanced at her to make sure. "Edmund?"

"I think Conrad thought if you want to wear a white suit, like Lord Jim, you have to be ready to give away your own life. And I think Hardy thought that if you live for yourself, you're covered in dirt, like the Reddleman."

"Very colorful phrasing, Edmund. Well, that's interesting. Do you find something wrong with either moral message?"

"I think they're both wrong."

"Really?" Ms. Monroe smiled.

"So do I, actually," said Ellen, blase.

Ms. Monroe's smile flattened.

Jo-Jo blushed as the whole thing dawned on the class.

"Wha — well! Ellen, do you have something to add?" Ms. Monroe glared at her, suspicious now at her whole new look.

"I think Lord Jim was a fool, a complete idiot and a symbol of what most people do, not what the brave people do who have everything to lose but hold onto themselves." She stared right back at Ms. Monroe.

"The brave people, Ellen? And who would the 'brave' people be?" Ms. Monroe placed her hands on her hips, exaggerating her nonchalance.

"The ones who still give a damn about themselves. I suppose that sounds selfish, Ms. Monroe? Well, I think it's the greatest thing you can find in a person, if you can still find it, and you really make it very, very hard, all of you, you know. It's a miracle to find somebody who still has the guts to throw the mud off himself and believe in himself, and be himself, dressed in white without being crucified for it. Someone who hasn't been turned into some robot, spitting out little preprogrammed essays. Someone who isn't what somebody tells him to be, or says what somebody tells him to say or thinks what somebody tells her to think. The best people, Ms. Monroe. The people who are still trying to be people."

"Well." Ms. Monroe folded her arms over her breasts. "I can see you've been listening to Edmund."

The class laughed, releasing the tension of their intellectual chaos. The orthodoxy had been challenged, which was so insensitive they reeled with hurt and confusion.

“I just think they’re totally wrong,” said Jo-Jo. “Lord Jim is better than anyone can be. Like Jesus, man. He knows how much he owes to the community, and he’s willing to pay up, even with his own life! So it’s OK. That’s why he can wear white.”

Ms. Monroe smiled warmly at Jo-Jo — her strong and loyal and beautiful guardian, her Billy Budd, her Lord Jim. And there was Edmund, her Reddleman with the red light on his wrist, she thought. “Well, I am afraid the discussion is getting a little far afield today. Therefore, the timed writing I had scheduled for the end of class will begin now,” said Ms. Monroe. She smiled at Edmund and looked at Ellen, shaking her head ominously.

* * *

Edmund high-fived Ellen in the hall. “My darling, you lopped her head off!”

“Oh, that witch deserves it.” Ellen laughed. “I had to see the expression on her face.” She tossed her book into her bag and turned to him.

“Bye, brave girl. Don’t get us lynched, now.” He wagged his finger and swatted her behind and she laughed, pleased with herself as they set off in different directions down the absurdly long halls to their next classes, purposeful and proud along their way as if on a secret mission.

Jo-Jo was suddenly in front of her. “Hi, Ellen. I think I should talk to you.”

“Well, I think you shouldn’t,” she said, walking past him. “Are you going to start screaming and pulling my hair and pushing people, Jo-Jo?”

“Listen, God damn it, I think I should talk to you! You should think about what you’re doing.”

“Ha! You should think about what you’re doing, Jo-Jo, once in a while.”

“You’re makin’ a big mistake, Elly!”

“I was making a big mistake. It’s over now, Jo-Jo. I’m sorry.” She looked at him. “Goodbye.” She left before he could reply.

* * *

At lunch, Ellen went to her house to pick up Kimberly, who had been staying there, and drove her to the bus station.

“This was more romantic than the wedding,” said Kimberly, hugging her. “Bye, and good luck with Edmund. I’m so happy it

worked! I'm going to tell everyone about this at the wedding. They will not believe it. No one will."

"Thanks. Thanks for your name, Kim."

"Sure, El. Cool, cool," Kim kissed her.

"I'm going to tell them tonight it was all my idea."

"Good luck! I'll phone my parents tonight — cushion the blow a little bit for you!"

"Thanks! You're the best." Ellen smiled.

"I'll catch the bouquet for you!"

Ellen laughed and nodded, waving as the big silver bus hissed and rolled out of the station.

* * *

Ellen picked Edmund up after school and drove to her parents' house. "Now, they're home, and I want you to meet them."

"OK."

"OK," Ellen nodded. She braced herself. What did it matter what they thought? It was her life!

They entered the living room and found her father tanned and wearing a peach polo shirt, slumped back in a chair with a fresh gin and tonic. Her mother was out on the deck, stretching.

"Dad, Mom, I'm home!"

"Well — Ellen? What — Have you changed your hair?"

"Hello, dear! You certainly have... changed your whole look. I can hardly recognize you!"

"Yes, that's what I was just saying, Betty."

"Do you like it?" Ellen asked. She wore tapered new blue jeans and Edmund's soft lime cotton shirt with dark green buttons and simple tennis shoes.

"Mmmm, kind of plain, dear, don't you think?" He didn't like it.

"No, and I'm comfortable. Mom, Dad, this is my boyfriend, Edmund."

Her father got up, wordless. Her mother put a smile on and went to shake Edmund's hand.

"Edmund Green, Mr. Neville," said Edmund.

Mr. Neville gripped his hand firmly. "Well, when did all of this happen, Ellen?" He smirked openly at his daughter.

"While you were in Kauai! I told you I was going to do some thinking about things."

"Well, dear, what happened with Jo-Jo? Excuse me, son, for asking."

"I don't love him."

“And you two are in love, dear?” asked her mother, cranking her smile.

“Yes,” they both nodded.

“Well.” Her mother glanced at her father. “Please stay for dinner. We’re a little jet-lagged, but we can —”

“No, Mom. We’re going for dinner over at Edmund’s house.”

“Is it far? I can drop you off if —”

“Can we take the car? It’s across town.”

“Oh. Sure. When will you be home, then?”

“Around nine, I think.”

“All right, dear. It was nice meeting you, Edmund.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Neville. It was nice meeting you and Mr. Neville.”

“We’ll get a chance to talk later, young man,” said Mr. Neville.

“Yes.” Edmund smiled.

Ellen kissed them goodbye and they left.

“What the Hell was that?” said Mr. Neville.

“Calm down, Tom. I don’t know.”

“That boy, Betty, is a drug addict!”

“Tom! How could you tell that from just looking at him? I think you’re being a little too judgmental!”

“He has a probationary wristband on, Betty! Plus, did you see how short his hair is, and that coat? I think he’s some kind of punk! Look what he’s done with our daughter!” He was pacing. “I think she looks like she’s on drugs. That’s why she’s been acting strange lately. Oh my God! I thought it would go away, we would come back, and she would be all right again.” He rested his head on his hand.

“You’re overreacting, Tom.”

“Did you see her? She looks like she’s joined a cult!”

“She does look awfully drab,” shrugged Ellen’s mother. “Maybe his folks are poor and she didn’t want to intimidate him.”

“So if she’s slumming, that’s OK? Drab? Darling, no make-up, her hair’s just plain and straight, her clothes — it’s a cult. It’s a self-destructive cult! She’s on drugs! These are the classic symptoms — doesn’t want to be like her friends, wants to buck authority, doesn’t care about her appearance. God, something’s gotten into her.”

“I think you’re going too far, Thomas.”

“Honey, Ellen has always cared about her personal appearance. She’s been a downright star, the way she presents herself!”

“She’s still a lovely girl, Tom. She just looks simpler now. Practical in a way, and fresh sort of —”

“She looks like she’s joined a monastery! She’s let herself go because of some pothead punk! What about Jo-Jo? She thinks Edmund’s better? There’s a problem there, Betty!”

“We’ll just have to find out more, Tom. You’re tired now!”

The phone rang.

“Let it ring,” he said.

After the third ring, the message played, and a voice came on the speaker: “Tom, this is Thad. I think Ellen has gotten mixed up with a kid you should know something about. Call me as soon as you’re in.”

He looked at his wife. “God damn it!”

* * *

“Well, two down, two to go,” she said, brightly. “How should we do this?”

“As directly as possible. It’s time for the truth now.”

“I did this. Let me tell them.”

“We’ve played a mean joke on them, El, even though we didn’t mean to. I don’t really see how they’ll understand, it’s too crazy, but they have to know the truth.”

“Does your dad get violent?”

“He’ll holler, but he won’t get violent. He better not.”

“If you guys get in a fight, he’ll kick you out. Then where will we be?”

“Well, if you get kicked out, too, we can live in the temple together. Or I can live there and you can visit me.”

“Great.”

“Come on. I think Jo-Jo was the first fight I was in since elementary school. I hope it’s the last. Let’s just hope it doesn’t get that bad.”

“Yeah, OK. I’m sorry.”

“OK.”

Ellen smiled. “Jo-Jo’s afraid of you, you know?”

“No.”

“Yeah. He is. I can tell. I know why.”

“Why?”

“Never mind.” She looked at him as he looked at the road.

His eyes registered an approaching obstacle. He turned to her. “Prepare to brake, dear.” He grinned.

She pressed her foot down on the brake.

Ellen pulled the Cadillac into the driveway of Edmund’s house. His father was home. He looked out the window and watched as they got out. Edmund saw him turn to his mother.

They rang the bell and went in.

“Kimberly, Edmund,” said Louise Green, trying to smile.

“Where did you get the car, Edmund?” said Ed Green.

“It’s my parents’ car, Mr. Green. Mrs. Green, I think we should all sit down. I have something to tell you.”

Edmund and Ellen sat on the couch and Ed and Louise Green shrank slowly into armchairs.

“What’s wrong, Kimberly?” asked Louise.

“Nothing, except that I’m not Kimberly.” She smiled at Edmund and took his hand. “My name is Ellen Neville. I must say I’m so very, very sorry to have deceived you both. But I love Edmund. I know it will sound unbelievable, but your niece and I switched places, Louise, so that Edmund would think I was someone else. If he thought I was the girl I used to be, Mr. and Mrs. Green, he would never have given me a chance. And I wouldn’t have wanted him to. I only ask you to forgive me and give me a chance.”

“Well — now wait a second, damn it,” said Ed. “I can’t believe this! You mean you’ve been acting like our niece all this time!” He looked at his wife. “What in the world! And Edmund, you’re in on this?”

Edmund winced.

“He didn’t even recognize me,” said Ellen. “In order to introduce myself, I had to be somebody else. It’s a long story.” She shrugged. “That was my fault. But now you know, and so does he. I’m Ellen Neville, and we wanted to tell you we love each other.” Ellen looked at their shocked faces. “Oh God, I know it’s terrible, but it’s wonderful, too, don’t you see?” She laughed brightly, unable to stay somber before his grim-faced parents.

“Where is our niece, then?” said Louise.

“Everything’s fine, Mrs. Green,” Ellen said. “She stayed at my house. She’s on her way to the wedding in Goshen now. She’s probably already there. She sends her love and apologies, too. She’s going to write you a letter about it.”

“Edmund, you must have found out about this,” said his father.

“I love her, Dad,” said Edmund. “Her crazy plan worked.” He grinned.

“You love her? After she plays this trick on you, you love her?” He shook his head. “Well, little lady, this is a damn fine way to introduce yourself, butting right into family matters!”

“Dad, we’re telling you because Ellen is going to be a lot closer to our family than my cousin in Minnesota. I know you’re shocked, and we are very sorry. It was strange, yeah. Very strange. That’s for sure. But, what we’re trying to say is that this is the truth now, and everything’s really great. Really great, Mom.” Edmund smiled at his mother. “Much better than before, in every way. You’ll see. See, Dad?”

“I just can’t believe it! Does Kimberly’s mother know about this monkey business?” asked his mother, her pain lashing out.

Edmund stood up. “Damn it! Ellen, please go.”

Ellen, who was just about to answer, left at his will, though against hers.

Edmund walked her to the door. When it was closed he turned to them. "If you're going to insult Ellen, I would rather Ellen didn't have to hear it, Mom."

"Edmund," said his Dad. "This rich girl comes along in her big car and sweeps you off and cons the whole family, and you're saying you're in love? Boy, this is it. This just beats it. This is the whole thing, Edmund, right here in a nutshell. This girl is using you for a little thrill, son! She dresses poor so she can go slumming with suckers like you. And you believe it! She's playing some kind of sick game, Edmund. You can't fall for this. Wake up, boy!"

His mother suddenly began to cry, covered her eyes, and rocked on the couch.

Edmund nodded with a crazy chuckle.

"This can't be happening!" His mother got up and ran into the bedroom.

"God damn it! You've got some apologies to make, Edmund!"

"No, I don't."

Edmund went to his room, standing with every muscle tensed. He sighed, staring in shock and disgust out the window.

* * *

"Ellen, get in here. Your mother and I want to talk to you!"

Ellen closed the front door and walked down the hall toward the voices in the living room. Her natural, clean look gave her a kind of calm courage. She had nothing to hide anymore, and wasn't hiding.

She sat down in the living room. They remained standing.

"I've just spoken to Thad Pendleton, and he told me some things about this boy you're with. We have to talk to you about it."

Ellen looked at her parents, incredulous.

They sat down on the couch facing her. "Ellen, sweetie, the boy is a drug addict. He hangs around members of a black gang downtown that deals crack in the projects. And he's dangerous, honey. He attacked Jo-Jo. He's a rebel at school and he hasn't got much of a future, and you know that, darling. He comes from a lower class, white trash Irish mentality and he's never going to make anything of himself."

Ellen lost her cool. "Can you hear all of that? How can you give the speeches you give? Did Thad Pendleton actually tell you all that?" Her mind went over the list again, fighting the urge to laugh, but she did. She reminded herself that this was serious, that she wasn't dreaming, and that it was potentially dangerous. "Hangs out with gang members?" She did laugh. "With Jonathan, you mean! And Jo-Jo, Jo-Jo started the fight.

Edmund was defending me! Irish? Mom's Irish, right, Mom? Smokes pot? At least he doesn't smoke crack and light cats on fire, like your darling Jo-Jo! Edmund got caught — for weed, for Christ's sake! He just didn't have the friends Jo-Jo's got, Dad."

"Well, that's a good point, honey. What is Edmund going to become? Just what kind of life can he give you? You better just think hard about that one, little girl!" Her father glared at her, his eyebrows arching soberly.

"I would rather have life in poverty than riches without life," she said.

"Did Edmund tell you that, I suppose, dear?" He glanced at her mother.

"No." Ellen closed her eyes, smiling at the rush of irony. "What should it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul? It's in the Bible, remember, Dad? But in the Bible, Christ gave up his own life for everyone, for sinners. That's what I was doing. You shouldn't give up your life. Edmund never gave up, and he gave me the strength to save myself, too."

"Jesus! It is some cult!"

"Dear, you don't know what you're saying or how this sounds," said her mother. "You'll see, but you've got to trust us. We're trying to save you from a terrible disappointment. This boy has filled your mind with all kinds of things, wonderful things I'm sure, and right now you're very impressed by him. But that will pass and then where will you be? You have to be very practical now and think about your future."

"Do I, Mom?" Ellen looked into her mother's eyes. For a moment there was a startled contact, and her mother looked at her drink. "I did this, not him. I fell in love with him and had to make him fall in love with me."

"Love! Love? What's all this about love, Ellen?" Her father threw his arms up and turned in disgust.

She pointed at her father's fraternity paddle with its red and gold motto on the wall. "No man is one man. You had me believing that, Dad! You broke my heart with that thing. You made me give up and stop looking for anyone real! I believed Jo-Jo was the best there could be until I saw Edmund."

"So Edmund is a rebel, is that it?" Her father shook his head. "Terrific."

She ran across the room, jumped on his chair and pulled the fraternity paddle from the wall. She turned to him. "No Man is One Man? Is that your motto, Dad?" She slammed it on his desk and grabbed a thick black marker from his pen-caddy.

"Ellen!" said her mother.

She crossed out the "IS" and wrote "OR" in black ink.

“Don’t you dare write on that, dammit!” He rose, furious.

She laughed, having gotten his attention with the absurd fraternity paddle.

“Give me that!” Her father pulled the fraternity paddle from her and she broke away from him and ran to her room, slamming the door and locking it behind her. She threw herself on her bed, clutched her pillow and cried herself to sleep.

* * *

“Hello, Pat? This is Betty Neville, Ellen’s mother?” What she didn’t say was PTA Treasurer, or wife of the City Councilman Tom Neville; she didn’t have to.

“Yes, Mrs. Neville! What may I do for you today?”

“Well, it seems that my daughter has fallen for a pretty rough kid, a bad influence on Ellen, apparently. I wonder if you could find out about him for me?”

“What’s his name?”

“Edmund. Edmund Green.”

“Well, let’s take a look at his file.” She punched the name into her Mack Link. “OK, here we go. Uh, let me see, now. He’s listed as mentally advantaged, but his grades have always been average or below. This year his grades are hurting. He’s in Advanced Placement Government and English, but Ms. Monroe reports that he has very poor citizenship and is sometimes disruptive. The school psychologist diagnosed him as having AYDS and RELCS.”

“What are those?”

“Attention/Yelling Deprivation Syndrome, and, wait a minute, let me look it up, Reactionary Ego/Logic/Nationalism Syndrome. That’s a rare one, these days, but it still crops up. They’re adolescent conditions, Mrs. Neville, not diseases per se. He has been given a prescription wheel for a number of mood-corrective drugs, but he’s refused to take them. According to the school records he’s also on Drug Abuse Probation for marijuana, and must wear the protection band at all times. If he goes off probation, there go his chances of a scholarship or any financial aid. He’ll be required to do two-and-a-half years of community service, by the way, and his parents aren’t in the income range to send him to school without federal assistance. And, of course, since he’s listed as mentally advantaged based on IQ tests, that puts him at the bottom of the list for many school resources. It seems like he’s skating on some pretty thin ice, over all, Mrs. Neville.”

“My God, Pat. What can we do?”

“I can talk to Ellen about this.”

“Maybe someone can talk to Edmund?”

“I think someone here should. I can have another counselor speak to him about his behavior and his performance.”

“Pat, I don’t know how to thank you.” Betty sighed.

“Not at all, Mrs. Neville. I’ll call Ellen in today after school.”

“Good.”

“And we’ll have a talk with Edmund tomorrow.”

“Thank you!”

“Not at all, Mrs. Neville.”

“Bye, now!”

“Bye-bye!”

* * *

“So what do you think about Edmund Green, Douglas?” asked Doris Monroe at lunch in the school cafeteria, a gigantic gymnasium that had been converted to seat 10,000 students. The school gymnasium was a retro-fitted 200,000 square foot warehouse. Doris had just told Edmund’s Social Studies teacher, Douglas Thatcher, that Pat Brooks had asked her about Edmund intimidating Ellen Neville.

“I think he’s a very bright kid with a lot of potential and a lot going against him,” said Mr. Thatcher. He was thirty and had a look that seemed forty, a head of black hair over a practical face and black-framed glasses. His eccentric posture made him an unassuming and easily likable member of the staff. There was a tired, good-natured surrender about him as he shouldered his share of the mundane academic duties with the rest of the teaching staff, but he brightened up the dull toil for everyone with his occasional wit. It was a gift the humorless Doris Monroe distrusted, and envied. “Edmund is an original thinker,” he said. “But he can’t follow instructions, and that’s going to get him in trouble down the road. He’s one of those kids who wakes up too soon, discovers himself, dreams big dreams, and quotes the Founding Fathers. ‘Give me Liberty or give me death!’ I don’t know where they get it, but it’s a long hard road before a kid like this straightens out. I don’t envy him. I don’t think his college prospects are good. But intimidating a girl? I think he’s more honorable than that. His problem, in a way, is that he’s far too honorable for his own good. No, I don’t believe that about him, Doris.”

“Far too honorable!” Ms. Monroe took her glasses off and her laugh was like a slap in his face. “I haven’t gotten that impression, Douglas! I saw them together in my class yesterday, and you should see Ellen. She, well, she looks like Edmund now!”

“I saw her. It looked like an impossible improvement,” said Douglas Thatcher drily.

“The point is, I think he’s dragging Ellen in a bad direction, Douglas. You said yourself Edmund’s got a hard road to hoe with his

attitude, and we both know about his drug problem. I think he's a very bad influence on Ellen."

Douglas doubletaked. "Drug problem? They get stoned once in a while! I don't blame the kids. They have a world problem, Doris! I'd be worried that something was wrong with them if they didn't need to get away from it now and then. God, I actually look forward to Edmund's class. I like to hear him fight back. It's a lost cause, but I have to give the kid a break. I feel sorry for him. He's an anachronism."

She put her glasses back on as if she were covering for his heretical remarks. "I had no idea you imputed such mythic stature to Edmund Green, Douglas," she laughed. "But meanwhile, Ellen is apparently getting very serious about him," she said seriously.

"Well, good for them. They're young! Ellen's got a lot more to her than anyone thought if she did this." Douglas laughed, shaking his head and shrugging. "I'm impressed, enormously. It shows character. It's rare, nowadays, Doris! Don't you get bored with kids that are all the same and act like the group they've been assigned to? I do! God, it's frightening, sometimes, how easily they fit into our handbooks. But these two kids have, for a short while together, something most people never have. I think it's great. Let 'em dream before they run into reality! It'll happen soon enough," he shrugged.

"Douglas, I think you're taking this whole thing too cavalierly. I know you're a cynic, but Ellen's future as a student is at stake here! Her timed writing yesterday was an attack on the moral basis of the reading comparison I proposed as the thesis."

Mr. Thatcher smiled at the familiar boldness, his bushy eyebrows rising over the frame of his glasses. "Sounds like Edmund, all right."

Doris frowned. "It isn't funny! Ellen's grades are going to follow Edmund's right out of school, in my class, at least. I looked at his records — his grades aren't so good in your class, either!"

"Yes, well, he's a bright kid. I wouldn't want the grades to —"

"Douglas!" She frowned, shaking her head. "It doesn't matter that he's a bright kid. You know that! It matters what grades he's getting and what kind of future he's headed for, which doesn't look bright, at all!"

"Well, no, but the grades don't reflect — he is a very bright kid, and —"

"If we have to make a statement, are you going to say, 'he's a bright kid' and sanction the trouble he's going to drag Ellen into when they run into the hard facts of reality, Douglas? With his drug record and his academic prospects — and his grades — Douglas?"

Defeated, the pragmatic iconoclast caved in. "I guess not! Not in this political stew," he shrugged.

"Good. That's settled."

“Whatever.” Mr. Thatcher shook his head and shrugged his high shoulders cynically. He stuffed a bran muffin in his mouth, foregoing the butter substitute.

* * *

At the end of Government class, Ms. Winter gave Ellen a pink office summons. She told Edmund to wait outside the towering administration building for her and stopped in at the desk.

She was directed to the appropriate elevator and found Pat Brooks’ office. She waited while she went over a fresh form on the screen of her Mak-Link which had Ellen’s name inserted at the top. “Ellen, your mother asked me to speak to you. Do you know why she asked me to speak with you?”

“I think so.” She laughed, hanging her jacket on the back of the chair.

“You seem to think she’s wrong. Well, Ms. Monroe told me she was afraid your grades are going to go down and that it may have something to do with Edmund Green’s influence. Now, Ellen. Edmund has had a little drug problem. While I’m sure he’s a very nice boy, he had a few other personal problems over the summer. As your counselor, I can only advise you against getting too involved with him.”

Ellen nodded, impressed by her naked, confident gall. “Ms. Brooks. Remember how I used to look when I walked in here?” She looked steadily into Pat Brooks’ eyes. Ellen hoped they could see her now. “Do you remember? Do you remember my Geisha makeup? My blue eyes? My hair? Do you remember my hair?”

“Yes, Ellen. I remember your hair.”

Ellen laughed. “That was a wall I put up, Ms. Brooks. It was a plastic disguise for a plastic universe. I’m here now, Ms. Brooks. This is me. I’m not afraid. These are clothes I like on me, for me, and I know that’s what Edmund wants — me. I thought no one wanted it before him, and I think I was right. I am happier than ever before, with him, and I’m in love. What can you have against that?”

“You’re in love.” It wasn’t a statement or a question. She clicked a box on the screen. “OK, dear. But you know this road won’t be easy. I just think you should think it over —”

“I thought it over very carefully. But I think you should stop.” Ellen rose.

“Ellen, I know you’re under a lot of stress, dear.”

“You don’t know... shit.”

“Now, please —”

“I’m not on the rag, I’m not on drugs, I’m not in a cult, and I’m not crazy.”

“Ellen, Ellen, shush now.” Pat Brooks smiled, closing her eyes patiently. She folded her hands, tilting her head. “Are you going to calm down? Then maybe we can talk this out and find out what the problem is.”

“All right. Then I’ll leave so it’s easier to find.”
Ellen grabbed her jacket and left.

* * *

She almost fell against Edmund outside. He squeezed her shoulders. “How are you?”

“Oh God, Edmund,” she said against his neck. She opened her eyes over his shoulder and saw Sheriff Buchanan standing behind Edmund, watching them.

“Is that kid botherin’ you, Ellen?” he said.

“What?”

Edmund turned.

“I hope you’re staying out of trouble, son.”

Edmund gripped her hand hard and stopped the words she was about to say. “I’m keeping out of trouble, Sheriff Buchanan.”

Buchanan looked at Ellen. “Is he hurtin’ you?”

“No, he’s not hurting me, Sheriff Buchanan.” She smiled.

“Let me see your thing,” said Buchanan.

Edmund extended his wrist.

Buchanan turned Edmund’s hand over, close to his face. “Gonna have to get a new battery pretty soon,” he said peering at the red L.E.D. He looked up at Edmund. “This one’s getting a little low, there, son.”

Edmund nodded.

“OK. You can go. But be good now!”

They drove out of the school parking lot as sleet started falling from the slate-gray sky. The dam of winter was finally breaking.

They stopped on a sidestreet and looked at each other as ice shattered on the windshield, and they embraced and she sobbed. Edmund combed his fingers through her hair. “It’s OK. They don’t matter.”

She squeezed his arms, as if to keep back her tears. “Even if they do,” she said, looking into his eyes and clutching his black sweater.

Edmund stroked her neck, whispering her name.

* * *

“Listen, Jo-Jo, I don’t want you to touch this guy. No sense getting in trouble. We’ll handle this.”

Jo-Jo smiled. His dad could handle anything. “Thanks, Dad!”

His father looked up at him from the papers he was signing. "Jo-Jo, this kid is dangerous for Ellen to get mixed up with. I want you to tell me what went wrong with you and her, anyway?"

"I don't know, Dad. She got all weird all of a sudden, and now she's with this guy!"

"Well, son. Hmm." Thad Pendleton heaved a weary sigh. "Drugs can do some bad, bad things to people's minds. This Edmund kid is obviously very messed up and is getting Ellen all mixed up, too. You know, I never want to hear about you involved in drugs again. You got that, kid?"

"Yes, sir."

"Because, by God, if I ever hear of my sons doing drugs ever again, why they're no better than this scum who's going out with Ellen, now are they?"

"No, sir."

"Good! If it ever happens again, I'd turn my own son in to the police. I will, Jo-Jo! If I thought you were getting into that garbage after you got a break most kids don't get, I wouldn't hesitate. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Good. Now, I think Ellen will be fine. You'll be sure and ask her to the Inauguration Party the Nevilles are having."

"Dad, she doesn't even want to talk to me."

"What?" Thad rubbed his chin, vexed. "Well, we're going to help her, son. Just don't worry about it." He nodded, taking his reading glasses off and rubbing his forehead. "You better stay out of it, OK?" He looked out the window and saw his wife with the delivery truck in front of the house. "Go along now with Teddy and help your mother with the groceries."

"OK, Dad!"

Thad watched Jo-Jo run outside with his little brother and he smiled, nodding his big head. Somehow, he'd fix this thing.

* * *

Betty looked up at him from the steaming water. "Tom, I found out from Pat Brooks, the school counselor, today that Edmund Green does have a drug problem. He should be on prescription drugs, but he's refused to take them. Apparently he has psychological problems. His parents aren't of the means to send him to college, and if he's caught on drugs again, he'll be ineligible for college aid and will be forced to do two and a half years of community service and Positive Programming!"

“Splendid! Bright future!” Tom Neville got into the built-in hot tub on the top deck adjoining the living room. He sipped his usual light gin and tonic to combat the shock of heat.

“If that thing on his wrist goes off, apparently, he’s in a lot of trouble. For a boy with a poor background, I would think that’s a serious liability.”

“Yes, it is indeed.” Tom chuckled, and he took a few swallows of his drink. “I know a certain peace officer who owes a pretty huge favor to me, Betty.” He smiled as heat felt cold for a moment on his tingling skin and cold felt hot in his tingling stomach. He splashed his face. “No, no, don’t worry. He’s very reliable. And considering, it’s no wonder. He helped when Jo-Jo was arrested for that thing, remember, dear?” He opened his eyes at her.

“Tom, what huge favor does he owe you?”

“He killed a prostitute he was sleeping with who was going to turn him in in Atlantic City. I got him a transfer to a job here five years ago.”

“What?”

“Can you imagine, a hooker turning him in? Anyway, he caught her robbing him in the morning and there was a fight. He lost his head and ended up shooting her. She died. Civil rights groups were trying to put pressure on him and I helped him get transferred to Middletown.” Tom slurped his drink. “He was just a lonely, battered cop, Betty, who tried to help her. As soon as he took a little for himself from the sewer of vices he was fighting, he was going to be ruined. He did a lot more good than bad, and they were going to hang him out to dry. The hooker had been arrested a dozen times and walked every time. Nowadays, when those girls go to prison, they stay there till they’re no good on the street anymore, and when Pete Parson takes office, you can bet we’ll throw away the key. That’s the irony of it all.”

“But Tom, why would you need him?”

“Well, I’m just saying it’s nice to know where this Edmund character has a little weakness, that’s all, honey.” He grinned behind his tall glass.

“Tom?” Betty Neville suddenly thought she understood him. “I wonder if that’s right. I think we should have Edmund over and give him a fair hearing before we do anything like that. Don’t you think? For Ellen’s sake, I mean.”

“Oh, I agree! We’ll give him some time.” He laughed. “Sure, we’ll have him over for dinner. That’s a good idea, actually.”

The waterproof phone rang in the puddle of water on the deck and Tom picked it up. “Thad? Yes, I spoke to him this morning. He’s looking into it, and Betty just gave me an interesting new angle. I agree, there’s nothing Jo-Jo can do, now. We’ll just have to see how Ellen’s

doing. Yeah, OK, buddy. Yep. Good night, guy, say good night to Barbara for me. You bet, I know, I know. Thanks, partner!”

“Tom, I don’t know.”

“What now, darling?”

“I think we should wait a bit and give them a chance, don’t you?”

“I’ll wait a bit! Yes! We’ll give them a chance.”

She clutched her glass of chardonnay. “I think we shouldn’t be too hasty,” she said, staring at the pink crystal rim as the alcohol rose like a shimmering wall around her, making it impossible for her to respond to him.

“We aren’t being too hasty, dear. You saw Edmund, too.”

She closed her eyes and drank a swallow of the cold wine. “Yes, dear.” She nodded, her eyes still closed. She smiled for his eyes as her Valium finally started taking hold, and she sank further into the steaming water.

* * *

The next day, as Ellen and Edmund were glancing at each other at the beginning of English class, Ms. Monroe came up to Edmund and tapped him on the shoulder, rather unnecessarily he thought, and gave him an orange office summons.

He opened it and found that he was immediately required by his counselor, whom Edmund found to be a Mr. Hofsteddler. Ms. Monroe stared at him as if she were privy to his crime as he left the room. He shrugged at Ellen as he closed the door behind him.

* * *

“Edmund, what’s happening to you?” asked Mr. Hofsteddler, a fat man with a cheesy suit and greasy hair.

“I’m getting some hairs on my chest. Wanna see?”

“Edmund. I’m thinking about your grades. You’re a bright student, you’re listed here as mentally advantaged, but you’re doing terribly. How do you expect to go to college and be anything but a ditch digger with this kind of performance?”

Edmund sighed and closed his eyes. “Mr. Hofsteddler, I’ve done my best. I’ve written what I thought were the best essays I could think of in every subject I have. I’ve been honest about what I think and I’ve read what’s required. When I see Jo-Jo Pendleton getting higher grades than I for papers a friend wrote for him as a joke, I wonder what kind of school this is. Have you read my essays?”

“Edmund, that’s not the point. You have a chronic problem. You don’t fulfill the assignment given you.”

“Who says?”

“The system says. And you won’t get anywhere by trying to go around the system.”

“I can’t understand the system. I don’t want to.”

“Edmund, quite frankly, I’ve been asked to speak to you about Ellen. If you don’t care about yourself, what about her? She has a bright future, son. Would you drag her down into your fight against the whole system now?”

“I’m not dragging anyone into anything.”

“You’re a rebel,” warned Mr. Hofsteddler. “What about Ellen? Is she a rebel? What can you offer her if you don’t start toeing the line, son?”

“What can I offer her if I start toeing the line, sir?”

“What future can you give her?”

“The Earth, the moon, and the stars, if I have anything to do with it.”

“Edmund, if you knew how you sound. You’re young and full of yourself. This is very stupid. What are you doing?”

“If you knew how you sound, you’d be ashamed,” said Edmund. He shrugged.

“What am I going to go on record as saying? ‘Student reacted well to counseling?’” He looked doubtfully at the Mack Link form on the screen in front of him, his finger pointed at a column of boxes on the screen. “Now, think about this. What can I say?”

“What you have to say, I guess,” said Edmund. “That’s where you’re different from me, you see.” Edmund picked up his books and left the room with Hofsteddler’s pen hovering over the boxes.



**Student reacted poorly to counseling.
Student shows signs of rebelliousness
and self-destructiveness.**



Student shows lack of regard for the

concerns of others.

* * *

The Wolf, as he called himself, hung his head out of the patrol car window as he sped up to the curb. “Hey, Holmes,” he shouted, laughing. He got a kick out of this. Ghost and Charles Holmes looked at him as they walked. “Edmund Green and your little brother tell me you’re dealing, boys!”

“You just tell Jo-Jo next time we see his sorry butt —” started Ghost.

“Cool, Geoffrey,” said Charles, pushing him back.

“Jo-Jo doesn’t have anything to do with it, smart ass!” snarled Buchanan. “Your little brother and his friend Edmund told us all about your little system, boys, and we’ll be admiring it in the future.” Buchanan hit the gas and burned an oily cloud in front of them as he peeled out down the pot-holed street.

* * *

“So, Mr. Neville, they seem to have it in for Jo-Jo for some reason, although I think I threw them off the track.”

“Shit, Burt. Those little fuckers. OK, good job. Thank you, Sheriff. Thanks a lot, Burt.” Tom Neville hung up, pursing his lips.

* * *

FILE ACTIVITY — EDMUND GREEN, MIDDLETOWN

John Mack smiled coyly at the memo the Mack Link had left for him on his personal monitor.

He called up the file and found the records of a juvenile delinquent the Mack Link had screened out. As he musingly checked off his list of transgressions and the latest censures Edmund had received that generated the flurry of file activity, he was briefly and oddly reminded of himself as a young student long ago. His teachers, wisely, told him that

changing the world was hopeless. But he and Sapphire had been rebels. They had not believed their elders.

This young Edmund sounded much like they did so long ago.

He accessed the “Personal Note” file of Edmund’s school counselor:

Edmund is going with Ellen Neville, the City Councilman’s daughter. Keep an eye on him — the councilman is very concerned. Ellen’s mother is the PTA treasurer and on the board of the local NEA, and she could be trouble.

It amazed him again, briefly, how confidential everyone still believed their computer files were. He smirked and rubbed his shaggy beard.

* * *

Edmund thumbed through the book he had checked out of the school library, *A Survey of Modern Philosophy*, searching through the names, the chapters, the ideas, the reasons, and the philosophies of modern man. He felt it was here that he would finally find the ammunition he needed to defend mankind from all the public school propaganda. With hope and the humility of approaching wisdom, he opened the book and read:

The notion of free will is merely a reassuring fantasy that implies a person is responsible for his behavior, not only in that he should be blamed for “bad” behavior, but that he should be given credit and admiration for “good” behavior. Good science refutes this, root and branch. In place of man’s fabled soul is a machine to be manipulated, for better or worse, by his environment and his very chemistry. The challenge for man is not how to conquer his environment, but how to construct an environment that will conquer, in effect, man. Before this can be achieved the notion of man’s free will must be abandoned, and the impracticality of his freedom finally and completely recognized, embraced, and acted upon.

The book went on and on in the same way, with ever more creative ways to call life fake and people dangerous. Edmund closed the book and reread the title. His spirit sunk to the depths of despair and hopelessness. He read on, stubbornly, and found that man’s senses were invalid, his reason was an arbitrary convention of society, his nature was predatory, and his ego was insane. The idea of right and wrong was

subjective. Duty to the group, sacrifice to society, and obedience to the majority were the only virtues possible. There was not a single voice of dissent, just a few modest, tongue-in-cheek jabs accompanied by an apology for human vanity, and a lame justification of limited freedom by way of its situational practicality. And when the past success of American liberty was noted, it was always with embarrassment. Personal liberty was never philosophically endorsed by any of the “modern philosophers,” and it was only exonerated when accompanied by some indirect benefit to society at large. After three hours of reading, only one underlying conclusion tolled through Edmund’s heart as he closed the book on the twentieth century. He was *doomed*.

He threw the book across the room as hard as he could. The red eye on his wrist seemed to wink at him. Machines did not rule the world. Ideas did. No matter how wonderful and liberating the inventions of free minds could be, philosophers had the power to twist them into chains, he thought. If philosophers denied free will, slavery was inevitable. Edmund knew this must be his mission, to prove to the world free will existed, to prove, in effect, that he existed.

* * *

He finished reading one of the modern philosophers’ essays to the Triumvirate.

“How do you like that? It drags on like some sick sack-dance on all of our sorry asses. Is that the worst garbage you’ve ever heard or what?” Edmund slammed shut the book that had taken a beating since he had checked it out and slid it across the granite slab toward Ellen and Jonathan.

“It’s only a small minority of philosophers who believe those things, I’m sure,” said Ellen.

“No.” Edmund shook his head. “Not apart from Ayn Rand. And she isn’t even in this book.”

“Why?” asked Ellen, stubbornly.

“Yeah, why?” Jonathan frowned.

Edmund grimaced. “People need freedom or power to survive.”

“Wait, huh?” asked Jonathan.

“If they don’t want to think for themselves, they need someone else to think for them. It’s really that simple.”

“So they need power,” said Ellen.

“Yep. They can’t get money, clothes, cars, or medical care from mother nature. These things don’t grow on trees. They need power over people who can command nature because they obey it, like Francis Bacon said. But if we have to obey these idiots instead of nature, we can’t command nature anymore, and the whole thing goes to Hell. It’s all

pretty damn simple, actually. Which is the worst part about it. It's not just a mistake."

"The world's sick," said Jonathan.

"We'll change it," said Ellen. "It's OK, we'll change it. It may take some time, but we will, Jonathan."

"Yes. We will, El. Hey! Jonathan has a great idea about evolution. Tell Ellen, Jon."

"It's about the evolution of man!"

"Man, huh? No more butterflies?" She rolled on her side to face him.

"Yeah, it's an original theory, and it's that man thought of man — he created himself by thinking. In a way, he was made by his own free will."

"Really?" Ellen smiled, looking into Jonathan's candle-lit coffee eyes.

"Yes. Man was not made by God, or by his environment, or society, either. See?"

"Whoa!" Ellen glanced at Edmund.

"It started with one man. When someone thought of tools, others used them, too, and some had good hands for using them, so they made more, see? Of course, they had more children with good hands for tools, and after a while, hands became opposable-thumbed. And when someone thought of words, some could use their voices and mouths better, and so over time, people's mouths became beautiful." Jonathan blinked as he looked at Ellen's mouth. "Well, I meant able to talk."

She kissed him, and she smiled at the delight she knew it gave him.

Jonathan laughed. "You don't mind, I hope, do you, Edmund?"

"No," said Edmund. "Your brain is too sexy. It's driving her wild."

Jonathan kissed her again.

She looked at Edmund.

"I figured I could get away with one more since I might never get the chance again." Jonathan grinned.

"It's a wonderful theory, Jonathan," said Ellen. "And, of course, it's true. Somebody had an idea, and then suddenly the ones who could do it better became successful and so had more kids. What started as an idea in one animal's head became the human race, a self-designed being. You're wonderful, Jonathan. Isn't he wonderful?"

"That's very cool, Jon," grinned Edmund, nodding.

"Let's get high and dream about conquering the world with benevolence and reason and freedom," said Ellen.

"Look at the beauty of we humans," said Jonathan, jumping off the slab and stroking the breast of the reclining goddess.

Edmund jumped down and walked up behind Ellen. He hugged her around the waist, whispering in her ear. She smiled and together they unbuttoned her blouse, he from the top, she from the bottom, meeting in the middle. "I think this particular young biologist has earned the right to see his own species, for inspiration, if nothing else," Ellen winked, and together Edmund and Ellen opened her shirt and took it off. Edmund smiled and watched Jonathan's reverent face.

"Wow, that definitely inspires me, Ellen. Thanks." Jonathan stared reverently.

"Want to touch, Jonathan? To feel the structure of the breast, of course. I expect you to be mature about it." She looked studiously at him as Edmund doubletaked. "Well, Edmund, you were the one who suggested he have the real thing to examine, and since I'm here — Come here, Jon."

Jonathan stared in disbelief.

"Don't ever pass up a valuable scientific opportunity, my friend," smiled Edmund, nodding.

"I want Jonathan to get a head start on all the other biologists in his field," smiled Ellen as Jonathan touched her, and squeezed her, carefully. "No, feel them out. Find out how they're built, with your hands, Jonathan. That's the reason I'm doing this now. And I know we're friends." She winked at him. "So go ahead. Feel them."

Jonathan did feel her and was actually able to sense a basic structure — one he could draw. His heart was filled with grace for the respect she gave to him, and he gloried in the beauty she entrusted to him.

Edmund grinned. "You're the best."

"You guys take off your shirts! I want to see your chests, and I think you want to see mine, so we'll decorate our temple with human beauty for a while, OK? Whenever you're finished, sir."

"Oh," said Jonathan. He felt one last thing to confirm a hypothesis. "Yes!"

They both took off their shirts happily.

"Look at what we created for ourselves. We must have had something to do with it," she said. "Our finest creation — proof of everything philosophers try to ignore — ourselves!" She raised her arms, casting back her head and closing her eyes. "People miss out! How beautiful are we humans, and they all miss out for no reason at all." She sighed. "I guess it's just too much fun to be alive. Heaven knows people can't have fun or enjoy being alive. They have to spend all their time apologizing to the animals for their brain or to God for wanting anything at all. People are beautiful, yet they hide like clams. They hide their bodies like dirty little secrets and they hide their feelings like crimes."

"Hey!" Jonathan laughed. "I completely agree."

“Don’t drool,” laughed Edmund. “This heater’s doing its job.”

Ellen laughed. “Yeah, it’s great! Mmm. Two chests. Black and white. Chocolate and vanilla. I’m being spoiled by the sight of two scoops of pure sex appeal. I’m hypnotized!”

“I do have a theory about breasts, actually,” said Jonathan, rather transfixed himself.

“Yeah? I’m inspiring him.” She raised her eyebrows at Edmund. “Really, Jonathan,” she said. “What is it? Tell us!”

“You know how dogs have six teats and they usually have about six puppies?”

“Yes,” said Edmund.

“We usually have one baby, or twins. So, two, see? Elephants have only two and they only have one or two babies, like us. Someone’s probably thought of that one, though.”

“He’s right again,” said Edmund.

“But that doesn’t explain how beautiful yours are,” said Jonathan. “I think that’s something we must have made happen, with our own desires, to make them so beautiful.”

“He’s so sweet I could eat him, Edmund.”

“A man of reason, indeed.” Edmund gave Jon five.

“We’re going to change this stupid world. Beauty, Passion and Reason,” Ellen proclaimed. “The Invincible Triumvirate.”

“That’s right,” said Edmund. “We’ll heal the world.”

“Yeah,” said Jonathan. “What are we complaining about? We can do it.” Jonathan laughed and drummed on his legs. “We’ll do it,” he sang.

They sat in a triangle on the slab, human from the waist up except for the white plastic band on Edmund’s wrist and its glowing red eye.

“Oh, cover that thing, Edmund, and let’s get high,” said Ellen.

They passed the pipe and Edmund turned to Ellen’s miniature TV. “Let’s watch TV.”

Ellen jumped down from the slab and reached over the TV, turning it on and adjusting the antenna. The light from the tiny television made her breasts glow blue from beneath. “I know I’m beautiful, gentlemen. I only hope you’re appreciating it.” She smiled.

“Don’t worry, El,” said Jonathan. “We’re intellectuals! We’re appreciating it in a million different ways.”

“It came from the mysterious uncharted vastness of man’s brain and science!”

“Oh this sounds good,” said Ellen.

“DAY OF THE MUTANTS!”

The brass section blared as if each trumpeter had been simultaneously punched in the solar plexus, and were then repeatedly

punched with a left and three rights as the title melted onto a 1950's set of a laboratory.

"There ya go, Dr. Holmes," said Edmund.

"I've seen this," said Jonathan. "It was written by those philosophers who wrote Edmund's book."

"Really?"

"No, dummy, but you know, it could have been. It's all about the evilness of man's brain and how dangerous he is when, in his great arrogance, he goes where man was not meant to go!"

"Meddling with the powers of creation," said Ellen gravely.

"Splitting atoms and transplanting brains," added Edmund.

"Wait! Listen!"

"I thought he was here, at the lab!" said the TV.

"Conical boobs — kind of like the cars back then," said Ellen.

"Yours are better," said Jonathan.

Ellen grinned.

"Look, Jon. Compare them to the carving. Just like hers, don't you think."

"The Greeks knew women," said Jonathan.

"Shh! He's not at the lab."

"Well, I just checked the laboratory, Miss Stevens, and he wasn't there," said the TV.

"But that's impossible!" said Miss Stevens.

"She's gonna check it out for herself," muttered Jonathan.

"Yes. Miss Know-It-All Beautiful Scientist will soon find out how impossible it is." Ellen snickered.

"Soon, every one of her logical assumptions will be shattered to smithereens," said Edmund wisely.

"You're right. Have you guys seen it, too?" asked Jonathan.

The brass section was punched in the pit of the stomach again, and the "Nuclear Experiment Door" was ajar, an "Emergency" sign flashing and zooming. Then came a close-up of Miss Stevens screaming and fainting. From the clouds of radiation emerged a huge monster that strikingly resembled a circumcised penis.

They howled in laughter.

"Definitely written by your philosopher, Edmund," said Ellen.

"It's deadly serious, young lady," scolded Edmund. "This symbolizes the ego run amok."

She screamed, attacking him. Jonathan rolled back on the slab, giggling, so she attacked him, too. "The ego run amok! Raping and pillaging in its path!" She attacked Edmund again.

"Look," shouted Jonathan. "He's going to rape her!"

"Evil men with your evil minds," cried Ellen. "Save me from their greed and lust!"

They tickled her between them on the slab.

“We must sacrifice this young girl,” announced Edmund, tickling her armpits.

“Yes, she’s too beautiful,” cried Jonathan.

She screamed.

A scientist’s bald head appeared on the TV with an evil face screwed into a microscope. It finished them. They all lay back, laughing and laughing, holding their sides, delirious as the evil eyeball of the scientist probed them like specimens on a slide.

The film wrapped up with the two leads arm in arm, surveying the smoking rubble of the city.

“I’ve learned something, Frank.”

“What, Darling?”

“That there are some places man should not go. Some knowledge is not meant for man, but only for God to know.”

“Oh, Darling!”

They kissed, and the last few tired punches in the brass section’s stomach hammered out “The End.”

“There it is,” said Ellen.

“Yup.”

Jonathan stretched. “Are you guys going to drive me home now? It’s 7:30.”

“I’ll drive you home,” said Ellen. “Wait here,” she said to Edmund.

“Wait a minute. I want to tell you both something.”

They looked at Edmund.

“OK, sit down. It’s going to seem weird, very weird, but I’ve got to tell you.” Edmund looked down at his writing book that he had pulled out of his coat pocket. “Do you remember when the CSB freaked out a couple times?”

“Yes,” said Ellen.

Jonathan nodded.

Edmund nodded and looked down. “Well, I didn’t think it meant me, either, even though it said ‘Edmund.’ Then I realized that what it said is what I said, right here in my book.” Edmund pointed at the phrase. “Coming to smash this machine, see? Then I thought it could be talking to me. And then it told me to look in the back of my book. Someone wrote ‘Find the tomb of Sumner’ on the last page. This place.”

They looked at him as the words realigned the world around them.

“Look,” said Edmund, handing him his book.

They looked at it and back at Edmund. “Wow,” said Ellen. “S.H. Who could that be?”

“It’s probably impossible to guess,” shrugged Edmund.

“She wouldn’t have left you initials if she didn’t want you to guess,” said Ellen.

“Why do you say she?” said Jonathan.

“I don’t know.”

“Because it’s something you would do!” smiled Edmund.

“But... hey... Sapphire Hunt,” said Jonathan. “I thought you were going to say Sapphire Hunt,” said Jonathan.

Ellen and Edmund looked at each other.

“Sapphire Hunt?” Edmund thought.

“God! Do you think?” Ellen whispered.

“And she’s on the loose now,” said Jonathan. “There’s a nationwide manhunt for her. And I don’t think she likes Mack. Mack said he was going to build those robots she burned up.”

“God, I can’t believe it.” Edmund frowned. “Sapphire Hunt jumping into my room in the middle of the night to write in my book? How would she know how to pick me from anyone else?”

“The way I did,” said Ellen.

“I doubt that, Ellen.” Jonathan sighed. “Maybe she knows how to get into all of Mack’s stuff? School records and whatever. She made that bracelet you’re wearing. If she knows Mack’s number, she could get into all his stuff, and that’s an awful lot of stuff. That’s everything, Edmund!”

“Yeah,” Ellen nodded.

“OK now, wait a minute!” Edmund shook his head. “Why?”

“Why, why,” said Ellen. “Because she’s organizing a revolution. They said a different name was on every CSB with a different message, and you’re just one. That’s about 30,000, isn’t it?”

“No, over 50,000,” corrected Jonathan.

“OK, well, that’s a lot. Maybe... ”

“Maybe some of them were just dummy messages, to throw the FBI off,” offered Jonathan.

“OK, OK, wait a second,” said Edmund. “You guys are more willing to believe this than I am.”

“If you say it’s true, Edmund, we believe you,” said Ellen.

“If this stuff is real, you better believe it, too, Edmund,” said Jonathan.

Edmund looked at them skeptically for a moment and then nodded his head. “OK, you’re right. It is real. It could be Sapphire Hunt. She’s a good guess. That’s a guess. In the meantime, we’re the only people who will know about it, or about this place. Understood?”

“Understood.” Ellen nodded.

“Understood,” said Jonathan. “You can trust us.”

“I know.” Edmund shook his head. “We’ll just have to wait and see, whatever it means.”

They paused for a moment. They felt the weight of their loyalties and the hope of their mission; in their eyes was an oath too solemn to be spoken.

Ellen and Jonathan gathered their things.

“You guys are actually going to spend the night here?” Jonathan asked.

Ellen nodded. “Yep. The heater’s working, and I’ve got blankets in the car.”

“Your mom’s going to be pissed about the car.”

“I was supposed to have my birthday present by now, but I ordered extra details because I was actually afraid of what my old friends would think if I didn’t have more details.” Ellen laughed.

“Does this birthday present have wheels?” asked Jonathan.

“Yes.”

“Pretty nice.”

“I wonder if your dad will give it to you now.”

“Well. That would be funny.” Ellen shrugged. “Come on, Jonathan. Have you got your stuff?”

“Yeah, but you better put your clamshells on, Ellen.”

“Oh yeah. They don’t deserve it. No wonder they made it illegal! Want to kiss?”

“Really?”

Edmund winked at her.

“Only if you’re sweet about it. No wolfing, just a kiss. Otherwise, Edmund might get mad.” She winked back. She held out her breast and Edmund grinned with joy as Jonathan kissed her nipple sweetly. “Now that was just taboo!” she whispered, kissing the top of his head and glancing at Edmund impishly. “I think we’ve shattered most of what holds Judeo-Christian civilization together.” She pulled on her sweater, stretching and winking at Jonathan. “Come on, Professor, let’s go.”

“Sure, El,” said Jonathan. “Bye, Edmund. You have the best girlfriend in the world.”

“Oh, I know.”

She kissed Edmund hard and briefly, and then left.

After they had gone, with her perfume still in the air, Edmund began a love poem in his leather writing book. There was too much emotion to funnel into the pen, so he lit the candles and turned off the TV. He lay back on the slab, thinking of what he could say. The world was a treacherous place, but they didn’t have to change themselves. They were alive, they could change the world instead. She continued to turn his doubts into hopes, his rage into determination. When the world seemed too dark, she reminded him they held the torch in their own hands, a torch that could make the world beautiful.

* * *

Saphire Hunt looked at them reposed and naked on the slab at midnight, ghosts and memories stirring her heart. It could be us, she thought.

“Edmund,” Ellen whispered. “I wonder what this place is?”

She is so like me, Saphire thought.

“I don’t know.”

And he is so like him. She smiled.

“Jonathan and I were talking about it on the way to his place.”

“We’ll see. But we can’t count on miracles.” Edmund stared at the granite ceiling. “They talked to me about my grades.”

She cursed. “Thanks to my mother.”

“Well, I’m going to apply for a scholarship to a writer’s tutorial in New York. It’s the Gaines-Huxley Fellowship, and all I have to do is enter an essay contest on why I want to be a writer.”

“So it doesn’t matter about your grades?”

“I know the facts. I just don’t write their conclusions, which they seem to care more about. I’ll do well on the A.P. tests in English and history.”

“I sent in an application for a scholarship to Juilliard. I’m practicing night and day for it. My parents can’t believe it. As far as college, I’m good at history and English, and I’m great at math.”

“Well, I’m going to have to start ‘toeing the line’ with my essays. Mr. Hofsteddler told me today — my counselor.”

“You just have to lick their boots without seeming too facetious. You’re passionate. That’s why I love you, but, for me, please be nice to them from now on. They don’t know how the whole joke looks. They don’t even realize the big picture, most of them. Nobody even thinks it’s their job anymore. Just give them the bullshit they’re asking for. Then write what you believe.”

“All right.” He shivered.

“I just want you to get what you deserve.”

“Thanks. Thanks for being so impossible.”

As they kissed, Saphire turned off the floating monitor.

* * *

Over the coming weeks, Edmund and Ellen continued to spend Friday nights in the tomb. After school, once a week, the Triumvirate met for their royal picnics on the hill and in their temple.

Each of them walked through a minefield in their respective parts of Middletown, and to be together on the hill was an opportunity to laugh, play Frisbee, dream, live. Together they looked at the world’s folly

and reveled in their freedom. They basked in the respect they gave each other. Theirs was a society better than anywhere else. They made it so, and they watched each other flourish, encouraged by pride and praise.

Ellen's father said little to her except for a random ultimatum or a hollow threat not to give her the car. The fact that she didn't care about his bribe, however, made him want her to have it even more. Still she felt her father watching her, waiting to pull the plug. He seemed to prefer that the plug was still there, plugged in. For the first time in her life, she felt her father's loathing directed toward her. She felt uneasy and was suspicious of his ceasefire. Tom Neville was a man used to forcing his way upon a whole city, as she well knew. That he would not interfere seemed completely out of character. She feared him, deeply.

Her mother seemed to be stumbling. She was tipsy almost every night, or gone to bed early. She canceled luncheons. She continued to plan the inauguration party with Jo-Jo's mother, but trimmed back on light social affairs. She tried not to notice Ellen. Ellen took it as a blessing, seeing in her mother a mess she was not strong enough to handle right now.

How impractical she was, Suzy told her. What would she get with Edmund? Poverty probably. Look at what would be hers if she just let go of her silly ideas. Suzy secretly enjoyed the spectacle. She bleached her hair blond.

Edmund's father frequently mentioned the Army as a future option, and he wavered on Ellen. He liked the idea of her with his son, but thought it was crazy for her to rebel from her world to do it. He told Edmund he thought it was great until he saw her again, dressed down, which seemed insulting and even, strangely, suicidal. He partly blamed his son for hurting her and partly distrusted Ellen for giving so much up to be with him.

His mother had seemed comatose ever since Ellen's trick. This would get to his father eventually and his father would punish Edmund for it. This his mother knew, by experience if not by insight, so she was planting silent seeds of rage in his father with her listlessness, and Edmund could only hope they would germinate slowly and in a harmless form.

Mr. Hohner had many visits from the Triumvirate and illegally employed both Jonathan and Edmund on a regular basis with his fifty dollar bills. Mr. Hohner had to admit Jonathan was a better sweeper than Edmund, though both would qualify for Nobel prizes.

At school, Edmund and Ellen competed to write the perfect Mack Link "Human Touch" essay. Their essays seemed horribly average and lifeless, but they got above average grades. The Mack Link took the slightest hint of satire or irony for confusion, so the coveted 'A' eluded them. Mrs. Monroe, who judged honors essays personally, watched as

Ellen and Edmund made no scenes in class, made no comments, and wrote nonconfrontational, average essays with correct interpretations of socially progressive literature. When she sensed Edmund's mockery, she graded him down. He must believe it, she thought, to make the highest grade, though the thought stuck in a gum of implications. Ellen received guardedly high grades.

Mr. Thatcher, who smoked marijuana himself occasionally, thought Edmund and Ellen were victims of the system. But that was that.

Jonathan, the third spear of the Triumvirate, was becoming conspicuous, something he had avoided all of his young life. Without realizing it himself, he no longer walked with his shoulders drawn in, his steps feeble, his expression idiotic. He no longer looked properly ridiculous so they could forgive him for being smart, for caring about his mind and his future. He was walking erect now, his face uplifted, his eyes shining and focused far.

When Ellen dropped him off one day, his brothers and other members of the M-13, with some of their girls, were in front of his apartment building.

As Ellen drove away, Geoffrey looked at him as though he were a criminal returning to the scene of his crime, walked up to him and hit him on the shoulder.

He landed on his back in the street, gasping. "What the fuck, man?" he said, though fear pulled his breath from under his words.

Ten voices laughed.

"What was that for?"

The faces crowded over him in the street. "Yeah, yeah," nodded Geoffrey.

"What?" snapped Jonathan, his voice hollow.

Geoffrey kicked him on the collar bone, slamming his back onto the street. "Shut up, fool!"

Charles came over. "All right, all right. Let him get up."

He felt like he didn't exist. The fear pressed Jonathan into one dimension, with no substance, just a point of view. He rose like a ghost, like smoke.

"What the fuck are you doin', boy?" Charles shook his head, sadly.

"What the fuck are you doing?" whispered Jonathan. It seemed like someone else had said it, someone who should have been there now, but someone other than him.

Charles cocked his head in disgust, looking at him with one eye. "We're trying to straighten you out, boy!"

"What?"

“You gotta stop hangin’ with rich white folks! This city councilman’s daughter, man, you’re drawin’ the heat on us! You’re drawin’ heat on us, bitch!”

“What do you mean?”

“Shit. Listen the way he talks. You been tellin’ Buchanan on us, bitch!” yelled Geoffrey.

Charles shook his head, throwing his hands up and turning away.

“Look little scientist, little brother, you breakin’ all the rules, man!”

“Geoffrey,” growled Charles.

“You think these white folks ain’t trouble, man? You gonna get your ass capped, boy!”

“Let Ghost tell him, man,” said a man Jonathan didn’t know, pointing at Charles.

Jonathan was aware of the green bandanas each of the men and women had wrapped, rolled, or tied around them. It seemed like a nightmare — the monster people — but it was real. Everything else was a dream...

“OK. Now yeah,” Charles said to the others. “I know the boy’s got to learn what it is, but I’m gonna tell him, so that’s it! Now Jonathan, your friends have brought the heat down on us. You know what that means, fool?” Charles’ eyes, full of sadness, pleaded with Jonathan.

“That’s crazy,” Jonathan said.

His brother’s fists, in a slow rolling dream-time, seemed to tear out his stomach. An elbow smashed against his nose, splintering the bone. The pain exploded like a flash of madness between his eyes. Jonathan hit the ground, beaten, his stomach somehow holding in the chaos. His nose was a bridge of fire between his eyes, and he saw crimson blood staining a broken puddle of ice.

People were shouting around him, but all the voices seemed to recede as he heard the cold wind howl down the street between the tall buildings of the projects.

Six hours later, at 1:30 in the morning, the Emergency Room at the public hospital got to him. His mother was shouting at Charles, and Geoffrey was making threats as Jonathan lay in his room, his broken nose finally set.

In his hand, under his pillow, was his toy gun. He had, earlier that day, finally decided to throw it away. He held it now, mentally firing it.

* * *

Six weeks later, ten days before Christmas, President Hooper, defying his lame duckhood, sent 20,000 troops to Peru’s Huallaga River Valley to burn the peasants’ coca crops and fight the guerrillas in the jungle.

One day before Christmas, China declared martial law in Hong Kong again and ordered a national news blackout with a naked nuclear warning to the West.

And on Christmas Eve, John Mack held a press conference to officially announce that he would supply China with robot security units and riot-control machines of his own design to replace those destroyed by Sapphire Hunt. He vowed that 30,000 would be ready to ship to the Republic of China by summer, and they would be fully compatible with the central Mack Sino-Superlink network which would be online in China by May first. The Sino-Superlink would provide Internet access throughout China while strictly enforcing its stringent censorship policy.

He promised a worried lame duck President Hooper that an additional 15,000 anti-riot machines, compatible with the Euro-Superlink network in the European Union, would be ready to ship by September to eastern Europe and the Baltics. President Hooper assured the American public that communication lines were open to China and the European Union and that American assistance was warmly welcomed in stabilizing the states of emergency in both superpowers. Chinese and European Union officials sent messages to the American government, thanking the American people for their efforts to promote peace on Earth during the Christmas season and asked for emergency winter aid, which President Hooper promised, in turn.

President-Elect Parson made a special announcement to reassure the American public that his first priority would be to concentrate all his efforts to redouble American funding for positive programming, prisons, and law enforcement, and continue the present administration's foreign policy initiatives toward China and the European Union.

Since last Christmas Eve, 3,617 federal laws had been passed, 91,939 regulations had gone into effect or had been refined to favor campaign contributors, 6,642 new revenue enhancements provided a flush of job security for tax accountants, 246 prisons had been constructed, 76,511 murders had been committed, and 301,665 rapes had been reported.

And on Christmas Eve, Ellen, Edmund and Jonathan got high in their temple at midnight as snow floated over Middletown.

Ellen gave Jonathan, whose nose had finally healed under Ellen's frequent magical kisses, a microscope set, complete with slides of paramecia, spermatozoa, and amoebas. She gave Edmund a gold pen, a white sweater, and the Riverside Shakespeare. Jonathan gave Ellen a box of liqueur-filled chocolates, and gave Edmund two second-hand bookends made of tin in the shape of elephant heads. Edmund gave Jonathan a second-hand hardbound copy of *Gray's Anatomy* and Ellen a second-hand silver ring set with two small smooth stones, blue and green. They sat on the slab, wrapped in a thick quilt before the Coleman heater,

surrounded by their gifts in the candlelight, eating the warm and delicious chocolates and making predictions about their futures.

“Don’t worry, world, the Triumvirate is coming,” toasted Jonathan romantically. They drank champagne and laughed, raising their glasses toward Middletown.

* * *

It was a brand new year when Ellen finally played the piano for Edmund and Jonathan. When she played the first chord, they both sat back and closed their eyes. The dark room was lit only by the fire. The first snow and the lights of Middletown flickered in the windows.

The harmony rolled faster and faster until it seemed to burn and shiver in cinders, sprinkling sad but heroic over the sea. Ellen bowed her head over her hands, her eyes closed.

Edmund kissed the back of her head. “The Flight of Icarus,” he whispered. “Better than I’ve ever heard it.”

“It’s better than I ever played it.”

“Wow,” said Jonathan. “What was the story of Icarus, Edmund?”

Edmund squeezed her shoulders softly as she sighed. “Two men, a father and a son, Daedalus and Icarus, were imprisoned by King Minos on an island from which there was no escape. They made wings of bird feathers and wax and tried to fly to freedom.”

“But one went too close to the sun,” murmured Jonathan.

“Yeah, that’s it. Icarus, the son. He flew too close. And he was burned.”

“Ellen, are you in there? Why is it so dark in here?”

It was Tom Neville’s voice. He turned the light on. “Well, Edmund! And you have company, Ellen?”

“I was playing for them.”

“Oh, how nice. Well, maybe Edmund can stay for dinner tonight, eh?”

“Do you want to?” asked Ellen.

“Yes. That would be nice.” Edmund found it difficult to pinpoint the focus of his eyes.

“Good. And what’s your name?”

“Jonathan, sir. Jonathan Holmes.” Jonathan shook Tom Neville’s hand. “I know you, of course. I’ve seen your election posters and TV and stuff.”

“Good, that’s good. Well, Ellen, are you going to take Jonathan home? I can stay with Edmund. We can chat while you’re gone.”

“Sure. Come on, Jonathan.”

They left and Tom went to his bar and made two whiskey sodas. He gave one to Edmund and sat across the desk from him in his black patent leather chair.

Edmund sipped the drink.

“So, how did you two meet?” he asked.

Full of character, thought Edmund, like on TV, but something was concealed. “Well, Ellen and I didn’t get along, at all, at first. In fact, we hated each other. I thought she was just a — well, a social slave — you know, with her clothes and hair and makeup and her attitude.” Edmund chuckled. “The way she used to laugh at everything and everybody and I never dreamed it could be. She has so much inside her so rare, so wonderful. She did the whole thing and I’m so proud I’m almost embarrassed. If that makes any sense.” Edmund laughed. “What I mean is, I love her, sir, very much.”

“Edmund, what are your plans?”

“I plan to be a writer.”

Mr. Neville nodded and set his drink down. “What college do you hope to attend?”

“I’m hoping for a fellowship.”

“A fellowship? How are your grades?”

“It’s a grant for a writer’s tutorial. They judge my writing ability from an application essay. It made the most sense to me. No club memberships or community service certificates. Just my brain and my ability.”

“I see.” He didn’t. “And this is all you have to support your ambitions? A scholarship to a writer’s tutorial?”

“Yes. I should get it, Mr. Neville.”

“I see. Mmm-hmm. Well, when will you find out?”

“Ten weeks.”

“Let’s hope it’s a brilliant essay, son.” Tom toasted him, and winked. The Gaines-Huxley Grant, he noted.

Edmund toasted him back, thinking he caught his eyes narrowing for a moment.

* * *

The cook served them Beef Stroganoff, sauerkraut with stewed apples and shredded green beans for dinner. They had sampled and complimented the courses before the real conversation began.

“So, Edmund, I can see you have a little bracelet,” said Betty Neville. “What is it, exactly?”

“It says ‘This body contains THC.’ Tetrahydrocannabinol is the chemical name for the psychoactive substance in marijuana.”

“Oh,” she said.

“Mother, it’s that thing Daddy was lobbying for,” said Ellen.

“Yes, yes. Now, you smoke marijuana, is that it?”

“What do you want here?” said Edmund.

“Honesty.” She nodded, looking frankly into Edmund’s eyes.

“We need honesty now, Edmund.”

“Do you really think that’s what you got from Jo-Jo?” said Ellen.

“There’s no need to bring Jo-Jo into this,” said Tom.

“That’s what the police said!” laughed Ellen.

“Well, yes, I have smoked marijuana occasionally,” said Edmund, glancing at Ellen. “It’s not like a religion. You know, this gets blown so out of proportion that kids immediately know it’s B.S., quite honestly, the first time we ever try the stuff. I believe people need to be free, and sometimes that’s the only way to feel free, nowadays, to do something that feels good that is illegal, just for a few harmless, good moments that remind you it’s still true, that we are free, inside.”

Ellen quietly looked at her father, spearing some green beans. That was the truth. Now what would he do with it?

“That’s pretty revolutionary talk, son. Are you some kind of leftist, anarchist, sort of Libertarian?”

“Freedom, Mr. Neville. Free market, all the way.”

“But that’s what we’ve got, young man, or didn’t you know? The whole world is turning to free market, and they’re asking us for help on how to set it up.”

“If we’re helping people set it up, then I pity them.”

“Ha! So what’s your solution to the world’s woes, Edmund?”

“Get rid of the laws and let people solve the world’s problems instead. That requires freedom.” Edmund looked boldly but respectfully into the politician’s eyes.

“Oh! OK. Yeah.” Mr. Neville nodded. “I got ya now. Free enterprise will save the day, hey, Edmund? I’ve heard that sort of thing before. Laissez-faire! Libertarian!” He laughed.

“It will save kids.”

“Save kids. Well, you’re obviously from a decriminalization standpoint. I can understand that!” He chuckled, looking at his wife.

“Sure.”

“There would be chaos if drugs were legal, kid,” said Tom Neville.

“Do you want everyone to be rolling around in the gutter on drugs? Who will run this society?”

“Everyone’s rolling around in the gutter on drugs now, and it’s because the lunatics who can’t see that it’s happening are running society. The laws and programs just make finding solutions impossible, and turn off everyone’s brain so no one can fix it. They’re gradually making people obsolete, who are the only reason for the problems and the only solution.”

“You’re free to think anything you want, Edmund. You’re proof of that!”

“But we’re not free to act on our ideas. Freedom isn’t in our heads, or slavery would still be freedom. We’re taxed when we earn, save, spend, rent, give, own, sell, build, and die. We can’t even paint our house our favorite color. Freedom doesn’t really exist in this country anymore, Mr. Neville. It hasn’t ever, really. Not yet, anyway.”

“I wouldn’t want it to,” laughed Tom. “What kind of world would we have if people were free to run around doing anything they wanted?” He looked at his wife, who nodded.

“A beautiful, spectacular, exciting, excellent, surprising, occasionally sad, and always peaceful world,” said Edmund. “Instead of this ugly, tired out, violent and vandalized world we’ve got right now.”

“A poet, indeed! Who would look after the weak in your utopia, Edmund?”

“The strong.”

“With no one forcing them?”

“With no one stopping them.”

“No one’s ever stopped them, Edmund.”

“No one’s ever trusted them,” said Edmund.

“Why don’t they now, then?”

“How can people help each other when they’re already carrying the whole government on their backs? The government is supposed to do it for them, and leaves them barely able to take care of themselves while it’s supposed to be doing it for them.”

Ellen nodded, looking at her father as she violently chewed a bite of the Stroganoff.

“Well, it’s a pretty sick view,” he said.

“Sick?” laughed Ellen. “You’re the one who thinks human beings are sick and need to be controlled, Dad.”

“Well, this Stroganoff was delicious, Betty.”

“Yes, thank you, dear.” Betty Neville rose and started gathering the plates and was instantly freed of the chore by the cook, of course.

“Run along with your mother, Ellen, I want to talk to Edmund in the living room, man to man.”

Ellen winked at Edmund, but she felt her pulse surging in her throat as she went with her numb mother.

Mr. Neville put his hand on Edmund’s shoulder and gripped it meanly, pushing him with deliberate steps into the living room.

“All right, Edmund, you’re a fine young representative of your community, aren’t you?”

“Not exactly.”

He pushed Edmund down in a chair in front of his desk and sat in another chair in front of him. "And you're an upstanding member of your church, is that right?"

"No."

"And a model student, eh Edmund?" He looked at him broadly, missing his eyes, somehow.

"No."

"And you would never take drugs and you're a firm supporter of the war on drugs, aren't you?"

"No."

"Then what are you doing with my daughter?" His face exploded in Edmund's face, red and huge. "What do you have in store for her? What sick little dreams have you got in store for her? What little dreams have you got, proud little man?"

Edmund slid the chair back and got up.

Tom rose, looked at him, and smiled.

"You want to fight?"

"Yes." Tom pointed at the paddle on the wall. "With that."

Edmund read the professionally cleaned plaque: "No Man Is One Man."

"We'll see about you, Edmund," Tom grinned.

"You're not going to try and hit me with it?"

He laughed. "I don't have to. I don't have to do a thing."

Edmund backed away from him.

Tom just stared, shaking his head.

Edmund left, wishing he had reached for the thing on the wall so they could have finished it right there. He left with the feeling that something savage was going to happen to him, in the most civilized way, something he could not defend himself from.

Betty Neville, who had been listening in the doorway, turned around. She went to the liquor cabinet in the study, and poured herself a nightcap that was too stiff for sleep.

Ellen took him home. He had waited on the curb, wrapped in his coat. She didn't ask, and he didn't say anything.

They kissed goodbye on the driveway of Edmund's house, and Edmund hesitated. "We're going to have to meet at the tomb from now on."

"I know."

She frowned, looking at his chest.

"Every Friday night."

They kissed a quick promissory kiss, and turned away.

* * *

“Well, Ellen. As you know, we bought a birthday present for you, and it’s overdue because of the customized details you wanted, and now that it’s here, I’m wondering if you deserve it,” said her mother, obviously drunk and saying her father’s words.

“Dad?” She looked at him.

“Well, do you think we should give you a car so you can visit this hoodlum lover of yours?”

She laughed.

“What happened to Jo-Jo, darling? You two were doing so well —”

“Don’t talk about Jo-Jo!”

“Honey, is this the gratitude we get? I know Jo-Jo was there for you. Maybe you just weren’t there for him. He loves you and he’s a great kid! You’ve got to give a little and try to be understanding, that’s all.”

“Give — and take what? Dad, don’t, don’t talk.” She started to leave.

“Then you don’t want the car, I suppose,” he yelled.

She turned back and looked at him, realizing that in place of the power he had always had over her, she now had power over him. “No.” She smiled.

He blinked, hurt, startled.

She turned to go.

“Honey, please, what’s happened to you?” He was about to weep. “Your father is only thinking about you, honey! Keep the car. I want you to have it, but please, will you promise me one thing?”

She turned and looked at him suspiciously. “What?”

“The inauguration party is January 20th. Please be Jo-Jo’s date.”

“You’re crazy!”

“Honey, will you promise me?”

“That I will go with Jo-Jo to the party? I won’t!”

“Just as a gesture, honey. You know we owe our good fortune to a lot of people, and —”

“Dad!”

“Honey —”

“God damn it, shut up! I won’t go to the party. If you don’t think I deserve the car now, well, then it’s an honor not to get it. Good night, Dad. You know what?” She grinned and widened her eyes to scare him. “I feel alive!” She turned and walked out.

“You can have the car, honey,” he called after her. “You can have it, darling.” He put his head in his hand.

“Let’s go to bed, Tom,” said Betty.

“You go ahead,” he said. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

The phone rang and Tom let the machine answer it.

“Hello, Tom Neville? This is John Mack.”

Tom Neville jumped at the receiver. "Hello! Hello? Sorry, I was about to turn in. What can I do for you, sir?" His heart skipped a beat. "Is this *the* John Mack?"

"Well, hello, I'm glad you're in, Tom. Yes, it's me. Of course I've heard of you — the P.P.P. bill you wrote. I like it, I like it a lot, in fact. I think it's a fine way to utilize the potential of the American Superlink when our man in the White House gets it through Congress."

"Well, thank you, sir. I'm truly honored, but I wasn't the sole author. It was a collaboration, of course."

"Of course, but you were the first to institute the League of Future Leaders, and I'll be pushing for that part of the P.P.P. bill with the President. You can count on it. I think some of those ideas are greatly in the national interest."

"I'm overwhelmed."

"Don't be. Now, I have a tricky little question, though, concerning your own daughter."

"My daughter?" Tom shivered involuntarily.

"Yes, I understand she's going out with a boy named Edmund Green?"

"Yes..." Tom Neville's heart sank to his feet. "How did you know?"

"Oh, the Mack Link is pretty thorough," chuckled John Mack.

"Yes." He was dumbfounded.

"Now, Edmund's file doesn't look so good and, well, it could be a sticking point if the press got involved."

"It's not serious at all, Mr. Mack."

"Oh, not to worry. I just wondered what sort of fellow this Edmund is, just in your opinion, off the record. Is he Future Leader material, do you think?"

"No."

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, you saw his records."

"I'm asking you. What kind of kid is he?"

"Well, in what way?"

"Well, what kind of ideas does he have? Do you know?"

"Ideas? Well —" Tom Neville laughed at the triviality of his question. It made him feel familiar with John Mack, though, and he liked it, suddenly. "Frankly, I just finished reading him the riot act about my daughter, John. He's some kind of anarchist, I guess. You know, he keeps going on about setting mankind free from the chains of government or some other such nonsense. He won't be with my daughter for long. I can assure you of that."

"I'm sure you can." John Mack stared at a tugboat on the east river from his office. "Well, thanks. Just curious. It doesn't sound like a

problem. It seems like you have it under control. Accept my early congratulations for the P.P.P. bill, Tom.”

“Thank you, sir, thank you very much.”

John Mack ended the conversation and shivered as he hung up the phone.

He was the one.

* * *

The inaugural party was two weeks away when Tom Neville received word that the bill he helped write and lobby for in Washington had collected enough votes to pass the House and Senate.

The P.P.P. bill required a minor who violates probation for illegal drug use to spend four years in a drug rehabilitation facility doing community service with no visitation rights upon completion of high school. It was called “Positive Peer Pressure,” and operated on the idea that kids took drugs because of peer pressure, so if their peers were turned against them, after a certain period of time under the pressure of intensive all-day peer counseling groups, and with no outside influences, the habit could be broken in early life, and a well-adjusted, law-abiding young person would be delivered to society at the end of the program. Breaking probation while in the program could conceivably mean stretching the time of institutionalization to five years, all at the expense of the parents unless they were on some form of aid. Of course, those wealthy enough could enroll their children in the program at their own discretion, or a different, privately run program. Also, parents caught with drugs or allowing their children to have them in the house would lose their children until they finished their Positive Parent Programming and/or jail time. The establishment of the National League of Future Leaders was the flagship element of the youth bill.

Betty Neville heard her husband pick up his phone and punch a button. “Thad? They vote as soon as Parson’s in, and it’s a shoo-in. Yep. What? That could be our boy’s lucky day, all right. I have! Buchanan finked on Edmund down in the projects where his friend lives. Well, of course he’ll fix it. Thad, he knows what I know, OK?”

Betty Neville felt the back of her throat arch as her stomach clenched. She drifted to the liquor cabinet and made a Bloody Mary with extra tobasco to fight back the nausea.

* * *

Ed Green read the article about the P.P.P. bill at the breakfast table with his wife, who stared out the window at the gray, drizzling sky.

“Well,” he said. “It’s about time!” He pursed his lips, glancing at her. “They’re finally going to get serious about this drug problem, Mother.”

She did not register any response.

He continued to read the article, nodding his head at the successive measures Tom Neville’s bill would call for, but the words didn’t match his expectations somehow. In a way, they far exceeded them.

His heart was just not in it as the proposal became unsettlingly far-reaching. The prospect of some sort of four-year prison-school to be paid for by parents frightened him even as his head nodded automatically. “Yes sir! It’s about time...” he said. But the meaning of the words kept jamming up into a thicker and uglier mess of implications in his head, and Ed Green stopped reading and looked at the center of the breakfast table, the white and gray salt and pepper shakers. Then he glanced at another story on the front page:

A transport bus carrying 37 teenagers convicted of illegal drug possession overturned and all died when the bus burst into flames. Drug Czar Herzog said that he abhorred the tragedy but that, “accidents are inevitable when transporting the number of people we are talking about. The system is overburdened. These are casualties in the drug war we are fighting. Lots of brave cops die every day in this war, too.

Ed Green felt tired suddenly.

Since his wife had sunken into her sullen brooding, the world had dimmed and left him protruding like a bleached bone on a gray beach. He tried to cheer her up with the news of the government’s commitment to put things back in order. But now, as he read the article and the militant actions it described, which he had boosted for so long, he felt strange and unsure of himself. It didn’t make sense anymore. The strident propositions belittled him, shook an angry finger at his fatherhood, and shook a fist at his manhood. This was his son they were talking about! he thought. How dare they take such liberties with his family? How dare they take such license with his parenthood? As he skimmed the newspaper, he felt that in some ways Edmund may have been right.

He stared as if his eyes were glued to the gray plastic salt and pepper shakers on the table. This was all too much, he thought.

People weren’t the same anymore, Ed Green sighed inside. Things had changed.

He frowned out the window. His eyes tired and fuzzy. People were less now than they used to be. They wanted everything done for them, but that was never the point. That was never the point, when all of

it started. People were more then. Everybody was more, everybody had more basic decency, he thought — a more decent upbringing. They took things for granted that just weren't there anymore in people today. People had changed. Now they took things for granted that were meant as a last resort, just some icing on the cake, for rainy days. It was all wrong now.

He looked at Tom Neville's picture in the paper, suddenly offended by his young, arrogant face, and amazed at himself. He had voted for him.

The world had changed. People had changed, and Ed Green felt insulted. All the things he'd voted for for years seemed now to exist at his own expense. He felt degraded and obsolete, replaced and given the bill, and he remembered his son always said there were too many laws. There weren't enough laws, he had thought, the world was lawless! His son was as crazy as everyone else. But now, as he looked at these measures that marched over him and took his son away and insulted him, he saw that what his son had been saying was true! He cared about his son, damn it, and he could teach him how to be a good man. His son was a good person, better than most. And Edmund was his son, a Green, and he may have some different ideas, but nothing he should go to prison for. And anyway, it was his decision how to deal with him if he got into drugs or something like that. Ed Green decided he would be damned if some fancy uptown Ivy League politician would tell him what to do with his son.

He glanced at his wife painfully. "Don't worry, Mother," he said, laying his hand on hers. "Edmund will be fine. There's always the Army." He squeezed her hand. "I think that could be just the thing for Edmund."

* * *

Edmund opened Ms. Monroe's door and walked towards her. She was busy keying in grades in her Mack-Link Grade Ledger. In his hand he held the forms and essay and envelopes which comprised the application for the Gaines-Huxley Fellowship. Edmund had carefully filled out the forms and written the application essay on why he thought the Gaines-Huxley Writing Fellowship would not be wasted on Edmund Green. One thing remained incomplete in the application. He closed his eyes for an indistinguishable instant before he placed the application on the desk before Ms. Monroe.

She peered at it through thick lenses, a polite smile of question contradicting her face.

"This is the Gaines-Huxley Fellowship application, Ms. Monroe."

“Oh yes, I know, Edmund.” She laughed. Her eyebrows rose wryly over the black frame of her glasses.

“When you have time, could you please write a brief recommendation for me, Ms. Monroe? It’s required that the English instructor of the applicant give an assessment of the student’s skill —”

“Of the student’s skill and citizenship,” recited Ms. Monroe from memory, rubbing the glass over one eye with a napkin. “I’m aware of the Fellowship’s requirements. You know, Edmund, you might qualify for a Student Loan,” she said, glancing doubtfully at the plastic band on his wrist that winked its red light at her. “I wasn’t aware that you were planning to apply for the Gaines-Huxley Fellowship.” She sighed, with an air of stern maternalism. “I’ll write my recommendation for you. You aren’t allowed to see the application after I’ve written my recommendation, so are you sure you’ve filled everything out properly?”

“Yes.”

“All right then, Edmund. I’ll doublecheck for you. Is there anything else?”

“No.”

“Well, I’ll see you in class then.”

“Yes.” Edmund stifled the urge to rescue the paper from Ms. Monroe’s desk, but as he gazed at the forms, Ms. Monroe set a paperweight over the pages, daisies trapped in resin.

He turned and walked away.

* * *

They sat in the temple on the slab, warming up. Middletown was slate-gray beyond the snow-blanketed cemetery. They each read different pages of the newspaper.

From her safehouse, Sapphire Hunt watched her unlikely Triumvirate as she sipped green tea.

From the sixtieth floor office of his obsidian skyscraper on the upper east side of Manhattan, John Mack watched Edmund and Ellen and Jonathan, too. Sapphire could never detect the device he was using to observe them, he was certain.

She knew he would be watching by now. In her heart, she knew that he would recognize Edmund as the one when he looked close enough to see himself.

“Listen to this,” said Jonathan. “‘Are you a Pack Rat? If so, help is on the way. A new program has at last been funded to establish federal clinics across the nation to provide counseling and other services for those afflicted with CSS — Compulsive Savers Syndrome.’ No shit, that’s what it says!” Jonathan slapped his leg and laughed.

“Yeah, I know.” Edmund nodded.

“We need more fuel for the heater,” said Ellen. She looked at Edmund, who was reading an article spread out on the slab. “Well, my father’s bill will probably pass. See?”

“Yeah.” Edmund was reading the article proudly describing the homegrown bill in the *Middletown Crier*. Next to it was an article describing the American Mack Superlink President-Elect Pete Parson promised to have funded. “Ellen, this is fucking Nazi Germany.”

“I know.”

“Have you read this?”

She looked at his wristband. “Oh, Edmund, I wish I could tear that off you and throw it in the deepest part of the ocean.”

“Not for another seven months.”

“Who do they think they are!”

“They’re God, Ellen,” said Jonathan, sullenly pushing his part of the paper away. “As far as we’re concerned, they’re God.”

The red eye of God on Edmund’s wrist glared at Ellen in their temple, where it was blasphemous. “Why are they so powerful?” she wondered. It was from this world, this small society only, that she could expect any real answer.

Edmund looked out the door. “I read a play about the people who led the Salem witch trials. They all gave themselves to society completely, and then hung innocent young girls for taking off their white collars and dancing naked in the woods. Corpses swinging instead of children dancing, in the name of morality!”

Jonathan stared at Middletown, the CSB churning its nonsense. Fuck you world, you don’t exist, I don’t acknowledge your existence anymore, he thought.

“I’m going to write about it someday,” Edmund nodded. “People who give up themselves gain a moral advantage in this crazy philosophy. Suddenly they have power over other people.”

“Everyone agreed sometime that we shouldn’t live for ourselves,” said Ellen. “And even when they were handed the chance to live for themselves, they gave it up. Wow. We’re doomed. That’s the only reason dancing at the end of a rope could ever be considered more moral than dancing naked in the woods. That’s the answer, Edmund.”

“That was the fork in the road,” nodded Jonathan.

Edmund nodded, stroking Ellen’s hair. “That’s why China and Europe will never change until they radically alter what they believe about human life. They still believe people shouldn’t live for themselves. No matter how much we help them, until that idea changes, they will *never* really change, and the worst things can happen, always with justification. But America doesn’t believe in its own ideas anymore. They’re just slogans now. We believe in their savage, ancient ideas again, and that’s why we keep getting worse and smaller and are ganging up in

groups. And we have nothing to offer the rest of the world anymore, as Americans, except gadgets that make feudalism work better, like the stuff Mack and Hunt have been making and selling to everyone.”

“Sapphire Hunt saw that. That’s why she stopped helping them, I bet,” said Jonathan.

“Maybe. But John Mack does anything they want,” said Edmund.

“He must believe them, Edmund,” said Jonathan.

Edmund shivered and looked at the sky outside. “No, it’s worse with John Mack.”

John Mack gritted his teeth as he listened to this boy Sapphire was haunting him with.

Sapphire smiled, knowing how this must be getting to him.

“John Mack is worse because he believes in his own mind, but no one else’s,” said Edmund. “He believes his machines are better than people, better than himself. But he knows what he’s replacing. He knows very well. The other people are stupid, or naive.”

Mack sighed involuntarily, staring at Sapphire’s Triumvirate in fear. An amazed tear bled from his eye.

Sapphire felt a surge of protectiveness, though she also felt a kind of fear for their sophistication, and she scowled at John Mack who she knew would be badly stung by this, wherever he was.

Ellen reached out and touched Edmund’s cheek, looking sorrowfully and lovingly at his face.

John Mack understood exactly what she was doing now. She was showing him themselves, when they were young. How cloyingly sentimental. He was amazed, angered even, by her inane optimism.

Jonathan’s eyes suddenly focused sharply on Middletown in the open doorway. “I’m not giving up,” he said.

“Good,” said Edmund, gripping his shoulder.

“There’s always Sapphire Hunt,” smiled Ellen. “She’s still out there. They haven’t caught her yet.”

“We’ll see,” smiled Edmund. “We have to hang on.”

Jonathan nodded and gripped Edmund’s and Ellen’s hands.

“If you ever get into trouble, Jonathan, you know my number,” said Ellen. “Or come to the temple and we’ll come meet you. I’ll leave my cellular phone and a battery pack in here. OK?”

“Thanks, El.”

They sat in a ring on the slab and pressed their foreheads together. “We’ll make it,” Edmund whispered. “Together, we’ll make it. We’ve just got to hang on and stay out of their way. Just not get where they can see us for very long, or hear us, or sense anything that we do.”

“We have to be invisible,” said Jonathan, his voice leaden and distant.

Ellen looked at Jonathan and the way his nose had changed. Her eyes spilled tears as she smiled for him, wrapping her arms around their shoulders. "Not to us," she whispered and kissed them both.

Very well, John Mack thought. She put too much faith in these children. In the end, they would be his evidence against her. Whatever she believed was in them would erode before her eyes and prove her romanticism unfounded.

He would play her game; she would lose.

Saphire turned off the monitor and sighed. She and John Mack were just spectators now.

* * *

Part III

The Machine

On Friday, biology class was another circus. The regular teacher was back, but her monotonous words were punctuated with fart noises and sex cracks. She didn't notice. She didn't care. John Lanier couldn't find the liver on the human anatomy. He pointed to the crotch and got a big laugh. Then Joker, who was a gangbanger when he wasn't in school, couldn't locate the brain. He pointed at the crotch. The teacher yawned and the class got out of hand. She called a security guard and gave everyone a 'C' for poor community effort.

On Saturday night, Jonathan was busted by Sheriff Buchanan for smoking a joint on the steps of his apartment complex. Dealers were all around, but Jonathan was busted. Jonathan didn't have the gang connections the others had, and he didn't have the money, either. Buchanan was on the take, like most of the cops in the neighborhood now. Jonathan was an easy target, a path of least resistance. Plus, unknown to him, he was a special target of Buchanan.

On Sunday, he tried to approach the pretty girl on the street outside his apartment block. Jonathan had saved \$200 from working at Mr. Hohner's store, with the vague notion of helping her someday.

"Are you OK?" he asked.

She was sitting on some steps, her head down between her knees. She looked up as if startled and yelled, "I'm OK, man! What you think, bitch!"

"Here," he said. "You're pretty. I bought you this. It's for you. Bye." He handed her a nice mirror wrapped in pink paper.

She grabbed the package. She grinned at him. "If they see you, you're dead."

"OK," he said. He shrugged and walked away.

On Monday, Jonathan was processed and fitted with his own probationary wristband, and a THC sensing unit was installed in “his” room next to the graffitied PCA. His brothers beat him up again for this.

On Tuesday, he showed up at Mr. Hohner’s to sweep his store but Mr. Hohner waved him outside and closed the door behind him. His face was a maze of worried wrinkles and angry creases. “They cited me, boy. The bastards cited me for under-the-table-employing. They must be watching me, the *scheiss-kopfs!* Gott damn them! You can’t come here to work, now. I’m sorry, Jonathan. You can’t, boy.”

Jonathan looked at him in silent, weak surprise.

“Don’t give up, now. You are a *gut* boy! Here.” Mr. Hohner waved a fifty dollar bill.

“No!” said Jonathan.

“I can sweep, boy,” snapped Mr. Hohner. “I want you take this. Take this, now take it. It’s just a number on a piece of paper. The bastards can’t stop me from giving it to you.”

“No. No!” There were tears in Jonathan’s eyes.

Mr. Hohner thrust the piece of paper at him desperately, and Jonathan ran down the street.

“Jonathan!” cried Mr. Hohner, and Jonathan felt the pain in the old man’s voice. He held his ears and he ran. The police had asked him where he got his money because they thought he was dealing drugs, and he had told them he worked at Mr. Hohner’s shop. They asked if he had an apprentice license, a job assignment ticket, and a work permit. They asked him if Mr. Hohner had any documentation.

That night, he sat in his room staring at the red eye of the THC sensor in his room, between his model of a Space Shuttle and the gutted MackLink monitor.

He didn’t want to think. He didn’t want to study. He didn’t want to care about anything. He wanted only to get stoned and dream, but there was no more pot on the streets anymore. The roll music pounded and pounded and smashed outside the window. He checked his brother’s emergency Fly pipe, but it was smoked out. Nothing was left. He went outside, and looked around. Someone caught the look in his eye seconds after he had stepped out, and he had bought a ten piece of Blue Fire a few seconds after that. He smoked it and later went out and bought some more, and smoked it, and went out and bought some more, and smoked it. It was 4:30 in the morning before he went to sleep, clutching his toy gun under his pillow.

On Wednesday, he didn’t go to school. He couldn’t bear to be with Ellen and Edmund at the temple, either. Everything seemed wrong. He felt wrong, as if a layer of glass separated him from the world, and he couldn’t face them from this meaningless place. He walked around the

decaying neighborhood, staring like a ghost at the streets and the people. He felt lost and falling.

Out of nowhere a voice spoke to him. "Hey, Mute!"

He looked up, and saw the pretty girl.

She sat down on the steps next to him, smiling.

He smiled at her, raising his eyebrows wearily.

She put a shy hand on his knee.

He looked at her, shaking his head slightly in confusion.

"Thanks for the present," she said, shrugging and looking away.

"Oh, sure."

"No one's ever given me a present. I mean, not without wanting something for it."

He saw her lips were trembling. She was so beautiful, and underneath the toughness, she was soft and kind, as he had always known.

"You're nice, Mute. I didn't know you could talk," she looked sadly into his eyes and laughed, nudging him with her knee.

"Thanks."

She looked away from him, down the hazy corridor of the street. "Nice people get used." She smirked. "I should know."

"I'm sorry."

She looked around and then looked quickly at him. "Mute, I want to get out of here." Her lips trembled again and suddenly folded down in pain, tears rolling over her made-up face.

He took her hand. "I know." He squeezed her hand. "I know."

"I have an aunt," she said, squeezing his hand back. "In Rhode Island. I need to get out of here, Mute. I think I might die today if I —" She choked and laid her head on his knee, sobbing loudly. "If I stay," she said.

He stroked her hair gently, his hand trembling. "OK. We have to get you there. What do you need to get there?" He noticed a young kid with a baseball cap who was a spotter for the M-13 staring at him, grinning as he loped down the street. "What do you need?" said Jonathan.

"I need 150 dollars. I have 200 dollars stashed away where my mother can't find it. I have to go now! People are looking for me."

He placed 150 dollars, all he had, in her hand and closed it over the bills. "There. There's enough." Tears were welling in his eyes, but he lifted her face and smiled bravely. "You have to promise me one thing."

"Hmm?" She wiped the hair from her face.

"Go now."

She held his eyes for a moment, and saw the truth in them.

"Even if they put you up to this... do it anyway," he said.

She laughed, kissing him, her tears wetting his cheeks. “I won’t forget you.”

And she left.

On Saturday, he was cornered a block from his home by three men.

“There he is, man!”

One of them walked up to him and pointed. “Yo, little fucker!”

“What happened to Denise, man?”

“What?” Jonathan was paralyzed before them but vowed to himself one thing: her secret would die with him.

“Where’d she go?”

“You were talkin’ to my woman the other day,” shouted the first man. He was at least thirty, and his face was cruel and stupid.

“Who?” Jonathan asked.

“Who, Fool? You were talkin’ to her, and she’s gone! Where the fuck is she, man?”

“I don’t know —”

The fists hit his face and he was vaguely aware of himself laughing. The street rose toward him like an ocean wave.

That night, he managed to crawl back to his apartment.

Fireworks were in the air outside the window. Middletown was celebrating the Inauguration of the new President. Blood was clotted in his nose, his eye was swollen shut, and the left side of his jaw ached when he tried to open it. His mother was gone somewhere. The phone was disconnected. He stared out the window at the exploding colors around the orderly lights of the CSB:

YOU COULD GO TO PRISON! SUBSTANCE ABUSE IS A CRIME!

All the colors flashing in the sky, he thought, but his soul was dark. Who was trying to kid? The act he had perfected, the invisible boy, was real all along. It had always been real.

That night, Jonathan took out his German dissection kit and traded it for a fifteen-dollar piece of Fly. And he decided, as he laughed after a hit, that he would just join the M-13 tomorrow. To hell with school. The Presidential fireworks splashed and danced in the sky outside the window. Fuck 'em.

* * *

Jo-Jo Pendleton tightened his black tie, laughing at Ellen Neville in his mind as he looked at his beautiful reflection in the mirror.

Luckily, Suzy, who now thought she was going steady with him, had not gotten pregnant. John Lanier said the chlorine and heat in the hot tub would take care of it, and he was right, thank God. The little Catholic bitch kept hoping she was pregnant, and it had haunted him for two weeks before proof came that God had spared him. That was it, he thought. If she was going to try any of that shit, he had to end it forever, right now.

Besides, what a bimbo she was! It was creepy. She dressed like Ellen now, she even wore Ellen's clothes. She had bleached and tinted her hair like Ellen's, and wore gold lipstick and Geisha makeup like Ellen, and blue contacts. But there was something missing, the part that Ellen used to hide, but Suzy wasn't hiding anything underneath it all like Ellen was.

Ellen was supposed to be at the Nevilles' Inauguration party that night. Actually, his father said "maybe." Jo-Jo could almost hear Edmund Green laughing at him. The laugh inside Jo-Jo had taken on Edmund's voice now, sometimes.

He wanted Ellen, he admitted to himself as he adjusted the hair on the sides of his head. Something about having Ellen made him right. If he had Ellen, it seemed no one could say he was blowing it. It was all right, before. He didn't deserve Ellen, he suddenly realized. But that didn't matter. In fact, that's what had made it great. He had had her anyway.

Ellen thought she was so special, so smart, and right about everything. Who did she think she was? She was no better than he. God, he just wanted to slap her around until she had to admit it. He imagined himself backhanding her, and he grinned savagely to himself in the mirror. He took his father's gun out of the brown paper bag and weighed it in his hand, smiling at the blue steel curves that smiled back at him in the bright bathroom lights.

* * *

Edmund and Ellen tried to call Jonathan, but the phone service was disconnected. They drove by his building in Ellen's obscenely flashy car. Charles came up to the window on Edmund's side as Edmund rolled down the window.

"Get on outta here, fuck!" he said.

"Where is he?" asked Edmund, leaning out of the window, serious.

"With his people!"

Edmund licked his lips, galled by this asshole, and he sat back, looking at him. "Jesus, Charles, we just give a shit about your brother, that's all. A simple goddamn thing like that. We aren't going to get anyone busted. That's total bullshit that we ratted you out. That's

Buchanan's horseshit, man! And you believe him? We hate the fucking pigs as much as you do. Well, not as much as you do, OK."

"See ya, Edmund!" waved Charles, amused enough to let him go with a smile.

"All right," Edmund shrugged sincerely about what he said, and they rolled away from the curb, Charles looking after him.

* * *

Ellen had finally gotten her car. It embarrassed her now, a loud car with spoilers and details, but she was proud of it in one sense. She had stolen a prize reserved for the kind of girl she was for her and Edmund, which it had not been meant to reward. "Let's watch the fireworks from Lookout Ridge tonight. This is our night and I'm going to spend it with you, not at my father's stupid party."

"Sure. Inauguration day. Fireworks in Middletown. What's happened to Jon, El? It's been a whole week."

"I don't know. I'm not sure what we can do."

He shrugged, aggravated. "We'll check out his place again tomorrow. Maybe his brothers won't be there. Sure, let's go up there tonight. Your father's just going to have me assassinated, but sure. Let's do it." Edmund frowned at her. "You're going to miss the party? The mayor is going to be there."

"Don't be a jerk, darling."

Edmund nodded. "All right. Screw the Mayor."

"Besides, Jo-Jo is going to be there. Edmund, my parents and his parents hope this is going to be our reunion. I'm supposed to have given up on you by now."

"Oh. So why are we going to your house at all, then?"

"I want to pick up some stuff for us. A little champagne, a few hors d'oeuvres, and a surprise." She winked.

"Ellen, the party's at full tilt. It's nine o'clock. I'm just going to stay in the car."

"No. You're going to come in."

"It's black tie! Your father's going to pop a vein in his brain."

She pulled into the driveway. "You are my boyfriend, Edmund, and I live here. We're just stopping in. I want Dad to see you standing in the entry, waiting for me."

"What about me?"

"Edmund, it's got to happen sooner or later anyway. Tonight they're expecting some kind of decision from me, so this will take care of that."

"OK."

"And start getting used to the idea. Come on."

She parked the car and they got out and headed up the driveway in the unusually bitter night. Ellen squeezed his hand. He laughed, pulling her around him.

* * *

The party was impressive, sparkling, and immaculate. The formal gowns on the women and their daughters, their perfect hairdos, traditional make-up with a little more eye shadow, the tuxedos on the men and their sons, the maids, the butlers, the musicians, the caviar and champagne — all were the ceremonial dressings of the god Power, whose spirit anointed and presided over the mannered festivities.

“Thad,” sad Tom. “Here comes the Mayor and his wife.” Thad Pendleton and his wife Barbara turned as the Lanier family entered. John Lanier was strutting in a slick tux with tails. He gave two thumbs up to Jo-Jo. Jo-Jo grinned, shaking his head.

“Well, Thad, how are you? Are you trying to outdo our parties, Tom?” The Mayor shook their hands warmly.

Tom laughed, waving his hands in emphatic denial that said he was, in fact, trying to outdo the Mayor’s parties.

The Mayor grinned, a seasoned player who recognized a rising star in the young City Councilman. “Congratulations on the P.P.P. bill, Tom. Guess we’ll be seeing you running for Congress, soon.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Tom Neville, with a humble nod of his head.

The couples exchanged greetings as Betty joined them and after kisses and handclasps, Mrs. Lanier looked from Jo-Jo to Tom and back at Jo-Jo. “Well, I thought you would be with Ellen, Jo-Jo? Where’s your daughter, Tom? Why isn’t she by this handsome young man’s side?”

John Lanier shrugged at Jo-Jo apologetically.

“Well, I’m not sure where she is right now, Nancy. I imagine she’s about.” Tom looked around as if she might be there.

Jo-Jo’s dad squeezed his neck firmly, grinning at the Laniers.

They were all pretending she was there! Jo-Jo felt sick. It was crazy! He felt a rotten sore in his stomach, spreading like cancer.

“I’m home,” called a voice.

They all turned around to see Ellen as she came in the door. Edmund came in behind her in his green coat and closed the door. She kissed him on the mouth and told him to wait with a pointed finger. She ran in her jeans, shirt, long coat, and tennis shoes upstairs. Edmund put his hands in his coat pockets and smiled at the staring faces.

Jo-Jo looked at him standing there in his long green coat, so casual, so loose, so innocent, so easy. That fucking son-of-a-bitch, he thought. Who the fuck does he think he is?

“Oh, is there something I don’t know about?” asked Mrs. Lanier discreetly.

“Things are a little interesting right now,” laughed Betty Neville. There was a telltale slur on her tongue.

Tom’s mind boiled, but his muscles froze. “Let me go see what that scamp is up to. Teenaged girls, George — you should count your lucky stars you have a boy!”

“Hear, Hear!” said Betty, toasting the Mayor and his wife. They and the Pendletons all toasted her, chuckling perfunctorily as Tom got away.

Shit! It was a graceful exit until Betty ruined it, Tom thought. What had gotten into her lately, he wondered angrily. First he had to deal with Edmund.

“Well, Edmund, how are you?” Tom said cheerily, gesturing broadly and wringing Edmund’s hand.

Edmund winced and nodded as his hand was shaken.

“You out with Ellen tonight, were you?” he nodded.

“Yes, Mr. Neville.”

“Edmund, this is a black tie affair. I wonder if we could go out front?”

“Sure.”

They moved out and Tom closed the door. It looked like he was showing out the door a family friend who had merely dropped Ellen off. He congratulated himself. “Now, Edmund.” He held his hand out to shake Edmund’s hand again.

Edmund frowned.

“Come on, shake my hand,” said Tom, grinning savagely.

Edmund reached his hand out and he shook it, hard.

“Good bye, Edmund.” Tom turned and walked inside.

Edmund stared after him and went to the car to wait.

Tom rejoined the group.

Ellen jumped down the stairs in her backless blue silk evening gown, off one shoulder, no makeup, and her hair down. Tennis shoes were on her feet, and she carried a big denim bag. She waved in the entry hall.

“Go talk to her, Jo-Jo,” said his father in his ear.

Jo-Jo sprang toward her as if he were running a pass route, but then remembered himself and walked deliberately toward her. “Let’s go outside,” he said, his lips tight.

“I’m going anyway.” She turned in front of him and walked out the front door. Jo-Jo closed the door behind them.

“Hey, Ellen!”

She kept walking.

He caught up and grabbed her arm. “What the fuck do you see in him?” he asked through clenched teeth. It was much more desperate than he intended.

She turned to Jo-Jo, pulling his arm away.

“What is it, anyway? God damn it, Ellen!” He was crying suddenly.

“Me!” she said. She fixed his eyes, not letting them jerk away from her. “I see me in him, Jo-Jo, and that’s what you see, too!”

His face went slack. “I —”

She sighed, her eyes pitiful and burning his. “You hate him the same way you love me.”

He wanted to strike her, but just stared stupidly at her.

“I love myself, and thanks to him, I’m not giving myself up. You look at Edmund Green and you see part of yourself you never gave a chance, Jo-Jo. Do you get it now?” The words shot into the sore in his stomach like icicles. She turned and his heartbeat missed as she walked away toward the car.

He felt cold, like a zombie.

The engine turned over and Ellen’s car rolled slowly past him. He pointed at Edmund as the car passed, jumping up and down, smashing the ground with his feet. He wanted to rape Ellen and waste Edmund!

He fell to his knees in the snow as they drove away into the night together, free, leaving him gaping after them in the freezing night, his tuxedo slapping against his stomach. “Fuck you!” he shouted. “God damn it, fuck you!” He wept. “Someday, I’ll fuckin’ own you! I’ll make you do whatever I fuckin’ want, Edmund!” He clutched his forehead and clenched his fist. “Just like you, mother fucker,” he muttered to that little part inside him, who smiled back, receding with Ellen and Edmund into the great cold distance.

He stood up straight, every muscle burning and clenched, and shook the tears from his face onto the ground where they froze. He walked rigid and coiled into Tom Neville’s house, patting the outline of the gun in his coat pocket.

* * *

“Christ almighty. That was scary, Ellen. I think your father gave me the handshake of death.”

“Well, he doesn’t know anyone in the Mafia, unless unions count.”

“They count.” He sighed and looked at her moonlit body wrapped in silk beside him. “But you’re the most beautiful thing this universe ever created! All evolution was leading up to you. It’s worth it. Being waxed by your father’s mob is worth it, for you.” He kissed her earlobe.

“Thank you, sir,” she smiled. “But don’t say that. You’re safe. We’re together, so let’s not think about any of that. Let’s not think about any of that at all, OK?”

He grinned. “That dress is so beautiful, I want to tear off strips with my teeth and eat it off your skin.” He breathed on her neck.

She squealed.

She turned up Lookout Ridge Mountain Highway.

They passed a few turnouts where kids had caravanned to watch the fireworks.

“Let’s go up higher, so we’re alone,” said Ellen.

“That might be too high to see the fireworks.”

“No. They’ll just look like tiny wildflowers if we’re up high. It’s dark and quiet way up.”

“OK.”

They rose into the gloomy heights and passed the last cluster of cars. The world turned dark, lonely, and cold, like a part of outer space. The road wrapped around a canyon, and they found a turnoff at the end of the next bend between two shoulders. The glow of Middletown was condensed like the center of a spiral galaxy below them.

Ellen pulled Edmund’s coat and sweater off and they filled their paper cups with champagne and sat back. The first fireworks were appearing like novae over Middletown. “To the new President of the United States,” said Edmund.

They laughed, and crossed glasses. They kissed and drank the champagne from each other’s mouth and licked it from their chins and necks.

* * *

Jo-Jo squeezed the hand grip of his father’s .38 revolver in the pocket of his tuxedo. “Dad, I’m going out with John and Sammy,” said Jo-Jo. He had hit the champagne hard, his father could tell.

“I don’t want to find out you’re fooling around with drugs, Jo-Jo,” he whispered fiercely.

“We’re not, Dad.”

“You’re going home, then?”

“No, we’re just going to watch the fireworks.”

“Well, damn it, don’t drive too far. And you take it easy. What happened with Ellen?”

“Who gives a shit?”

“Jo-Jo! Why — damn it! You come back here.”

He was out the door, and Thad Pendleton was pinned by the approaching wife of the Mayor. He smiled, shrugging the tension off his face.

“Thad, you big handsome man. Did anyone ever tell you you look remarkably like Ernest Hemingway?”

“Well, thank you, Nancy, no. I’m a little taller.”

“You devil. Wonderful party, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.” He winced, putting Jo-Jo out of his mind.

“I think Betty has just done a wonderful job. She seems upset, though, poor dear. Is anything upsetting her, Thad?”

“Betty? Hell no! A little tight, I think. It’s unusual for her, of course. But what with all the toasting, I can’t say I blame her. By the way, to the President of the United States!”

“Hear, hear!” Nancy toasted him, squeezing his big arm.

* * *

“Jo-Jo, Jesus, let me drive!”

The Camaro almost spun out around the curve.

“Jo-Jo, there’s a fuckin’ 250-foot fuckin’ cliff over that little fuckin’ guard-rail,” shouted Sammy from the back seat. “Let Lanier drive!”

“Fuck both of you,” shouted Jo-Jo. The tires spun under the car as he shifted on the slick straightaway.

“OK, OK, Duke, just pull her off anywhere, we’re high enough, man.”

“We’re goin’ higher!”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” moaned John Lanier, putting his hand on the dash to brace himself for the next curve. “You’re going to get us killed because of that stupid cunt, Jo-Jo.”

“Just shut up, John! Just shut your mouth!”

“Jesus, save us,” murmured Sammy, shaking his head at Johnny.

* * *

Ellen sat on Edmund, facing him, leaning back on the dash, her legs extended on either side of the bucket seat, his fingers in her hair. Her dress was still on, draped on his taut stomach, her hands under the silk.

“I started writing a song for you,” she whispered.

“Good.”

“Oh, Edmund, I can’t, I can’t sit still,” she complained, moving her hips.

“Shush.” He stroked her jaw line.

She pressed her mouth on his forehead.

He looked shyly into her eyes and finally stroked her with an intimate, whispering rhythm.

She clutched his hair as though it were the last thing that existed, and leaned forward, touching her cheek to his.

Edmund held her shoulders and moved deep three times. A supernova of pleasure melted them away and fused their souls at the center of the cataclysm. They lay still against each other for a long time after, her temple against his as they breathed, sobbed, and laughed quietly, not speaking.

* * *

The party was winding down. Tom and Thad nursed a few cognacs in the living room by the fire, and Barbara was nursing an Irish Coffee.

“Buchanan’s put some heat on Edmund’s little black friend,” said Tom Neville. “Shook up the little Fly gang he’s in. Told them those two were squealing on them.”

“You two! That really seems a little cruel to me,” said Barbara.

“Hey, get ‘em workin’ against each other, honey. They’re already killing each other off for us,” grinned Thad, nodding appreciatively at Tom.

“And tomorrow, in the immortal words of Scarlett O’Hara, tomorrow is another day!” Tom slapped his knee and laughed.

“The P.P.P. bill gets passed Monday, Babs, and this drug addict friend of Ellen is going to find himself the first guinea pig to try it out,” Thad chuckled to his wife.

“I’m tempted to call Buchanan first thing Monday morning and have him trigger Edmund’s nose, but I may wait a few days, Thadster.”

“Aw, Tom!” Thad growled.

“You men have no pride,” scolded Barbara, teasing Thad.

The men chuckled at each other, nodding.

Thad suddenly noticed Betty Neville. She was standing in the doorway, her hands on her hips.

“How are ya’ doin’ there, Hostess!” said Thad.

“Well,” she said.

Drunk as a skunk, winced Thad Pendleton.

She walked in, swinging her arms girlishly. “No man is one man!” she announced to the room with an elaborate flourish at Tom’s fraternity paddle.

Thad grinned at Tom, a little question in his eyes.

“No man,” she belted, sauntering toward them with the paddle. “Is one man,” she whispered, laughing a short laugh that rocked her shoulders. “Right, Tom?”

“Honey —”

“Isn’t that right, Thad? You two should know that.” She laughed and cast her head back.

“Betty, Honey,” said Barbara, glancing at Thad.

“Well, my husband dear, who raided my panties with all your friends.” Betty Neville kissed her husband on the forehead deliciously and sloppily. “Monday’s your big day, isn’t it?” She plopped back in a chair, and stared into the flames.

“Well, I think the spouse and I must be getting back to our bed, Tom. I think the same might be good for you two.” He put his hands on his knees and heaved himself up.

“Right,” said Betty. She blew a kiss at Barbara.

Awkward disentanglements followed.

At half past midnight, the house was finally empty, Betty was snoring on the couch, and Tom Neville looked over his terraced backyard into the clear winter night. A nagging quarrel of fear and anger nullified itself inside him.

He turned his head and looked at his wife, sleeping with a smile on her amazingly preserved face, illuminated by the fire. He looked down at Middletown. The sprawling lights soothed him as if each light represented a vote for him and he represented each light. Betty was no problem, he reassured himself, and he got her to bed.

* * *

The Wolf kissed the roach of a marijuana cigarette, got a discrete puff, and threw the remains onto the slush outside the window. He wormed his fat tongue around until he caught a bit of marijuana on the tip and then shot it frog-like out of his mouth. Then he sprayed his tongue with mint spray and squirted eye drops in his eyes.

He called himself The Wolf because he thought of himself as dangerous, a leader of the pack, but not because he looked like a wolf. He liked to imagine his eyes, large and pale blue, were like those of a wolf but they were set deep in a fat face as waxy, pink and porous as a grapefruit.

Buchanan laughed and nodded at his partner. “Where do these kids get it?” he scowled.

“I don’t know. But they can walk all day if they got this kinda shit,” said LaGuardia. “That’s all I know.” LaGuardia laughed, grinning cool.

Of course, kids never reported stolen drugs that didn’t show up on police reports, and it was surprising what kids would stay silent about if it meant not being arrested.

“What was that, now?”

“That was Humboldt County grass, if ever there was.”

“These kids are spoiled up the ass around here, LaGuardia,” said Buchanan grimly. Buchanan had a goofy giggle, which he followed

now with a macho sneer. He looked over Middletown from their spot way up Lookout Ridge, thinking over his odyssey as a policeman.

Whenever the weed zonked him, his first thought was of Desiree, and of the look on her face when the two bullets punched little holes in her cheap satin dress. When he thought of it, it was in slow motion, like a football highlight. It was easier to think of when he was stoned, and that was the only time he let himself think about it. Again, he went over his personal account of it. She was going to turn him in for accepting sexual favors in return for police protection. After all he had done to try and help her, she was going to turn him in just because he threw her sister in jail ten years ago. And she had been laughing the moment before — before he squeezed the revolver two turns and she fell down, moaning. She died in the space of five minutes as sweat ran into his eyes.

He realized he was a political favor now, a dog on a loose leash in Middletown. He had to be grateful for the transfer, and his new master, Tom Neville, thought he made big demands but in fact made few and small ones. This was a comfortable tour of duty, this Middletown, after the big city. He and his partner made out pretty good in the projects — enough to retire in Venezuela some day. A little here for looking that way, a little there for saying this or not saying that. Drug dealers never reported bribes, and this was a soft city, in the middle between the big ones. The war was pointless anyway, as he knew better than anyone.

The flashback started again, the slightly bloody lips whispering “no,” the gunpowder smell.

“Fireworks are mighty pretty. Those kids picked a good spot.” LaGuardia shrugged, assessing the pyrotechnics.

“Yeah, they did, they did indeed.” Buchanan was glad to shake himself out of it. “Way up here. Our spot. Didn’t they know that?” Buchanan guffawed and accidentally farted. “Aaah!” he grunted in relief, and accidentally belched.

They took in the view for a while as the fireworks rose like fizz popping in the sky far below.

“Well,” he put his hands on the wheel. “Duty calls, partner.” He twisted the ignition and lurched into gear.

“Maybe we can catch a little T and A tonight down the bend,” said LaGuardia, rolling down the window.

“A little T.A. T and A,” said Buchanan as he swung the patrol car back onto the highway.

“T.A. T and A?”

“Teen-Aged Tits and Ass, kid, Teen-Aged Tits and Ass!”

They laughed heartily as they barreled down Lookout Ridge. The prime strip was in front of them; they liked to start at the top.

Buchanan radioed in, and they sat up, looking sharp. Their radar was out, their hearts were pumping, and their minds were upshifting.

The garden of earthly delights grew rich fruit on Saturday nights beside this lonely stretch of road, and they had a brass invitation to all the pleasures of man in this teenaged twilight zone. Buchanan sometimes wondered why they strayed so deeply into his territory to do this stuff. Didn't they know? They were completely his here in the wilderness, where they thought they could get away. No one was up here but them and him, and he was The Law, he was the Wolf.

"Wait a second, here's a little girl's car if ever there was, sitting pretty all alone," said LaGuardia.

Buchanan nodded and turned the squad car sharply into the turnoff, hidden in a tiny ravine between two ridges. LaGuardia hit the rack of lights and chirped the siren. They got out, flashlights in hand, not looking at each other as they approached the car. Their faces were stern and grim — just like cops.

* * *

"Shit, it's the cops," said Ellen.

She crumpled the paper cups of champagne, tearing them up, and rubbing the liquid into the carpet and cranking the heater. They were naked under the blanket.

"Jesus," said Edmund, gritting his teeth and closing his eyes. He found Ellen's panties and handed them to her under the blanket, and she got his boxers. The red light on his bracelet seemed like a tiny, screaming traitor on his wrist.

"Stay under the blanket," she whispered. She pulled the blanket over their heads and they sank down on either side of the floor shift. She tried to pull her panties on.

They saw the flashlights raking over the blanket and winced at each other in the splashing glow.

Buchanan and LaGuardia saw the movement under the blanket and grinned at each other.

"All right, folks, come out of the blanket," shouted LaGuardia angrily. The adrenaline generated by a bust kicked in, and full-tilt righteousness filled his voice. "Move!" The order was a brazen challenge to whatever might be under the blankets. He imagined killers ready to blow them away, but he was really hoping to see titty.

Buchanan knocked angrily on the glass. "Come out of the car with your hands above your heads!" he ordered.

Ellen nodded at Edmund and pressed her finger to his angry lips.

Buchanan raised his eyebrows at LaGuardia auspiciously.

When he turned his fat grinning face back at the window Ellen's face was glaring back, and the glass between them rolled down with a mellow buzz.

“Why, hello there, Sheriff Buchannan,” she said cheerily.

“Well, hello there, Ellen?”

Ellen held the blanket up to her throat, her elbows over her head.

“Is there something else you need, Sheriff Buchannan?”

“No — well, no! I was just concerned how you were doing up here.” Buchannan let out a loose smile over his face.

“Fine. We’re doing just fine.” She winked, almost accidentally flashing one breast at him.

Buchannan blushed, more in anger than embarrassment, and said, “Well, well, you say hi to your father for me now, all right then, and I’m sorry if we intruded in on your little party.” He laughed a forceful laugh.

She winked again. “You’ll be discreet, of course, I hope, Sheriff?”

“Oh yes, Dear, of course!” He laughed heartily.

“Good. Good. Jo-Jo and I will tell him you were ever so sweet.”

“Well, well. You’ll be discreet, too, now!” He wasn’t sure what discreet was, but wanted to make sure he had some of it plastered on his ass, as well, just in case.

“Oh of course!”

“Good night, now, and you two ought to get back home soon.”

“Oh, we will.”

“All right then, good night. Good night, Jo-Jo! Sorry to bother you kids, but get on home soon, OK?”

“We will!” said Ellen, marveling at how powerful Jo-Jo’s name was.

They walked quickly back to the car without speaking to each other.

* * *

“Ouch!” said Edmund.

They sat up after the squad car had pulled out of the turnoff.

On the bend of the road below them, a car made a roaring stop as it pulled into a turnoff, kicking up a glittering wall of slush.

“Jo-Jo!” said Ellen.

“Really?”

“I think that’s his car. And something tells me it’s him driving.”

* * *

“Jesus!”

“What’s the deal? No search? No frisk? Man, she was naked, baby!” LaGuardia looked out his window.

“The City Councilman’s daughter, for Christ’s sake!”

“Oh, for crying out loud!”

“Yeah, that’s right. A little frisk job and we’re out of a job.” Buchanan pulled around the curve. “Hey, check that, God damn it!”

On the bend ahead a car tore into the turnoff.

“All right, we got one!”

“Fast car, maybe a Camaro or Mustang. Siren’s up,” said LaGuardia, engaging the unit.

“Reckless driving,” hummed Buchanan, citing cause for anything that might transpire.

* * *

“Jo-Jo, you asshole,” shouted Sammy.

“OK. We’re here at least,” said Johnny.

“They’re not up here,” muttered Jo-Jo, loading his crack pipe. He scratched his lighter and torched the pebble of Blue Fire savagely.

“Fuckin’ bogart!” said Lanier.

Jo-Jo turned to him, feeling the alien sweetness enter him. “That’s OK, man, here’s yours.” He quickly put some in the pipe and handed it to John as the rush still washed over him.

“Cop,” sighed Sammy.

“Shit, he’s coming for us, man,” said Johnny.

Jo-Jo’s mind blew like a defective firecracker in his hands. He shifted and pulled the car back, knocking the hot pipe from John’s fingers.

“Dude! God damn it!” shouted Lanier, fishing the pipe from between his legs. They swung out in front of Buchanan.

They rolled slowly in front of the squad car. The flashing lights in the rear view mirror filled Jo-Jo’s mind. He shifted and punched the gas pedal to the floor. And suddenly, he felt right.

“Fuck, John, fuck, John! Stop him now, man,” screamed Sammy as they swung around the narrow corner.

The siren wailed like a crazed creature, gaining on them.

Jo-Jo stared at the white dots that were swerving left and right under the hood. “Yeah, you pigs,” he shouted. “Yeah, come on!”

* * *

“Isn’t that Jo-Jo Pendleton’s car?” said LaGuardia, hesitating with his hand on the Mack Link.

“Jo-Jo’s with Ellen, ain’t he?” shouted Buchanan, skidding around a bend.

“Let me buzz the plate.” LaGuardia fed it into the Mack Link.

“Fuckin’ white boys wanna play hardball,” sneered Buchanan, plowing harder down the slick curves.

* * *

Jo-Jo ate the road, burying Buchanan behind him.

“Jo-Jo, you’re blowin’ it, man,” said John Lanier. “Let me drive the fuckin’ car, God damn it!” He tossed the pipe out of the car, and it smashed in a murky explosion against the rocky shoulder. “We got nothin’, now pull over!”

Jo-Jo grinned, oblivious of him or Sammy. All he could hear was his father’s voice. “Jo-Jo, if I hear about you doing any of that shit one more time.”

“Fuckin’ Jo-Jo!” pleaded Sammy.

“Jo-Jo, you’re a fuckin’ idiot, man,” shouted Lanier, grabbing Jo-Jo’s collar as they hugged a curve to the right.

“Fuck you!” bellowed Jo-Jo, sobbing. He took his right hand off the wheel and hit John Lanier in the face. He felt John’s nose crack on the back of his clenched hand, and he turned to look at him for one second. He saw the blood dripping from his nose and a look of terror in John’s eyes as the guard rail crumpled, rippling under the Camaro.

When Jo-Jo turned, he saw Middletown detached and rising before them like a galaxy. The car tipped to the left and whistled in mid-air, the engine roaring as the tires spun free. Jo-Jo bowed his head to the steering wheel and thought what a stupid fucking life it had been.

The car struck granite and was twisted like a soft candy bar. They fell deeper into the blackness. Joseph Pendleton screamed, and the little voice inside screamed with him. It was over in a sudden painful burst of splintering light.

* * *

The car bloomed like a crimson rose in the snow at the bottom of the black cliff. Buchanan looked in disbelief. “The jerk just plowed right over,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, at fifty miles an hour,” shouted LaGuardia. He ducked into the car and answered the radio.

He came out and gripped Buchanan’s bicep. “Jo-Jo Pendleton’s car,” he said.

“Jesus H. Christ.” Buchanan exhaled. “That little bitch lied! OK, OK.” He sharpened up like an icicle. “This is the story, La Guardia.”

* * *

It was 1:15 when Buchanan called Thad Pendleton.

“Mr. Thad Pendleton?”

“Yes. Who is this?”

“Sir, it’s Sheriff Buchannan. Sir, I have some bad news for you. Mr. Pendleton, tonight your son was found —”

“No! God damn you,” warned Thad Pendleton, gasping.

“Sir, I’m sorry, he was found in an accident. I’m afraid he didn’t make it. He was found dead, sir.”

“God! Mother! No! No! No! No!” Thad Pendleton gripped his leg until his fingernails cut the skin.

“Now, sir, I know this is terrible news, and it’s not easy for me to—”

“How? Where? God damn you! God damn you!”

“Mr. Pendleton, he lost control of his vehicle on Lookout Ridge and went over a guardrail, sir.”

“No!”

His wife, weeping, clutched his leg. It seemed a harpoon had struck her powerful husband in the chest. A supernatural certainty shattered her motherhood, and she fell across his knees.

“Oh, no.” Thad sighed.

“Thad,” she cried, clawing his arm.

“He was in the car with two other kids. sir. We haven’t been able to identify them. Would you possibly be able to help us, Mr. Pendleton?”

“Johnny Lanier and Sammy Pinkowski,” said Thad. “Christ! Christ no, you can’t be telling me — oh, Mother!” He fell over his wife, clutching the phone to his head like a revolver.

Buchannan sighed at his desk, the nameless forces of emotion washing over him, as they had many times. “Mr. Pendleton, are you sure that’s who he was with, sir?”

“Oh God, God, I don’t know, I think so, I think so.”

Then it hit Buchannan. The Mayor’s son was in the car. His mind was already fabricating, constructing before he even recovered from the shock. “Mr. Pendleton,” he murmured, his voice distant. “Your son evidently, well, sir, your son was evidently on drugs, sir.”

“What are you trying to say to me?” shouted Thad Pendleton.

“Mr. Pendleton, crack. He was on Fly, and that’s why he went over that guard rail.” It was like a miracle. The answer had seemingly come out of his mouth before Buchannan thought of it. “A gang in the projects sold him Fly laced with Angel Dust. They said they had it out for Jo-Jo for a drug debt just earlier today. It was a family down in the projects who did it.” The projects, he thought. Yes, yes, of course!

“Oh my God. Was he found with it on him?”

“Yes, yes, he was, but I can lose that evidence. Consider it lost, sir.”

“Who sold it to him!” Thad Pendleton looked at the elephant gun mounted on his wall.

“Mr. Pendleton.” Buchanan recognized the tone of voice. “We’re going to take all the appropriate steps to apprehend those responsible for this, I assure you,” he said, mildly.

“Who are they? You know who they are! Tell me who they are!”

“Mr. Pendleton, please —”

“Tell me, Buchanan! Or I’ll make Tom Neville make you tell me!”

“Thaddeus,” screamed his wife.

“Mr. Pendleton, please don’t do anything rash. The Middletown Police Department is doing all they can. You must believe that —”

“Fuck you, bastard. Fuck you, Buchanan. I’m calling Tom Neville right now, and then I’m calling the mayor!”

“Please don’t do that, Mr. Pendleton!” grimaced Buchanan. “I’m calling Tom Neville right now, and then I’ll call the mayor. You mustn’t do that, Mr. Pendleton.”

“Good-bye, God damn you!”

Buchanan winced at the last damnation and gripped the phone tightly as he hung up the receiver.

Thad Pendleton collapsed over his wife, stroking her back. “Our Jo-Jo is dead,” he yelled. “Oh, Mother, Mother!” They sobbed in a knot of agony, clutching their cotton sheets.

* * *

Buchanan scratched the stubble on his head. He mopped his face, wondering how he could break the news to the Mayor.

LaGuardia passed his desk.

“Meet me in the car,” Buchanan said, wiping his forehead. “There’s a change. The mayor’s son was in the car.”

LaGuardia’s face blanched, and he left the station quickly.

In a moment, Buchanan joined him in their patrol car. Buchanan stared at the red eye of the Mack Link mini-CRT mounted in the dashboard. “We found this pipe by the road. And this bag of rock laced with PCP.” Buchanan produced the items.

LaGuardia nodded. “I found the bag, you found the pipe,” he said.

Buchanan nodded.

Such items were easy to obtain in the station house. Large amounts of drugs even popped up in fellow officers’ lockers at inspection time — practical jokes that got raucous laughs. Most cops these days were “prepared.” LaGuardia had found Buchanan to be one of the more prepared.

“He went over the guard rail because of the PCP. The Holmes brothers sold it to him. You know, the ones we busted at Neville’s daughter’s party?”

“Perfect, yeah.”

“That’s the official story, see? The real story is Jo-Jo committed suicide. No skidmarks — classic case, LaGuardia. Suicide wouldn’t look good for Pendleton or Neville. Not when he took down the mayor’s son, too. So they’ll go with me on the official story. Just remember the official story. I’ll do the rest.”

“The Holmes brothers did it.”

“Right. Everyone will want them dead, see, to close it out and pinch it off. We’ll be heroes before the night’s over, LaGuardia, and this time they’ll owe us a favor and we’ll have something on them.”

“Were we chasing them?”

“No. Following, from a distance, and we found the crack pipe still hot at the edge of the cliff. The car was already over, just to be on the safe side.”

“OK.”

They nodded and went back into the station. Buchannan decided to call Tom Neville first, while LaGuardia dictated the preliminary report into the Mack file.

* * *

“Keep going,” said Edmund.

After they reached the next bend they stopped and looked with the other kids there down into the ravine.

“What happened?” shouted Edmund.

“They chased that car right over the cliff,” shouted a girl.

“God!” said Ellen, looking at the red fire below. “What kind of car was it?”

“Camaro,” said a long-haired guy.

“Camaro,” said a girl.

“It was a white Camaro, man,” said the long-haired guy, looking back down into the ravine.

“Come on,” said Ellen, covering her mouth.

They passed the paramedic trucks and a helicopter on the way down to Middletown. Ellen turned sharply left onto Starlight Drive and punched it down to her house. “Edmund, that could’ve been Jo-Jo!”

“They don’t know. Your parents don’t know,” said Edmund.

“What time is it?”

“One o’clock, no, quarter after.”

“Shit, you’re right.” Ellen sighed. “How can we find out?”

“They ran Jo-Jo off the cliff!” Edmund looked at her.

She shook her head, fighting off the monstrous possibility. “No! We’ll wait here until a light goes on.” And when a light went on, she thought, she would know Jo-Jo was dead.

Edmund looked out the window at the clear late night as a high knot of clouds untied over the sky. Lower clouds overflowed from the mountains as they waited, coming thicker and thicker and covering the stars. Finally, a light turned on in an upstairs window of her house.

Edmund squeezed her hand. "I think someone's up."

She checked the window, tears leaping down her face. "I'm going in. Stay here. I'll be back." She ran inside.

Ellen picked up the phone in her room.

"Christ Jesus! Oh, no, no, no, God! It's true."

"Mr. Neville, sir, please. Mr. Pendleton is very upset and is about to call the Mayor. This must be handled the right way."

"God, shut up, Buchannan. I just got off the phone with Thad Pendleton!"

"I was afraid of that, sir. He said he was going to call you."

"Now, listen! Burt, this is that kid I asked you to help who just got killed."

"I'm aware of that, Mr. Neville."

"Well, listen, then! Where did he get the bad dope?"

"What?"

"Who did he get the Fly from. Do you know who, Buchannan?"

"Well, yes, sir —"

"Because if you don't have them tonight, your ass is history! You understand me, Burt? I'll throw you to the wolves."

"I understand, Mr. Neville, I understand, you don't have to go into it. Now I don't really —"

"I want a name, and I want it now. Give it to me."

"Well, sir, I arrested a couple gang members at your house, Mr. Neville. At the party your daughter had a while back." Perfect, just perfect, Buchannan thought.

"What the Hell are you talking about?" Tom Neville's voice was drawn out and carefully metered.

"That's right, your daughter had a hell of a party while you were out of town, Mr. Neville."

Ellen frowned.

"I'm aware of that," said her father.

"And Jo-Jo, well, I found Jo-Jo doing Blue Fire with a couple of gang members from the projects in your study, Mr. Neville."

"What?"

"I told Jo-Jo to get lost and I busted his friends, 'cause, you know, I knew it wouldn't look good if that P.P.P. bill got passed and everything. I thought I should keep things cool, Tom. I didn't connect it until now, though. Brothers named Holmes, one of them is Edmund's pal, the same one you told me about, and his whole family. They must have wanted to get even with Jo-Jo after I started putting the heat on them for you."

“Where do they live?”

“I know where they live. It’s in the projects, M Street. We’ll arrest them and put them through the proper processing, don’t worry about it now, Mr. Neville.”

“No. You’ll do more than that! I want more than that for this, and so will the mayor. Damn it, Buchannan, I want you to be able to tell the Mayor that you got the whole fucking gang who did this, do you understand? This is a war now, OK? Thad Pendleton told me he’s going to shoot every nigger in the projects tonight and he’s loading his elephant gun. I swear to hell if you bring those fuckers in alive, he’s going to find a way to kill them! And I can’t fucking blame him, man! I’ve had enough of this — enough! Just do it, Buchannan! Take care of it tonight, no survivors, no witnesses, end it tonight. Find those bastards who were at my house, raid that place, no questions, and finish it all right there. That’s it! You understand?”

“What, Mr. Neville?” Buchannan’s mouth was curled at the edge’s, like a wolf.

“You heard me, didn’t you? That gang murdered Jo-Jo! That kid was going to be my son-in-law! What’s the matter with you? Don’t you care that that was the Mayor’s son who just got killed! Get your boys out there, do you hear me?”

“Yes, yes, now calm down, Tom.”

“Jo-Jo and Johnny are dead now because of that scum. Along with Sammy Pinkowski! You owe it, and, God damn your ass, if you don’t do it, I’ll finish you, by God! Find them and finish it, Buchannan! Finish the whole fucking gang, for Christ’s sake!”

“Yes, sir.” This was what he was waiting to hear. There were a few boys he knew who would be very glad to hear his news. “Mr. Neville, I knew Jo-Jo, too. I liked him. He was a good kid. They were all good kids. Tell his father I’m sorry.”

“Sorry, nothing. Tell him you got the punks who did it!”

“We will, Mr. Neville. You have my word.”

“Tonight?”

“You can count on it, Mr. Neville.”

“Good. Call me when it’s done. Now, I’ve got to call Thad back. He’s out of his mind. Get it done, Buchannan. I’ll call the mayor.”

“Mr. Neville. I have to tell you. Jo-Jo Pendleton committed suicide tonight. So you understand. This is the way to go?”

There was a gaping hole of silence.

“Do it!”

Ellen hung up the phone and for a moment was mesmerized in her dark room at the strange dealings and huge consequences about to come crashing down. She bolted out of the house and ran to the car.

* * *

In Buchanan's mind he was already blaming the fly dealers for the deaths of the three boys. They, not he, had chased the boys over the guard rail. And in a way, they had. He had been trying to help them, to save them. And in a way, he was. Ultimately, it was the Holmes brothers who killed Jo-Jo, Johnny, and Sammy. And if they finished them off, there would be no questions. No answers. It wasn't difficult to face the gathering of men before him now.

"Listen up. Johnny Lanier, the mayor's son, and Thad Pendleton's son and another kid were killed tonight after their car plowed over a guard rail on Lookout Ridge."

He let that sink in.

"The boy driving had been smoking crack, and the crack was probably laced with Angel Dust."

He let that sink in, like a calving iceberg.

"But, we know who sold him that crack, boys, and we're not letting the mayor down on this one. The chief suspect is an M-13 named 'Ghost' Holmes, Geoffrey Holmes. This scum and his brothers have spilled a lot of blood in Middletown, and we haven't been able to nail them for it. But this time, they hit too high. We're coming down with everything we've got. The order comes from the top. Do I make myself clear?"

A fierce affirmative filled the room.

"I mean the clearest possible this time, guys. The Holmes live at 1214 M Street, number 214. The whole family are dealers. LaGuardia and I have checked them out."

"How much can we do here?" asked Lampugnola, a grizzled cop who had had the projects beat for six hopeless years without taking a bribe. He still believed in the war. His son had been the victim of a not-so-random gang shooting.

"How strong do we hit them? K.O., Lamp! We're not risking any officers."

"OK!"

"We're gonna hit 'em quick. Bash the door down. No questions, no witnesses, and no prisoners, gentlemen. There's always ruffraff in front, and we'll put them on the wall. If the Holmes brothers are out there, bring 'em inside the apartment. I hope everyone understands this has got to be airtight!"

"Yessir!" a unanimous voice answered.

Many years of frustration filled that room — years pitted between rights and laws in the little Vietnam of America's streets. Many good men died fighting that crippled war, and many evil men had gotten rich. The police were caught between the danger of enforcing the laws and the rewards of not enforcing them, between the honor of upholding the law

and the senseless, confusing cruelty of inflicting the law on desperate people. It was as though people were paying more for crime than for justice, and it tainted their social roles in a way none of them had anticipated. Many of them were bitter toward a public they had all started out to protect. They weren't doing Buchanan a favor here. The death of the mayor's son broke a dam of retribution. Each man had his own reasons for welcoming this license. On this one night, each would vindicate a career of pain, confusion, and impotence.

Buchanan had some Blue Fire, some P.C.P., and two handguns in case the Holmes weren't already packing.

Everyone agreed on their respective positions, passed out the raid gear, and hit the patrol cars. It was all they could do to keep from yelling a war whoop in the parking lot.

* * *

Ellen jumped in the car.

"What?" Edmund asked.

"I'm not sure."

"Well?"

"Jo-Jo's dead!" She looked at him.

He held her shoulders.

She shook her head softly, and her head fell forward, on his shoulder. "Jo-Jo and Sammy and John," she whispered.

Edmund kissed her ear. "El.. "

"I can't believe it," she said. "Buchanan told my dad that — we saw it, I mean, Buchanan chased him. They went over the guard rail."

"He tried to get away from Buchanan."

"Jo-Jo's dad would've killed him if he was caught on drugs again. He was running scared. But Buchanan owes my dad something. He wouldn't have busted Jo-Jo. He let Jo-Jo go twice already."

"But Jo-Jo didn't know it was Buchanan."

"And Buchanan didn't know it was Jo-Jo, because he thought you were Jo-Jo. Buchanan told my dad Jo-Jo had an accident. He told him that he was smoking Fly with Angel Dust and —"

"What? How could Buchanan know?"

"Exactly. He must have been making it up. But then he said Jo-Jo committed suicide, because of the Angel Dust maybe. My dad told Buchanan — Edmund, I think Jonathan's in trouble!"

"Wait a second, why?"

"Buchanan told my dad Jonathan's brothers sold Jo-Jo the Blue Fire."

"Laced with Angel Dust?"

"Yes."

“No way. The car was on fire at the bottom of the canyon! How could he know!”

“Buchanan mentioned you, too. Then my dad told Buchanan to go to Jonathan’s house and —”

“And what?”

“I’m not sure. Then he said Jo-Jo really committed suicide. But it couldn’t be. He said —”

“What did he say?”

“My dad said to finish it.”

“What do you think he meant?”

“I don’t know! Jonathan is there now. He’s asleep. His brothers might still be up. We’ve got to get over there, I think.”

“What can we do?” Edmund asked.

“Warn Jonathan to get out. Let’s go!”

Ellen started the car and drove down the hill toward the dimly glowing heart of Middletown, the CSB spewing light at its center.

“What exactly did your dad tell Buchanan, Ellen?”

“It sounded like he told him to go get Jonathan’s brothers. Or the whole family?”

“The whole family?”

“He was really angry. He was screaming at Buchanan. He was threatening him, and Buchanan said OK. He was agreeing.”

Edmund shook his head. “Buchanan made this story up. He busted Jonathan’s brothers at your party. He doesn’t want your dad or Jo-Jo’s dad or the mayor to find out he was chasing them when the car went over the cliff! They’re gonna blow right into Jonathan’s apartment. They’re putting this whole thing on them, Ellen!”

She stepped on the gas and took the curves tight.

“Be careful, El,” Edmund sighed.

They got to M Street and turned right. “I don’t see any cops down there,” said Edmund.

“Can you see that far?”

“Yeah, I have good eyes for distance. There’s no police there yet.” They passed a few clusters of grim, staring faces on the street.

“You stay in the car with the doors locked and the windows rolled up.”

“Don’t worry about me,” she said.

“I do, around here. Stay in the car. You’re white and that means something, here, unfortunately.”

“OK.”

There were about fifteen people in front of Jonathan’s building. Three or four came up to the car as Ellen parked on the left side of the one-way street. Edmund got out.

“What you need?”

“I got it here, what you need?”

The interior light of the car stayed on as Edmund shut the door.

“Look at that shit!”

Edmund walked across the street as a variety of catcalls and smacking noises converged on the car behind him.

“Hey, hey, hey, what you need, man?” said one man, turning back to Edmund. There were too many around the car already to get a look. Two other guys approached from the other side of the street.

“Look at that pussy!”

“Hey, pussy, pussy, pu-seeeee!”

“Come on, baby, what you need, honey? Come on, now.”

Edmund looked back. The interior light was taking a long time to go off on its delay switch.

“You afraid of a black man, baby? No-no-no, hey! Don’t be lookin’ that way!”

“Hey, I said what you need, man.” Someone turned Edmund by the shoulder.

“I’m looking for a friend of mine.”

“You don’t have no friends here, homie,” said a familiar voice. Edmund saw Jonathan’s brother Charles on the steps of the apartment building.

“Look, Charles, I’m Jonathan’s friend, Edmund.”

“No you ain’t.” Charles started down the steps.

“Hey, Pussy, Pussy!” shouted some asshole by the car. Edmund turned to see him push the hood up and down, up and down, whooping out laughter.

“Look,” said Edmund, anger punching the word hard at Charles. “You guys are in trouble. I came here to warn Jonathan and you. You gotta get out of here, now!”

“You gotta leave him alone!” Charles shoved Edmund off the sidewalk into the street.

“Jonathan! Jonathan! Wake up!” Edmund shouted.

“Hey, sucker.” Charles pushed him again, dancing and ducking. “Did you hear me? We can’t have no shoutin’ out here, fool!”

“Edmund, are you OK?” Ellen said.

“Hey, open up, honey, we’ll fill you in, baby!”

“Shut the window, Ellen!”

“I see you brought your pussy with you, homeboy,” said Charles.

“The police are coming here any second, Charles! Listen to me. They’re coming after you and your brother and your whole family. The mayor’s son and Jo-Jo got killed tonight, and they’re going to blame it on you. Get out of here now. Jonathan!”

“Oh yeah?” Charles shoved him. He put his hands up in karate stance. “Any second, eh?” He laughed, letting his arms fall. “You know, we can just roll this car right on over, bitch.”

“Why don’t you listen to me for a second?”

“Get up here, man!” Geoffrey shouted from the open door of the vestibule at the top of the stairs.

“Shut up,” said Charles.

“You got to get Jonathan and your mom out of there!” Edmund shouted.

“Shut up, fool!” Charles shoved Edmund, again, hard, and someone put his hand on Edmund’s shoulder.

Ellen honked the horn.

“Oh, she’s gettin’ mad now. Get that pussy, get that pussy!”

“OK, I’m going, Charles,” said Edmund. He turned toward the car.

“No, you ain’t,” said a voice behind him.

“No you ain’t, fool!” Charles grabbed Edmund’s neck and he pulled away and two hands grabbed him from behind.

Ellen screamed, but her voice was smothered by the shriek of sirens as squad cars converged, squealing around all four corners.

The police stormed out, screaming with electronic voices as everyone scattered. Charles ran toward the steps of his apartment building.

“Don’t go in there,” shouted Edmund, running after him.

“Get against the wall,” yelled Buchannan.

They turned as two policemen grabbed them and pushed them into the wall by the stairs with five others.

“You Holmes? Huh, boy?” shouted a cop at Charles.

“What you want?” said Charles.

A burst of gunfire flashed in the doorway.

“Jesus, man!” whispered Charles.

“That’s him,” said Buchannan, running past.

Two cops pulled Charles up the stairs, Buchannan going in before them.

Edmund knew the last chance was passing. The policeman nearest him turned the other way, and he ran for the stairs.

“Hey you!”

He crouched behind the stone balustrade and saw the policeman pixelated aiming at him through the balusters. He got through the door, and jumped over a body on the stairs — Geoffrey. He ran up the stairs, past two cops. He heard shots above.

“Stop! Stop!” he shouted as the police shouted the same behind him. He cleared the top of the stairs.

He saw the broken door of Jonathan's apartment at the end of the T-shaped hall.

Jonathan woke at the sirens but immediately blocked them out and sunk below wakefulness, hanging still. He was aware of a banging noise that seemed part of a dream. Then he heard three explosions, two more, and his mother screamed.

He jumped up, cold and stiff, the toy gun gripped in his hand.

Two men shouted angry nonsense, another two shots cracked the air and a thump hit the wall.

It was happening. His heart beat in his eardrums and he blinked. He shrank in the dark room, clutching the dead telephone receiver in the dark.

There was more angry shouting coming toward the door in front of him.

He rose to his feet and it seemed to take two minutes.

He put his hand on the knob.

The voices were close.

One of them shouted again, an angry monster, and Jonathan tried to shout, but only air came out.

He ripped open the door.

The light blinded him.

He thought he heard Edmund shouting at him. Was it a nightmare? Then he was hit on the shoulder so hard and fast he fell on his back in the same instant and he felt the plastic gun fall from his hand.

He felt his shoulder. It was wet and very warm. The horror of it seemed to lift him to his feet.

Buchanan trained his gun on Jonathan to shoot him again.

Edmund got in his way.

"Get down! I'll blow you away!" Buchanan fired, and Edmund dodged to the side. The bullet was aimed high and missed wildly, knocking out a fluorescent light. Jonathan slipped around the corner, moaning, and ran down the hallway to the left in the darkness. Edmund saw the blood on his back. Jonathan fell to the side as Buchanan fired his pistol past Edmund's ear.

"God damn you!" shouted Edmund as he fell on the bare, plywood floor.

Jonathan fell in the doorless doorway of an abandoned apartment. He got up and continued to run, back out and down the hall. Buchanan's gun snapped dry, out of rounds as Jonathan turned right through a fire door and ran down the steps at the rear of the building, crying.

"He won't go far," nodded Buchanan, turning.

Edmund ran after Jonathan, and Buchanan squeezed his trigger twice at him before he remembered he was out of rounds.

Edmund followed the bright red spots of Jonathan's blood down the brightly-lit stairwell. Outside the door at the bottom the street was empty, black and wet. Two policemen ran behind from the right just as Edmund ran around the left corner up between the identical buildings toward M Street.

As he ran, he felt the warm blood on his forehead, the swelling knot on his cheekbone. His feet pounded far below him.

He got to M Street and saw Ellen's car as she saw him. She unlatched the door lock, he got in, and sank down in the seat as the two policemen came out on the street behind him.

"Edmund!"

"I'm OK. Let's go, let's go!"

She sped the car down the street and turned corner after corner. "We have to look for him," said Edmund.

"Where is he?"

"They shot him," Edmund shouted. "Buchanan shot him twice!"

They circled and circled for half an hour.

"Where would he go?"

"He can't go anywhere. The police are trying to kill him. They just want to kill him. They killed his brothers and his mom."

She stopped the car, and stroked his head. She got a handkerchief out of her purse and wiped her tears on the cloth and washed the blood on Edmund's cheek. Edmund looked over her shoulder as fresh snow curled thick outside.

She finally dropped Edmund off at his house and drove home, wondering where Jonathan could have gone.

* * *

On one screen, John Mack had Edmund Green sitting on his bed and writing in his book. While he monitored what he was writing, he also had a live video of Ellen's room and her car at arm's length.

But he and Sapphire were now watching as Jonathan died before them on the slab inside the tomb of Sumner.

* * *

Betty Neville sat in her nightgown on the couch, a pall of darkness over the living room, her wide eyes staring sightlessly at the fire. She was thinking of Jonathan, the boy who had smiled at her and told her her daughter would be a great composer some day. Was he dead now along with all the other boys? Her husband answered the phone behind her. She didn't want to know. She looked at the brown liqueur she had poured for herself to blot out her mind.

“Good,” Tom said on the phone behind her. “Good, good. Bless your ass for this, Buchanan! Call the mayor now, and tell him.” Tom hung up the phone and hung his head in his hand, sighing. He looked up and saw Ellen standing in the doorway.

Betty looked at Ellen, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

Ellen stared only at her father.

“Darling, sit down. I have some very bad news, honey,” he said.

She continued to stare at him, expressionless, desolate, her shoulders loose, her hands limp.

“Honey, Jo-Jo died tonight,” he said. “Jo-Jo and Johnny and Sammy, darling.”

“Murderer!” Ellen screamed, her face wrenching in anguish. Tears blinded her. “Murderer!”

Betty gasped softly.

Tom’s strong-featured face softened and paled before his daughter. “Honey, they were in a car wreck on Lookout Ridge,” he murmured, tears welling in his own eyes. “Honey —”

“No, I saw it! Your friend Buchanan chased him off the road!”

“What are you talking about?” In a blinding moment Tom realized that what she said must be true, and that it was part of what was officially false, and must always be false.

“And then your friend shot Jonathan,” she sobbed. “Twice, Dad!” Ellen looked at him. “That’s right, that’s right, Jonathan Holmes.” Ellen shook her head in grief. “That sweet boy I drove home a couple of weeks ago. The boy who remembered your campaign posters — Buchanan killed Jonathan and his whole family because of you!” He glared at her and nausea welled in her throat. Tears poured down her weary face as she stood before him in pure hatred. “What do you think you are, Dad?”

“God damn it! How dare you spy on my conversations?”

Betty looked out the window.

Tom rose and reached for Ellen but she jumped back. “Ellen!” He was so angry he couldn’t see or think. “Ellen,” he screamed. “Jo-Jo was smoking Blue Fire. Your friends down in Shitsville sold him poisoned crack!”

Ellen shook her head. “Jo-Jo hit the guard rail at fifty miles an hour! Buchanan was right behind him. Jo-Jo panicked when he saw the police chasing him. Buchanan’s a lying sack of shit!”

Tom shook his head, closing his eyes. “Just shut your mouth.”

“That can’t change it. I’m not the only one who saw what happened, Dad.”

“God damn you!” He lunged at her.

“Are you going to kill me, too?” She jumped back again, laughing insanely.

He trembled, his arms hanging rigid. Betty Neville turned toward them.

“Buchanan didn’t find any drugs!” said Ellen. “The car exploded when it hit the bottom of the canyon. He blamed it on Jonathan’s family because he remembered them from my party.”

“Yes, little girl!” Tom nodded his head, grinning. “He told me. You and your gang friends were smoking crack in this house!”

Ellen laughed. “Maybe we should have all partied on Lookout Ridge, Dad! Maybe we should all have gone up there and I should’ve gone with Jo-Jo instead of Edmund tonight. Then your friend could’ve taken care of all of us. Bless his ass? Bless him? Bless him, Dad?”

Tom suddenly hated his daughter. He wanted to strike her. He was confused. He wanted to kill her, to get rid of her. He stood there trying to think. He took a step toward her, his hands curled.

“That’s it, Dad! If you don’t like something, kill it! Kill, Dad! Power, Dad! Power! Kill!” She sobbed. Jonathan’s face kept blinding her mind and stabbing her heart.

“What are you hanging around this trash in the projects for, anyway? God damn you, you little slut.” Tom was shaken, his foundation fractured and sliding. “Were you fucking that little nigger and doing drugs with this garbage Edmund?” His face contorted red, his veins and eyes standing out, his unkempt hair pale over his bloody face.

Betty cried, looking at Tom — Tom who had lectured her about her wealthy father’s heartlessness and bigotry.

“You’re twisted,” said Ellen. “You’re twisted out of your mind! Just attack, Dad. That’s all you know how to do. Flex your muscles, Mr. Politician. Blow me away. Kill me!” She grinned at him, a black gleam in her eyes.

He thought he was out of weapons, powerless, but then he remembered. “I have some news for you, little girl. You’re not going to college after high school, you little slut. You’re going straight to a drug rehab program. You’re going to be locked up for a year, and you won’t see your lowlife lover. I’m turning you in and locking you up!”

“Tom,” shouted Betty, standing.

“You shut up, you lousy drunk! You’re next. You’re next, damn you! You’re no better than this little tramp.”

Ellen shook her head, laughing as tears flowed freely over her face. “Jo-Jo didn’t have a chance. He went up there to get away from you bastards. He went up there, probably on drugs, and got run off the road. The cops did it, and all of you just look the other way. God bless Buchanan, Dad?” She laughed, throwing her head back. “He does what none of you have the guts to do. You don’t want to deal with your own children, so Buchanan deals with it for you.”

“Are you on drugs, right now?” said Tom, smiling.

“What?”

“You’re completely unstable, Ellen,” he said, calmly. He nodded. “You’re going into de-tox. Don’t make me call the ambulance unit tonight.”

Ellen turned and ran to her room.

“Tom,” shouted Betty. “Ellen, where are you going?”

Tom nodded, congratulating himself, his lips pressed in a thin straight line.

“Tom —”

“Shut up! I’m going over to Thad’s.”

* * *

Ellen pushed the play button on her message machine in her room. It cut into a frenzy of voices:

“Christ Jesus! Oh, no, no, no, God! It’s true.”

It was her father’s voice.

“Mr. Neville, sir, please —”

It was Buchannan’s voice.

It was the conversation between her father and Buchannan. She had pushed record in the dark when she picked up the receiver earlier that night. She turned it down and listened. It was all on disc.

Then another message came on: “El, I’m, I think. Dying, you know. I’m at the temple. Please come. I’m thirsty.”

She popped out the disc and slipped it in her purse.

Then, just as she turned to go, she saw the CSB exploding with colors and going dark. Tall green letters rose up its sides.

EDMUND AND ELLEN GO TO THE TOMB OF SUMNER NOW!

She ran down the hallway and toward the front door when her mother caught up with her. “Ellen, Ellen, we’ll make him stop.”

Ellen turned to her and handed her an envelope. “If you really do have the guts, Mom, here. Here’s proof.” She put it in her mother’s hand.

“Where are you going? Why are you leaving?”

“Why am I leaving?” Ellen sighed, laughing sadly. She kissed and hugged her mother. “Goodbye, Mom! I love you,” she said. “Thanks!”

“I’ll make sure nothing bad happens to Edmund,” she said.

“Use that against Dad if he does anything to Edmund.”

Then she left, and Betty wept, afraid it was the last time she would see her.

* * *

Where exactly Free Will was, John Mack had not been able to determine, and he did not think the boy knew, either. He and Sapphire watched him now in his room. Edmund looked out on the smoke-gray sky.

With a savage thrust of his finger John Mack triggered a nerve in his great machine. "Now I'll teach you a lesson, boy!"

Sapphire sent her message through the CSB towers.

Edmund noticed the red light on the box in his room go out. Then it started flashing.

He did not see the CSB shimmering colors in his bedroom window as he jumped off the bed and grabbed the inscrutable box, seeing instead his warped reflection in the black plastic. A green light started blinking on the corner of the monitor. Somehow, the thing had triggered. But he — there was no way, there was no smoke. He hadn't smoked at all for weeks. He held it, looking each way and grimacing back down at it. He closed his eyes.

A mechanical voice spoke from the box: "Do not move, you are under arrest! Wait until the police arrive!"

Buchanan, thought Edmund, and his world unraveled. He hung his head, perfectly still, thinking nothing, his eyes dead, clenching his fists.

He tore the machine out of the wall and raised it over his head, its cord thrashing like a tail, and he smashed it on the floor, stomping and pounding it under his heel. He gathered the pieces and threw them out the window into the snow.

John Mack lost his feed when Edmund smashed the box.

Edmund heard a distant siren scratching the sky.

He looked at the wristband. Its light was flashing, too. He was too weak and sad to tear it from his wrist. The green ripples of his aquarium lapped over the ceiling. His father knocked on the door, and he looked up, grinning contemptuously. "Go away," he shouted.

He noticed an amber reflection on the dark carpet. He grabbed it cruelly, a small golden box. He saw letters engraved on one side:

FREE WILL

It gleamed in the rippling aquarium light. There was a switch on the opposite side. He stared at the thing as his father pounded the door and the siren shrilled around a nearby corner. He pushed the switch with his

thumb, but it would not move. He laughed at the horrible joke and looked out the window as he heard the police car coming down his street. And then he saw the CSB Tower. As the giant words rose, the squad car pulled in front of his house. He lifted the window, jumped into the snow, and ran for it.

* * *

Betty Neville was waiting inside the door for her husband.
“What?” he shouted.
“Tom, if you try to harm Ellen, I will personally turn you in and testify against you.”
“You’re drunk!”
She slapped him anyway.
He slapped her back.
She pulled her shoulders back, clasping her hands, and smiled.
“Did you hear me, Tom? If you threaten her or try to harm her or Edmund in any way, I’ll do it.”
“Dear?” Pain and disbelief softened his hard face.
“I’ll call the mayor myself and tell him what really happened tonight. Do you understand what I am saying to you?”
He stared at her, suddenly realizing she wasn’t drunk. “You can’t be serious,” he yelled. “Dozens of witnesses saw you were drunk off your ass tonight, Betty!”
“I am serious. And Ellen gave me a recording of your entire conversation with Sheriff Buchannan, Tom.”
They faced each other. Tears started flowing in his eyes. “What are you saying?”
“You will leave my daughter alone. And you will leave Edmund and Jonathan alone. Do you understand that? Do you?”
“Betty, honey.” He saw the look in her eyes. “I was angry. You heard what she said to me.” Tears poured from his eyes as he succumbed to abject grief.
The phone rang, and Tom grabbed it.
Buchannan said, “Looks like we got Edmund, too. His bracelet triggered. He’s already on probation. This will give us some leverage.”
“Oh, God, Burt. OK. Good night.” He smiled at his wife, and turned to the liquor cabinet himself.

* * *

The police had caught Edmund before he could run to the tomb. The day after she disappeared, he went to the tomb on the hill, only to

find a padlock on the door. A groundskeeper, trudging through the snow behind him, yelled at him that loitering was illegal.

“Can you open this?” he had asked the groundskeeper.

“I’m the one who locked it,” the pudgy young man barked. “You kids can’t use people’s crypts for drug dens.”

Edmund had walked by him in silent rage, gripping his fists in the pockets of his coat.

That same afternoon, he stared as they towed Ellen’s gutted car down the hill. The roof was slightly caved in, the windows were smashed, the tires were slashed and spray paint bled on the windows and doors. Now, as he thought of it, he didn’t allow himself to remember the emotion he felt when he saw the murdered body of Ellen’s car. They never found her.

* * *

He was too weak to crumple the newspaper and throw it, too weak to think or feel. He pushed the paper off the bed.

He had walked home that day from school, past Mr. Hohner’s shop to tell him the sad news, but Mr. Hohner greeted him at the door, his face thin and drawn, his silver eyes tarnished. “No, *meine Kinder*, no, no. I can not have you here, didn’t Jonathan tell you? They have busted me. They busted me — ha!” Mr. Hohner’s face was frightened, angry, desperate, and defiant. “I filed a lawsuit against Thad Pendleton. So they arrested me for under-the-table employing. Now they tell me I have Compulsive Savers Something — I can’t clean up so much and I can’t hire anyone and I can’t have these things in my store, and they say I have a problem now, a psychological problem! You didn’t turn me in, my boy, did you?”

“Of course not,” cried Edmund. “Mr. Hohner —”

“Oh, I know, I know! I just don’t know anymore, *mein Junge!* I don’t know, now.” He shook his head and looked down the street.

People were marching down Broadway with signs. Some said “Middletown League of Future Leaders” and some said “Earth Animals.” Edmund saw Chandraya at the front of the march with her green lips, punk hair, and crucifix earrings. She was carrying an “Earth Animal” sign with the symbol meaning “NO MAN” — a circle with the cross through a stick figure. She saw Edmund by the shoe repair shop. She ran over to them, grimacing her righteous mouth. “Leather is murder!” she yelled.

“Fuck you, Chandraya,” said Edmund.

Chandraya went right up to Mr. Hohner and slapped a sticker on the glass of his door:



Then she turned and walked away in disgust.
Mr. Hohner looked after her, distant memories haunting his face.
“I can testify against them, Mr. Hohner,” said Edmund.
“No, please, goodbye now, please.” Mr. Hohner, his mouth pulled down, turned and went back into his shop, closing the jingling door firmly.
Edmund sighed and ripped the sticker off his window.

* * *

On the walk home, the Mobius strip of information spewed on the CSB over the gray buildings. Edmund looked up at it, his eyes glazing over as the tower switched to a video issued by the Pete Parson Administration. A business or home owner, with a furtive, paranoid face, stacked a bundle of newspapers and boxes in an overcrowded storeroom. He absently dropped a cigarette butt under a dry mountain of rags, and left the room.

YOU COULD BE COMMITTING ECONOMIC TERRORISM!

The American flag rippled over the National Insurance Building in Washington, D.C.

YOU COULD DESTROY THE ECONOMY!

The man slept as flames raged around him. He woke up, screaming.

YOU COULD KILL YOURSELF!

A government insurance inspector stood in an overcrowded room and shook his head before a shameful man. The inspector put a sticker on one of the boxes that said, “Property of U.S. Government.”

And the bars came down, sliding 350 feet and smiting the ground around the man.

YOU COULD GO TO PRISON. COMPULSIVE SAVING IS A CRIME! FOR POSITIVE PEER PROGRAMMING

CALL (222)232-2236.mak

An hour ago, he and his parents had met in the living room as the police representative showed the family how Edmund's new house arrest device worked. The plastic band was riveted around his ankle. The unit was installed next to the new THC detector they had installed in his room. He noted the manufacturer of the house arrest unit — Hunt Robotics.

If he wandered more than 200 feet from the main unit in his room the house arrest alarm would notify the authorities. His parents were given the key code that could turn off the device when Edmund had to leave the house for school. The Global Positioning Satellite system in the unit could tell if he wandered off course on the way to school. His mother had nodded in frightened obedience to the police representative when he instructed her sternly to memorize the key, and she wrote it down. His father had just stared threateningly at the man, for reasons Edmund did not care about anymore.

School was coming to an end. A strange change had come over him in the past months. He seemed to feel only the plastic bands on his left wrist and ankle as he walked to the aquarium and tapped flakes onto the water. His own body was numb.

Edmund looked at the last darts he had thrown: two half-bulls, two twenties, and a double-three. He had not pulled them to try again for a long time. There was no point.

His writing book was in his bookcase, between Aristotle and Thomas Jefferson. He hadn't written in it for months since Ellen disappeared.

Edmund opened it now and thought of the Triumvirate. How long ago all that seemed.

How naive, how optimistic, how foolish. He opened his book to a blank page now and wrote.

Too late to bed, too late to rise,
No need to get healthy — get wise.
There's no Ben Franklin or Free Enterprise
Fuck you guys.

John Mack laughed victoriously.

Sapphire watched Edmund in despair.

Edmund sat in his chair and watched Augustine the crab skinning Pelagius the frog. The frog had died the day before. The crab pulled one of its arms, swollen and white, from its socket and then darted tiny pincers into the chest cavity with the precise motions of a robot. Only a few Neons were left, darting about, looking lost. From under the gravel

of his aquarium, Edmund dug out the strange golden box he had found the night Ellen was lost, the night he was arrested. He read the ironic words on one side, "Free Will," and pushed the switch that would not move. He wondered only vaguely, distantly, about the meaning of the messages he had received from the mysterious S.H. Such hopes had tricked him once, and hurt him badly.

"Free Will," he murmured, turning the golden box in his wet hand. He shrugged. Unbelievable, he thought bitterly. One of the pieces of Sapphire Hunt's machine that sniffed him in his room was called "Free Will." Now, another one of her machines chained him to his room. Their savior — Sapphire Hunt.

He put the golden box back under the gravel and pulled the envelope he had received that day from his pocket. It was from the Gaines-Huxley Fellowship Foundation. He finally opened it, smiling in self-mockery like a Jack-O-Lantern. His eyes skimmed over it. "Sorry to inform you... under present policy... ineligible for aid... hereby returning unread... wish you best... in the interests of national priorities... cannot be condoned."

No college. Of course he knew that. Drug Rehabilitation, instead, and at least one year of Positive Programming, and four years of community service to be spread over the next twenty years. He shrugged the threat of weeping out of his joints. It was better not to care, not to desire, not to hurt. Mechanically, he turned off the aquarium light and climbed in bed. The blue and red eyes of the sensors kept vigil as he slept a dreamless sleep.

* * *

Betty Neville lay on the couch before the fire, a glass in her hand. Every once in a while, between swells of Valium and liquor, a reef of pain would catch her. They said the chances of her daughter still being alive were not good. But she would not submit to a funeral; she would not believe them, not even after six months.

She looked at Tom. He sat across the room at his desk, peering through his cosmetic reading glasses as he signed his powerful name on pieces of paper. She pulled the microdisc out of her sweater pocket. She put it back, sipping the peach liqueur. She could not bear two tragedies at once. Her daughter was gone. She felt she could at least prevent more damage in her world if she let things be and just withdrew.

Tom did not know what had become of the disc. He didn't mention it, but he quietly watched his wife and comforted her, and didn't object to her drinking. He joined her even, a little. His complexion was gray, his features like putty. Ellen was gone, and it left a great void inside him, and between them. The cloud of tragedy over Thad, himself,

and the mayor contained a great power, however, a power full of pathos, and a power he would not waste. For Ellen's sake, he told himself.

* * *

"So when will you hear about that scholarship, kid?" asked his father at breakfast. The sight of his son manacled in these crazy science fiction gizmos made him sick.

"I did. I can't get it. I'm a drug addict. No teacher vouched for me. I'm going into de-tox." Edmund smiled faintly.

"Look. I found out something, something these God damned bastards didn't think about, Edmund," said his father, alarming his mother. "Edmund, you don't have to go into that nut-house thing. You can join the Army instead. They have a special program. If you go into the Army, you don't have to go that brainwashing thing. It's the kid's choice, your choice, Edmund. And it counts against your community service, too. I found out about it." His father smiled, gripping his son's hand on the table. "What do you think? It's totally up to you, son."

"Well, then I could go kill people who grow marijuana in South America. That would sort of make up for things."

"Edmund, I just wanted you to think about it. I just wanted you to know you've got a free choice in this thing. You got a good option, a real solid option. I think the Army would be good for you, son! Just think hard about it, OK?"

"Sure." Edmund smiled weakly. "I will, Dad." Edmund thought about risking his soul in the nut-house, or his body in the jungle. "Dad?"

"What, son?"

"OK."

"OK, you'll join?"

"Yeah."

"Mother, did you hear that?" His father laughed, congratulating him and pumping his hand.

* * *

Edmund followed his father back to the car after enlisting in the Army.

Three months had passed. It was summer, and school was out. Edmund had just met the requirements to graduate, to his momentary and selfless amusement.

Their car was parked on the curb surrounding the CSB downtown. In the park surrounding the tower, a dais had been raised, green and white balloons had been strung, and a crowd was listening to a speech. Ed Green saw that Tom Neville was the speaker. "Wait a second, son."

He waved a slow hand at Edmund as he stopped and stared at the politician over the crowd. "Come on." He motioned for Edmund to follow.

They approached the crowd of spectators and Tom Neville's words came into earshot.

Edmund saw Ellen's mom standing with the mayor, Thad Pendleton, and his wife Barbara on the dais. He felt like a zombie, cold, pallid, standing there on the grass. Mrs. Neville saw him and her face was startled with pain. Edmund gazed away from her and listened to Tom Neville.

"A grass roots movement that started right here in Middletown. We already have colors on the CSB Towers that stand for other segments of our society. Red for national concerns, blue for state issues, purple for minority issues, and so on. This is the dedication of a new color to the CSB Towers across the nation. That color is one that I felt missing, and feel missing from my own life right now. That color is the color of youth, the color of tomorrow, of the strong and community-oriented youth who will carry the future day. That color is the color green."

Edmund Green stared as the tower lit up green in the blue sky; and he disappeared, it seemed, completely at the same time.

"Since the founding of the American League of Future Leaders, we have seen tragedy. The very kind of tragedy that calls for the existence of a league such as this in this nation. A league that will stand against the perils youths face today. That is why, as the color green is added to the CSB Tower representing America's youth and the American League of Future Leaders, I am dedicating the foundation of this important new institution of awareness to the prominent youths who were there at the beginning, but who fell to the scourges of today — drugs and violence. I dedicate the founding of the A.L.F.L. youth of America, with love and remembrance and enduring respect to John Lanier, Samuel Pinkowski, Joseph Pendleton and, my daughter, Ellen Neville." He bent his head to hide his face, and the crowd cheered on the field as the cold wind snapped over it, rolling the arching columns of green and ivory balloons.

Edmund's father walked toward the receiving line where television cameras and supporters had gathered to greet Tom Neville at the foot of the riser, and Edmund followed. Tom came down the stairs followed by his wife. Ed stepped in front of him as he walked, and Edmund fell in step behind him, looking blankly at Ellen's parents. "You're the one who started the P.P.P. bill, aren't you?" grinned Ed, extending his hand.

Tom looked at Edmund, his wrist and ankle manacled with plastic, and looked again at Edmund's father. He nodded heartily for the cameras. Betty Neville winced as she looked at Edmund, who smiled back at her.

“My son just joined the Army. So to Hell with your nuthouse!” He took Edmund’s shoulder and pushed him through the onlookers as his Irish temper cooled. When they had gotten in the car and closed the doors, he looked at Edmund. “Edmund, I don’t like the way things are, son. I don’t, any more than you do. But damn it, I’ll be damned if that college-ass punk is going to tell me what’s right for my son. I’m on your side, Edmund. I really am. This is the best thing possible. Even if you see action down in South America or something, why, that’s a hell of an adventure, son. I missed out. It’s something a soldier dreams about. You’ll see things that will fill a million books, just think about that. And I’ll love to read ‘em, too, son. OK?” He put out his hand. “Shake?”

Edmund shook it, sad. “Thanks, Dad.” He knew his dad loved him. It only made it sadder.

On the way home, they passed Mr. Dusett’s drug store. It had been burned down. Then they passed the site of old Mr. Hohner’s shoe repair shop. The shop had been leveled. What was in its place made perfect sense to Edmund now, and he passed it with a faint smile. In front of the building in progress was a sign:

**FUTURE SITE OF
COMPULSIVE SAVERS SYNDROME
POSITIVE PEER PROGRAMMING AND AID CENTER
Designed entirely by architects recovering from C.S.S.**

* * *

When Betty Neville saw the name of her daughter on the plaque to be mounted on the monument that commemorated the founding of the American League of Future Leaders, the last fragment of the old Betty Neville was destroyed.

Tom had not told her anything about it. It was a memorial plaque and implied that her daughter was dead. And what was more, it implied that she had in some way been affiliated with Tom’s ideas.

It was so sacrilegious, she couldn’t avert her father’s eyes in the portrait beside the fireplace when she got home, and she couldn’t look into her husband’s eyes. Her father had warned her about Tom. He said he was a man of no purpose and could only meddle in other people’s business. It was his view of anyone who was only a politician. She had been Tom’s defender then. Lately, for as long as she could remember, she had tried to be neutral about Tom, since her daughter had objected to the same things her father had. She could not survive any longer in a state of neutrality. There was no part of her it could protect now. Even Buchanan, who had fled the United States, had no respect for her husband.

She addressed her letter to the District Attorney, a friend of hers from school. She explained the gravity of the evidence on the disc and her intentions that justice be done. She sealed it, stamped it and put it in her purse. When he entered the room, on a casual errand, it startled her. She stood up and faced him. "I'm leaving to stay with my mother," she said.

"Betty, god damn it."

"Oh, damn it straight to hell if you want, Tom." She laughed. "That's all you're good at — damning this and damning that with an army of angels at your back! Well, not this time."

"You have a chemical problem, dear, I know. Let me help you!" He opened his arms to her in a rehearsed gesture. He looked at her without life, fake and posed.

"How could you have used her name like that," she screamed at his face. "How could you, when you knew how much she hated all that?" She closed her eyes and turned her head. "I'm going to live with my mother. You can file for divorce before me if you like. It may make it still possible for you to run for President, but probably not. You'll get half of my father's estate. That's blasphemy enough. I can't look at you anymore. I can't love you, Tom. I can't even bear to be with you. The drugs and the booze were all that made living with you possible, but they're not enough anymore. Goodbye. I'll have someone come by and pick up my things. For all I know, you could have had Ellen killed, Tom." She turned and walked out of the room, deciding to tell him about the disc by phone, after she had posted it on the Internet.

His wife, his daughter — how could this happen to him? Where was their loyalty? For Christ's sake, he cursed. The selfish, thoughtless devils. What a crazy turn of fate that he, of all people, would marry and father such selfish, petty, narrow-minded people who would turn on him and ruin so much! It was the end of him... He didn't know how to face himself. He never had to. He always had approval in the eyes of the community. It was what made him exist. Without it, he did not know who he was. He had given himself to them.

* * *

Edmund woke up at six a.m. Today, he left to fill an aluminum bunk in an aluminum barrack. It was September 22.

He sat up. His room was a mess. Recently, he slept most of the time. The aquarium had gone to hell, polluted and depopulated. Only the crab thrived as it fed on dying fish. The Neons were all gone.

Junk had started piling up on the floor, the bed, the bookcase. Just last night, his probation officer visited to go over the transfer of authority over Edmund from the state to the Army. The man, exuding pity as

though it were love, poked his head in to look at Edmund and thought he was asleep. He closed the door but Edmund heard him remark to his father: "Hey, have you ever considered, Mr. Green, that Edmund might have C.S.S.?" Edmund laughed musically to himself as his father stammered, embarrassed and at a disadvantage, and finally the man condescended to give his father a pamphlet for laymen explaining the psychological condition, its numerous symptoms, its social consequences, its legal consequences and, of course, the programs that offered counseling to those who were cited for related National Insurance violations.

Edmund looked out the window. Fall flamed in the trees. But the spark inside him was dull and drugged by something far worse than narcotics.

He wondered as he noticed a tiny anxiety scratching inside his stomach this morning. He ignored it and got ready mechanically, putting it out of his mind. Immediate facts. They kept him from thinking. He reviewed immediate facts in a kind of ritual of obedience, as a monk recited the rosary when he started to think blasphemous thoughts. Was this how everyone else did it, he wondered, or was it only the freaks like him? He didn't think about it. His father had packed his duffle bag, the car was loaded, and his parents were going over the last details with his probation officer. The bus would leave at 11:15. His wallet and I.D. were in his pocket. It was now exactly 8:15 in the morning. His tennis shoes were dirty.

He glanced out the window.

The CSB kept rolling its Mobius strip.

DISABLING CHILDPROOF LIGHTERS IS A CRIME!

Suddenly, beyond even his own hope, an eruption of light hemorrhaged on the tower and it went dark.

Huge green letters climbed the building.

EDMUND GO TO THE TOMB WITH FREE WILL

John Mack knew she would try to take advantage of this last opportunity.

He sat quietly on the slab of the tomb and looked at his watch. It was exactly 8:15 in the morning — the last morning Edmund might have to bring Free Will to Sapphire Hunt. So he sent the message himself.

John Mack had elected to allow time to slowly work on Edmund Green since he had lost his friends, his freedom, and his future. He had only to let the world itself wear him down, knowing Sapphire would witness the relentless corrosion of her young hero, and that she would finally see, at the end, what Mack's eyes had come to see about mankind. Mack wrinkled up the note that had been left on the slab for Edmund, the note Edmund had never seen.

Mack smiled as he reached up to the screens projected in his contact lenses and turned off the THC detecting device on Edmund's wrist and the house arrest unit. Leave it up to Edmund now, Mack decided. If Edmund did nothing, Mack's man would remove Free Will from him after he and his father got on the road to the bus station. If Edmund came here, Mack would be waiting for him. Sapphire would be officially defeated, along with her idealistic theory.

Mack sat back in the tomb and felt the watch in his hand chip perfect seconds off the minutes.

* * *

Sapphire glanced at her watch — 8:15.

She was hiding in an alcove of a tomb just down the foggy hill from the tomb in which her husband was waiting. Cody had told her he was there through her ear-plug-sized radio. He had also spotted Mack's men, scanned their radio frequency, programmed their voice-prints into his radio, and shot them both with a 24-hour tranquilizer dart. He answered Mack's checks with the voices of his own sleeping operatives.

She sat crosslegged, hoping, praying, believing in Edmund Green now, at the end.

He saw the red light on his wrist go out, and a few seconds later the blue light on his ankle went out, too. He reached into his pocket and took the little golden box with the words "FREE WILL" engraved on the bottom, turned it over and thumbed the switch that wouldn't move.

Ellen and Jonathan and the world he had lived in with them, and life itself, flashed before his eyes in a sudden, surging rage of hope. He jumped out his window and ran toward the hill.

* * *

At last, she saw him through the mist, running up the hill.

She moved out of the alcove and waved at him, one finger to her lips.

He walked forward a few steps after seeing her, and then ran to her, ducking into the alcove intuitively.

She smiled. "Edmund."

"Sapphire?"

"Yes. Good. You have Free Will?"

He opened his hand.

"I can't touch it, or it will give me a fatal shock."

"Oh."

"But you can turn it on."

"How?"

"Cody, Cody, are you there? Come in," whispered Sapphire into her radio. But there was no answer. "Cody?"

"What will happen if I turn it on?" asked Edmund.

"The government will turn off, Edmund. All over the world."

"The entire government?"

"What's necessary will remain. The rest will be gone."

"How do I flip the switch?"

"Answer four questions."

"What are they?"

"Close your hand over it. Good. Can you think for yourself?"

"Yes."

"Should you think for yourself?"

"Yes."

"Can you live for yourself?" asked John Mack.

She turned in dread and Edmund saw the tall, silver-bearded genius pointing a gun at Sapphire Hunt.

"Yes," said Edmund.

"Ah, *touche*, young hero," said Mack, looking Edmund up and down. "Smart. There's only one question to go. But I don't think I'll let her ask it." He fired his gun and she fell at Edmund's feet, her brow streaked with blood as her red hair covered her face and draped across Edmund's shoe.

"Coward!" Edmund glared at John Mack, who stared at his former wife.

"Look who's talking!" said Mack, smiling unexpectedly, painfully, and glaring at Edmund Green.

"You won't ask the last question."

"Really?" He pointed the gun at Edmund's chest.

"How perfect," said Edmund. "Using a gun against free will." Edmund smiled. "I know what the last question would have been, if you had the guts to ask it. It would have been, should you —"

Mack smiled bitterly. "A little light shines on this Pelagian heresy. Suicidal youths are not spirits breaking out of the machine in the name of Free Will, boy. It's poetic, but rather naive. Even this result is expected.

Even these responses are programmed. This disaster of the human spirit is merely the final success of the social machine. I'll let you know what the Pope and the President know, boy. These are responses which the machine, as you so well named it, depends upon for its survival and growth." Mack laughed a delirious laugh and raised his eyebrows, leaning forward. "You can, with imagination, engineer a vast mechanical insanity, an absurdist morality machine that operates with stainless steel uniformity, cutting people off from each other by making them all the same. A slaughterhouse of the spirit, feeding off Man's spiritual starvation and justifying itself with increasing momentum. If you take away man's hope and good will, systematically and gradually, he is left only with rage and ill will. People will indeed set themselves and the world on fire. They get so crazy and out of control, so brutal that — and here is the point — any number of controls can be justified, and the machine flourishes."

Mack shrugged. "People will soon grow so mad destroying the world and drugging their minds that they will have to be completely and utterly regulated and monitored, in every aspect of life. Their souls will have atrophied from disuse into nothing, boy, and their liberty will no longer be feasible. Their souls will no longer be redeemable, save by the grace of a social God with an omniscient perspective and influence. If men were free now, the world would be sacked, looted, raped, and burned. When all men realize this, the groundwork will be laid for the Mack Megalink to fill each of their individual heads with purpose, orchestrating each of mankind's moving parts in a unified direction. It will be like a cosmic Swiss watch whose seconds are entire generations!"

Mack's eyes glittered as they imagined his global masterpiece. "When America, the last practical joke on mankind, finally collapses, the brief self will be gone, and a single, sublime purpose will encircle the globe. Man, that hardest of diamonds, will be ground down in the wheels and will emerge immortal. A great god will at last be born, the Human Race. The ultimate form of our most pristine dreams and perennial longings will at last manifest in a great global soul, an immortal idea, a super entity which you, boy, and everyone else, could never imagine."

Edmund just smiled. "And yet, still, you won't ask me the last question. You're afraid of Free Will. It would just wreck everything, wouldn't it, Mack? Should you live for yourself?"

Mack suddenly realized he had asked the question.

"Yes!" Edmund answered himself, and he felt the golden box actually vibrate in his hand.

"Don't, boy!" Mack squeezed the trigger. "You'll do more harm than good!"

Sapphire lifted her head, and a bullet burst out of Mack's forehead.

Saphire got to her feet, her forehead only grazed. She looked at John Mack one last time in anger. Then she closed his eyes.

"We should go now, boss," said a wounded Cody, who had fired the shot from behind a headstone up the hill.

"Edmund, well done." She touched his cheek, a bright light in her tearful eyes. "Let's go!"

* * *

Saphire led Edmund and the wounded Cody back to the tomb of Sumner. She had them all sit on the slab and look out the door at Middletown, and the distant CSB. "Now, Edmund," she said. "In your hand is the power to undo all the harm my husband and I have done to this world. I chose you because you understood that what we were doing was wrong. If only for you, Edmund Green, this world cannot turn into a machine. You can destroy the machine and set people free to make a better world, or a worse one."

Edmund turned on the switch.

For a moment, it seemed nothing had changed.

Then they saw the CSB strobing in the center of Middletown.

"What is it doing, boss?" asked Cody as she tied her scarf around his bleeding arm.

"All eyes will have gathered on the tower in every city across America, and television channels and radio stations and the Macknet will be jammed with a message I recorded for this moment, translated into every known language and transmitted by satellite to every television set, by internet to every e-mail address and by phone line to every single fax machine on Earth."

They saw an image of Saphire on the sides of the tower, standing 350 feet tall. Though her words echoed over the city from the air-raided speakers on the CSB, they could not hear them from here. Saphire spoke them softly, from memory.

"I am Saphire Hunt. Since I have been gone, John Mack, my husband, has attempted to complete a network of technology that implements the agendas of oppressive governments all over the world. We built this network so that we could destroy it and render these tryannies impotent.

"We had always abhorred the abuse of our creations by the rulers of men and dreaded selling our powerful tools to them because they would only use them against those they ruled. But we knew that others would eventually steal our ideas and sell them to them anyway, if we did not. So we decided to do it first, and attached to all of it one string we could pull to bring it crashing down. That string has just been pulled.

But not by me or by my husband, who was seduced by the machine we created to betray the Human Race. Instead, it was this young man.”

The image of Edmund appeared on the CSB.

“Edmund Green,” said Sapphire, reciting her speech and smiling as she watched Edmund watching the tower. She put her arm around him. “It was this American boy, still standing on the brave level of ideas, who would not give up his own mind, his own ideals, his own goals, his own freedom. He saved this country; not my husband, who had grown to believe money and machines could replace the human spirit. This is your savior — a single youth who naturally understood what made America great. He is a boy who would not give up his life for the sins of man. This youth proved to me that we all deserve another chance to be free, and so you have another chance. The human spirit can live on this earth again. Cherish freedom, this time. Before you rebuild these machines, rebuild your souls. Cherish freedom, and perfect it with your own characters, instead of programs far away. Be society, for you are what society is made of.

“Your fate and mine is in your hands. I shall leave you and come back in one hundred years. I’m sure many will conclude I am insane, until that time comes. But when I do return, I shall see the fate you have chosen. I believe it will be a free and splendid and wondrous world.

“Now I will explain what Free Will is undoing across the earth today. The governments of the Eurasian Commonwealth, to the exact extent that they have not freed their citizens from their endless collective march, is now officially data-dumped on all matters relating to political and victimless criminals of every kind. The entire Mack Superlink and all of its Hunt Robotics extensions have been neutralized, all military equipment rendered inoperable, all riot control machines immobilized, all of its nuclear capabilities disabled, and all state-run media blacked out. Our satellites are taking care of this, in addition to our ground networks. It will take some time to solve these problems at all the levels — probably six months, at least.

“The government of China, that charnel house of the human spirit that has bred such a splendid long-starved soul, has been completely and utterly reduced to dead bits of bureaucratic and totalitarian rubble. The same has happened to all the Asian tyrannies by now, all of which readily accepted and now heavily depend on the supercomputer security networks they eagerly paid us to establish for them. Alas, their political prisons are all flung open. Their guards’ weapons, designed to be unusable by prisoners, are now unusable by guards.

“The social needs of England and France, as well as most of Europe, have been thrown to the mercy and judgment of their suddenly free but out-of-practice citizens. Records and files and identification numbers, and all documents related to the socialization of people, were

permanently erased a few minutes ago. Records of all political crimes and crimes of social morality charged in defiance of all the citizens involved have been wiped clean, and the bureaucracies which monitor such things have been indefinitely disabled with all of their records irretrievably lost.

“As a rule, the freer the Third World country, the less effect Free Will is now having on its government. However, the governments of Cuba, Mexico, Haiti, and many South American nations have been castrated by the very equipment that made them invincible, and their armies have been disarmed by their own expensive weapons. In many of these countries, political prisoners have already been set free and armed by the very automated prisons that were built to trap them.

“Now let me explain what has happened in the United States. All I.R.S. records are lost, and all the equipment has been fused and irreparably ruined, at a molecular level. Their offices have been rendered completely inoperable and their knowledge of other people’s business has been completely erased. In a moment, it should be clear why this first step was taken.

“All police and court records concerning victimless crimes have been deleted.

“All equipment including THC sensors, drug detecting devices, all records, files, programs, and equipment used in government-run ‘Positive Programming’ drug rehabilitation facilities and so on are null, void and inoperable.

“All those charged in the past with drug offenses, prostitution offenses, gambling offenses, tax offenses, pornography offenses, seditious art offenses, compulsive saving offenses, abortion offenses, and all other similar ‘offenses’ will find their records have been wiped perfectly clean so they may begin picking up the pieces of their interrupted lives.

“Police and government officials at all levels will find that their phone records are now accessible on the Mack Megalink Worldwide Web. Incidentally, all community standard screening protocols have been stopped, all automated censorship has been removed. Anyone anywhere on Earth can hear any phone conversations of any politician, their associates, and their functionaries, screened, of course, for national security concerns — they are all posted on thousands of websites in vast redundant databanks, the location of which shall remain a mystery for at least a few months so that everyone will have a chance to access the words of the leaders they trust so blindly.

“All government bureaucracies involved in the regulation of industry, trade, banks, insurance, environment, agriculture, medicine, transportation, charity, employment, art, science, drug enforcement and public education, at both the federal and the state levels, have had their files and records erased and their equipment permanently disabled.

“What is left? The only apparatus that has not been affected is that which controls national defense, court records, police records and all equipment relating in some way to the prosecution of people who have committed real crimes against real people. All other government functions have ground to a halt. All the myriad groups this machine recognized have been dissolved back down into the individuals that it could never see.

“Do you feel rage? Do you feel fear? This extraordinary freedom will only last for half of one year. You are free to choose to continue doing any or all, or more of the things these government agencies claimed to do for you while you weren’t looking, though you are no longer forced to pay the government to do them. You are free to do all these things with your own hands, in your own family and neighborhood. Imagine what you can do. You are free to do all these things in your own business with the resources the government would normally take from you, and you are free to see the results of your efforts before your own eyes, for better or for worse, in the people you know, in the world in which you live.

“I do not suggest that the things I have ended are unimportant. Indeed, it is their importance that made my actions necessary. With the exception of the I.R.S., all of these functions should be performed in society. Art, for instance, should be discussed and patronized. Children should be educated. The poor and disabled and elderly should be offered assistance, drug abuse should have alternatives and help should be available, banks should protect people’s assets, pollution should be cleaned up, industries should keep their earnings and pay their liabilities, farmers should prosper, jobs should be developed, housing should be safe and affordable, bigotry should be reviled, vices should be discouraged and discussed openly. That does not mean the government of man should attempt to perform any of these noble functions for men and women. Government should only protect our freedom and our property so we can run our own lives and address the problems and opportunities with which reality and our society confront us with all of our brains engaged and free. How does the government protect us? Let me remind America of something she taught the world, but alas has forgotten herself. Government means taking away someone’s rights. Its use is only justified against those who prey on the freedom of others. This is government’s only productive use. All other uses of government are destructive to the nature and rights of man. In government’s brutal and massive attempts to solve an abstract society’s problems, it strips us of our ability to deal with our own problems, our own family’s problems, our own neighbor’s problems — in short, all the problems that affect our lives.

“So the IRS is abolished and unnecessary. In a way, all of you are now the IRS. You shall distribute all of the wealth and with it all the

wisdom, all the ideas, all the goals, all the values that are important to you. For you are the people, and you are still here even if this machine is not! And now all of you are free and the world is yours, again.

“When this machine is turned off, you may feel that all of your hopes, values, dreams, love, and pity have been turned off as well. You will be left staring at each other in the streets, appealing to each other, ironically, as a last resort. You may not like appealing to each other’s free judgment, free mercy, free minds, and free hearts for the necessities and opportunities of your lives. You will no longer be divided by power and united by duress, but united by choice and divided by freedom. Learn to love this freedom! Learn to love yourselves again, and trade your excellence with your fellow man. Do not join the nearest gang of weaklings in search of outnumbered victims. Cast off the chains of such associations and grow into full-fledged human beings.

“Think what your free mind can trade with your fellow man instead of what your united muscle can steal from him. The people of the world have nowhere to turn but to each other. Reason has been liberated, if only for a moment. The human spirit has taken center stage, if only by default. Destiny is in mankind’s own hands, for better or for worse.

“Freedom will reveal the soul of the rational animal, and free will will reveal which side of our nature will win. Will Man be rational and free or animal and enslaved? Will Man recognize his right to guide his own life with his own mind, or will he gang up against his own individuality and overpower it by a simple majority? Will Man trust his own heart, and protect his own freedom, or suspect himself and wrap himself in new chains? The great chain reaction of Free Will, having destroyed the Mack Links of man’s oppressors, has only just begun. The final outcome is up to each and every person on earth to decide. Our destiny is right now.”

The lights on the CSB Towers dotted across the United States went black, never to light again.

* * *

Ed and Louise Green waited in the driveway of their home. Edmund’s mother leaned against the police car in a seizure of depression and horror. Police stood about in the driveway with walkie-talkies, and to Ed’s surprise, an M.P. was there, too, talking through his wristband walkie-talkie. His father paced, wringing his hands and looking at his wristwatch every ten seconds.

It was almost ten in the morning when they noticed the CSB Tower flashing like a gigantic siren. “Why don’t they fix that god damned thing or just tear it down?”

Saphire Hunt appeared and began delivering her astonishing statement and Edmund's name and picture appeared on the tower, jolting his father and mother with speechless disbelief.

Louise Green made a guttural whimper, her lips stretching and tightening in horror. "How could this be happening?" she cried at last, closing her eyes and covering her ears. She fell to her knees in the driveway, shaking her head and moaning.

"What in the world?" Ed Green's hands slipped from his hips. "I don't know, I just don't know. It's always talking to Edmund when there's a tower outage!"

"How can this be happening?" screamed Louise, covering her ears and closing her eyes.

As Saphire Hunt announced that she would come back in 100 years, he gripped his wife's shoulders and hugged her in dazed pity. Would they ever see Edmund again? And when the CSB went black, he lowered himself heavily onto the driveway next to her, staring at the gray smoke spiraling around the tower. Louise Green sobbed uncontrollably, but her husband was emptied of all purpose, all direction. He sat in silence with her, wondering how to take seriously the teenaged fury in his son that he had never taken seriously before. He had never believed his son's ideas could have any place in the real world. Now, it seemed, they had turned the world upside down.

* * *

Tom Neville hid behind his attorneys as he climbed out of the car onto the steps of the Middletown Courthouse on his way to his arraignment.

He had been indicted by a grand jury and arrested the previous day at his home. He was now out on bail. Flashbulbs strobed in his face as he staggered up the marble steps.

Glancing over across the expanse of white steps, he saw Sheriff La Guardia following his public defender up the stairs. La Guardia's eyes had made contact with his at the same moment. As quickly, the contact was broken, and thoughts of Burt Buchanan boiled and belched like mental indigestion in both of their minds. Buchanan was slamming Cacique shots in Venezuela.

The flashbulbs detonated like flak all around him, and finally Tom couldn't bear it any longer and turned around. There was a gasp, and suddenly, as if they were on synchronized tripods, all the cameras surrounding Tom Neville swiveled 180 degrees and focused on the CSB, which was strobing like a giant flashbulb. The message of Saphire Hunt held all the cameras spellbound as it sent shockwaves over the members of the media, the police, the lawyers, defendants, victims, witnesses,

pedestrians, cabbies, and limo drivers congregated at the moment before the courthouse. As Edmund Green's name and face appeared on the CSB, Sapphire Hunt's testimonial roared over the rooftops from the air-raided speakers mounted on the tower. Tom Neville thought he was having a breakdown and glanced at La Guardia again and found that he had glanced at him at the same furtive instant, again.

At the disoriented urging of their attorneys, they turned and continued climbing the stairs to enter their pleas to the court, their heads swimming with the terrific implications of Sapphire Hunt's madness.

* * *

At eight in the morning while they were having coffee, Betty Neville and her mother stood at the bay window of her mansion, looking at the message on the huge CSB downtown. San Francisco, once colorful and bright, was covered with a film of grit, neglect, boredom, graffiti, and gray fire-retardant paint under a taut tarpaulin of cloud.

"Edmund Green — isn't that the name of the young man you were talking about, dear?" Her mother read the name of the boy pictured on the Tower.

Betty nodded in wonder. "Yes, Mother, it is."

"Well, is he a terrorist?"

"No, Mother. I don't think so."

"Back in 100 years? Is that what it says? Oh, get my glasses, on the couch, will you?"

Betty didn't move. "Back in 100 years. That's what it says." Betty sat back on the edge of the table by the window and allowed the wild possibility of it to blossom in a hidden corner of her heart, despite its spectacular improbability.

"Well, I hope they repeat it again. They'll show it on television. Turn on MNN," said Betty's dignified mother. "The tower's all black now. Oh, it must have broken down. Really, they must be able to make them so they work properly. Why don't they just do whatever it takes to make them work properly once and for all? This is really getting ridiculous."

Betty laughed. "I don't know, Mother." She gazed at the cold, dead tower downtown. Smoke rose around it. "Maybe they'll never work." She smiled peacefully at her mother. "Maybe it's time to tear them all down."

* * *

Detlev Hohner stared with unspeakable spite at the plastic hospital I.D. bracelet riveted around his wrist. He lay prostrate on a hospital bed

in a great, glaring white room. At least, after paying his Social Security for sixty years, they had given him a window seat on his deathbed. He could see nothing but the menacing wall of the CSB Tower, which some insane bureaucrat had ordered built so it would fill the hospital's windows.

He had not been stricken with any particular ailment, other than being 99-years old and owing his life savings to the government. He was facing criminal prosecution for giving two good kids some spending money, but as soon as he was rolled into this festering sick room, he had contracted a severe case of pneumonia. Now he lay on death's doorstep, staring alternately at his plastic I.D. bracelet and the columns of red, blue, gold, purple and green letters marching like armies up the sides of the CSB. Hatred and rage were all that kept him alive like an intravenous drip. Instinctive vigilance held him in a suspended state on this stage society had chosen for his exit. Inexplicably, as he looked out the window, he moaned. Then the old man started to cry like a baby.

Impossibly, he saw a familiar face through his tears, and wiping them away he saw Edmund Green like a vision in the sky. With his last strength, he opened the window that had a sticker saying "Never to be opened!" He listened in wonder to the words of Saphire Hunt as they echoed over the city.

People complained irritably at the smiling old man, but he made no move to close the window. Several patients summoned nurses, but when one finally came and closed the window, she turned to scold Mr. Hohner and discovered he was dead. It startled her, so alive was the smile on his face, but without wasting another moment, she closed his eyes and quickly wheeled him out of the room. A doctor outside in the hallway could certify his death...

* * *

Doris Monroe sat smugly with a sulking Douglas Thatcher at an outdoor picnic table in the quad area of Middletown High, eating lunch at their eleven o'clock break. Douglas couldn't seem to avoid Doris at breaks.

Douglas Thatcher picked an odd object that looked like a tooth off the graffiti-scribbled tabletop and examined it quizzically. "What the devil is this?"

"Oh, I think it's a barnacle," said Doris, looking up at the rusting Dragon of Eden, whose twisted girders thrust upward around them like bombed wreckage. "It must have fallen off the sculpture."

Douglas tossed it toward a nearby trashcan in disgust.

"Douglas! Go pick that up. That's a piece of a piece of art."

"This piece of garbage is a piece of art?"

Doris rolled her eyes. “Go pick it up and we’ll turn it in to the office so they can repair it, Douglas.”

He glowered at her for a moment before marching with leaden feet toward the trashcan to pick up the barnacle that had fallen off the rusty old buoy that was supposed to represent poor planet Earth.

As he picked the old barnacle shell up, a murmur rippled over the crowd of kids in the quad. Douglas stood up straight, rubbing the small of his back and fingering the barnacle. Adjusting his glasses, he looked to where the kids were pointing and noticed the image of Sapphire Hunt standing imperiously against the full length of the tower.

As she spoke, her words projected loud and clear over the roof of the gymnasium. “I’ll be God damned,” Douglas said, grinning in wonder. Then he looked at Doris and noticed her back had gone rigid as the picture of Edmund Green flashed 350 feet tall in the sky. As Sapphire Hunt explained the outrageous fate she had loosed upon the world and Edmund’s role in setting it in motion, Douglas Thatcher found himself wanting to jump up and down and celebrate.

He looked at Doris’s paralyzed back as the tower finally went black and he snuck up behind her. He lowered his mouth so that it was a few inches from the tightly-wrapped bun on the back of her frozen head. He held there breathless for a moment, anticipating her reaction and stifling his grin. “Boo!” he yelled.

Doris Monroe screamed and recoiled, twisting her torso to face him, her hands clutched into claws in front of her breasts. “Douglas! What in God’s name are you doing?”

Douglas laughed.

Doris was furious and shaken. “Douglas, I’ll prosecute you for harassment,” she warned, her lips trembling. “What do you mean shouting at me? Can’t you see something awful has happened?” She was faint and she blinked rapidly beneath her black-framed glasses. “How dare you joke at a time like this? If any of that is true, Edmund has committed serious crimes. Treason, Douglas! He could be executed!”

Douglas laughed.

“What are you laughing about?”

Douglas pointed at her, unable to answer.

She balled her hands into fists and glared at him. “This is it, Douglas. You’re completely unfit to have a teacher’s responsibilities —”

Douglas laughed even more loudly.

“Oh, that’s it!” Doris Monroe grabbed her valise and climbed off the bench. “I’m going to the principal,” she said.

“Go ahead. Tattle-tale, Doris! Suck Badalamento’s butt! I’ll just bet this whole God damned miserable system just got flushed, lock, stock, and barrel, down the toilet. And you know what? I don’t think people are going to let it crawl back out, this time.”

Doris was shaking. She was frightened, but not frightened like a victim being hurt. It was an anticipated terror on her face, like a criminal being caught, and an equally rehearsed viciousness curled her lips and bugged her eyes for a long-awaited last stand. "You'll lose your job!" she said, grinning a cruel and muscular grin. "Just remember that while you're laughing."

"Good." Douglas smiled, his shoulders loose and arms swinging. He looked younger, his eyes sparkled. "You'll lose your stinking, miserable little power over me. I only suffered it because I was afraid too many good teachers like me are quitting because they can't take the bullshit anymore."

Doris looked at him blankly as though she had lost her identity for a moment. She decided to say something, but when she reached for the words, there was nothing to threaten him with. She felt deeply, deeply frightened.

"So long, Doris!" Doug Thatcher threw the barnacle, and this time made it into the trashcan.

* * *

Mr. Hofsteddler, Edmund's school counselor, mopped his white bowling ball of a head in the sun, the black finger holes of his eyes blinking in wry mirth.

The tower smoked in the aftermath of Sapphire Hunt's declaration.

"I knew there was something about that kid. He was a rebel," said Mr. Hofsteddler. "And so was Sapphire Hunt. I knew he'd go far, I knew it, I tell you. With that kind of attitude, nothing could keep him back." He grunted arrogantly at Pat Brooks.

Pat Brooks still stared from their lunch table at the burned-out tower. "She turned off the Mack Link? The whole Mack Link? Everything?" She shook her head in painful disbelief. "Not everything? No, no," she murmured.

Mr. Hofsteddler laughed. "Yes, everything, Pat!"

"Well, they can fix it."

"Not from the sounds of it!" Mr. Hofsteddler snarled and grunted in laughter. He slapped the table with his fat hand.

Pat Brooks stared for a moment at the mindlessly complex duties that had chained her to her Mack Link terminal. As the deadlines, forms, and files faded into the infinite distance of nonexistence, the tug of her duties broke and she sighed in spontaneous relief.

* * *

“OK, CAAFFEEEEEN Addicts!” shouted Chandraya through her favorite bullhorn. She addressed the gathering of C.A.A.F.F.E.E.E.E.N. marchers gathered on the grass before the CSB Tower. C.A.A.F.F.E.E.E.E.N. stood for Christian African-American Feminists For Environmental Empowerment and Economic Equality Now. Pink posters, pink ribbons, pink balloons, and pink buttons garnished the crowd of people before her. She had climbed on the cement ledge around the base of the CSB Tower to see over the crowd.

Today, C.A.A.F.F.E.E.E.E.N. and many other Christian and women’s groups had gathered to demonstrate for the addition of the color pink to the colors on the CSB Towers across America. Pink would represent the nation’s women, a group that had so far been denied representation on the CSB Towers in a silent sexist conspiracy. After a brief rally, they were going on a march down 1st Street to the steps of City Hall. “OK, shut up, CAAFFEEEEEN Addicts,” Chandraya hollered. “What do we want?”

All the women answered as one: “We want pink!”

“When do we want it?”

“Now!”

Almost on cue, the great tower flashed and the imposing figure of Sapphire Hunt illuminated the soaring wall. A storm of commotion swept the crowd, and as Chandraya tried to upstage Sapphire Hunt by increasing the volume on her bullhorn, the huge air raid speakers on the tower thundered over her. Even Chandraya had to stop yelling and listen.

Slowly, the groups on the lawn loosened as they listened. Chandraya stared at the giant woman above her, intimidated slightly by her magnificent beauty and serenity, offended by her massive individuality. When the picture of Edmund Green was projected over the tower, her jaw dropped open. People began to wander farther apart to get a better view of the tower. Chandraya wanted to tell them to come back, that it was only Edmund Green and he didn’t matter, but the people were listening to Sapphire Hunt, pondering her words silently.

Finally, the message was finished, and the tower fell dark. Even as Chandraya yelled at the people to get back together and get ready to march, they spread slowly away over the park, heading back to their cars, leaving Chandraya alone.

“It’s just a tower outage!” she yelled through the bullhorn. “They’ll fix it!”

* * *

President Pete Parson gripped the rail of the balcony, looking out over the city of Los Angeles. From the Presidential Suite on the fortieth floor of the Millennia Plaza Hotel, he could see the CSB Tower in West

Hollywood, and eight other CSBs dotted in the distance across the L.A. basin. At 7:14 in the morning, the day was already hot and gusty as the Santa Anna winds swept over the posh west side of Los Angeles, heading out over Santa Monica bay. His newest message, the “UnAmerican Art is a Crime!” campaign, was just airing on the CSB Towers for the first time. As he watched the glossy, well-produced public service spot, the message was interrupted and Sapphire Hunt appeared instead.

President Pete Parson lifted a pair of binoculars and read the renegade robotics genius’s words as sharp pains clawed at his chest. Dread overcame him as she cut straight to the point. He thought of his last conversation with John Mack even as he realized that Mack, unbelievably, had failed.

The consequences of that failure were too great for his spinning mind to grasp, and a wild panic momentarily possessed him, seizing his spinal cord and paralyzing his body.

He turned heavily away from the balcony, struggling wildly to catch his breath. He saw seven men rushing toward him through the sliding glass doors. They were only worried aides coming to inform him of the Mack Link’s failure, but Pete Parson inexplicably thought they were coming after him. He yelled in fear as they converged, and he instinctively took three steps backwards and slammed into the balustrade of the balcony.

A shorter man might not have fallen.

* * *

“We have to go now,” said Sapphire. “Cody needs help.”

The slab began sinking into the floor and the doors of the temple closed as they glided down a shaft carved into the rock.

“What’s happening, Sapphire?” asked Edmund.

She kissed his forehead, holding him still for a moment. “What kind of world do you think there would be if mankind were free?”

“I don’t know.” He looked at her as he wondered. “Beautiful, I think I used to think. I still do, I think.”

“I don’t know, either.” She smiled at him. “But I think it would be beautiful, too. Do you want to come with me, to see the world free men will make?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good. Because I’m afraid we will be thought of as criminals for a long time.”

She held his hand as the gliding slab of rock stopped deep under the tomb in a wide, low room where a jade-green sphere of energy shimmered. Sapphire tapped her foot, and another sphere seemed to ignite in the gloomy air, empty and transparent before them. She touched the

floating slab they had ridden and it floated behind them, blocking the shaft in the ceiling. She wrote a note and left it on the floor, and then she nodded to Cody. Cody kissed her and stepped into the bubble of light which seemed to become solid after a moment, and they couldn't see him anymore.

Sapphire tapped her foot and a third sphere appeared. "Come on," she pulled him up into the shimmering sphere and to Edmund's amazement, his feet hung on the bottom of the globe. He looked at her, and she hugged him close. She smiled, and tears streamed down her face. Then they shot through a billion cracks as the whole world seemed to crack into pieces.

* * *

They each sat on the floor of the chamber for a while, breathing and staring at the floor when they woke. Cody was not there, and neither was the note on the floor, or the other spheres.

At last, they got up.

"OK," said Edmund.

She laughed. "A hundred years feels just like one night. Are you ready?"

"Sure. Let's go."

They held hands as they rose into the tomb of Sumner on the slab.

It looked much the same. There was no door, and instead of the grass they expected there was a marble floor of an outer building.

A crowd of people, of all ages, races and wealth, were waiting outside.

Sapphire and Edmund looked at each other, and looked back out at the crowd.

The people broke into applause. They waved and pointed cameras and blew horns. A band started playing. The smell of barbecued foods flavored the air. Women wearing fashions that would have been criminal reveled innocently in their own beauty. Men did the same. Others were dressed in festive and luxurious clothes, some were in jeans and T-shirts. In an open-aired temple built around the old tomb, a great glassless window revealed a Middletown Edmund had only been able to imagine a century ago. In its center was a thing beyond his own imagination.

A group of colossi stood where the CSB had been, but the statue bore little resemblance to the Dragon of Eden, or any of the art from Edmund's time.

Taller than the CSB in the blue summer sky, it was composed of three splendid, romantic, exquisite, courageous figures — a man, a woman, and, in between them, an infant. The man's right foot touched the ground and his left knee pointed upward, his left arm aimed at

heaven. His right arm held the woman, his hand on her belly, cradling her womb as she leapt in the other direction. Her right arm pointed at the sky. In the crook of her left arm, the infant sat on his upward-thrust knee and touched her breast with one hand and pointed its other hand straight up.

Five hundred feet tall, the statue shone faintly purple in the afternoon sun, its stillness defying the starburst of its motion.

The society from which this work emerged was an obvious inference. Where urban blight surrounded the CSB, a sparkling and uninhibited city rose out of their ashen memories in living colors and shapes set free of all building codes other than physics and the human mind.

A group broke away from the people gathered around the opening of the tomb, and from them Cody emerged, and grinned at Sapphire. Jonathan Holmes was with him.

“Jonathan!” Edmund closed his eyes. “This is too good to be real.”

“It’s way better than you think,” said Jonathan. “I thought I might never see you again!” He slapped Edmund on the shoulder. “I felt bad that I got here before you. I was worried, man. Did you know Cody saved me?”

“Know? No.” Edmund shook his head.

“I guess not even you could have imagined this.”

“Is this the future, Jon?”

A beautiful Asian girl with green eyes kissed Jonathan on the cheek and introduced herself to Edmund by kissing his hand.

“My girlfriend, Joyce,” said Jonathan. “No. It’s the present!” Jonathan laughed. “You and Sapphire really came through. We all knew that you did, of course, because we got Sapphire’s note, and we just had to wait for you to come out. You guys started it all off, you know. You’re heroes. That’s what all of this is about. Somebody found your journal in a second hand shop about fifty years ago. That’s how they found this tomb, and they were able to tell that there were people suspended in term-waves under the tomb. So they built this monument around it. They did the right thing, after all, Edmund. Here, I brought you a history book. See that? It’s your picture, man!”

“No way!”

“Is that cool or what?”

It took a moment for Edmund to absorb another paradox.

The crush of spectators was self-indulgently silent, smiling, and wide-eyed.

“I feel like I’ve already met you, Jonathan,” said Sapphire. “What a brave and beautiful triumvirate you were.” She kissed his forehead and then kissed Edmund’s.

Cody looked down, uncomfortably.

Edmund bowed his head and smiled as a tear fell from his eye. "She didn't make it, then?" he whispered, thickly.

"Edmund," a sympathetic hand rested on his shoulder and Ellen leaned against his back. "I did."

Edmund turned and hugged her, crushed her, closed his eyes and smelled her.

"I thought you knew," said Sapphire. "From the note she left for you on the slab of the tomb. Ellen and Jonathan escaped the night Jonathan was hurt. Cody helped them into the sphere and purposely smashed up Ellen's car. They got out of the sphere a few months before us."

"They padlocked the door," said Edmund.

Sapphire nodded. "I'm sorry, Edmund. No wonder you seemed so hopeless." She looked at him with immense pity and admiration.

"It's OK," he said. "This isn't that world."

"This is the world we belong in," Ellen nodded and smiled.

"This is the world everyone belongs in," grinned Jonathan.

"Today is September 22. It's Free Will Day, Edmund." Ellen stroked his unshaven chin with her thumb, smiling, and laughing as the people applauded around them.

They looked from the hill, and the whole world glittered as freedom shone its infinite colors over the eternal frontier that was America.

"Let's go!" said Edmund.

The End