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# **The Bog Monster of Booker Creek**

**A Novel**

**By Wayne V. Miller © 2009**

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Dear Brett,

Just to be clear -- the bog monster was always me, never anything or anyone else. I wish I could have explained this to you in a way that made sense to you. I'm starting a record of what happened, but I won't share it with you until you're older, maybe when you're twenty-five, old enough to chuckle at your off-kilter old man but young enough to remember how we survived the frenzy together. You were tough, tougher than I could have imagined, but I wish I could have done more to protect you. Maybe you'll understand when you read this.

I am going to lay everything out from the beginning, in February 2005. You were an eighth grader at Phillips Middle School, a tall, lanky, skinny- armed boy, with pale skin and an assortment of blackheads and zits, a sometimes goofy smile that I saw you cultivate in front of the mirror -- which fit perfectly with the oversized cat-in-the-hat headwear you wore sometimes to parties -- and yet there was a penchant for the pained look of the only child. Your mother and I were worried about you because you seemed to have bottled up, withdrawn from the kids you had played with just a few years before. Nothing seemed to interest you much; you watched too much TV, played too many video games, and lay around the house like an unacknowledged secret. Then the assignment came.

It was the worst kind of schoolwork -- one requiring your parents' attention and time, too. Your mother helped as much as she could, invited your schoolmates to come over and snack and work, but in the end she came to me and said, "John, you need to get involved." I was happy about being needed, but not about the position it put me in. "What is it?" I asked. She didn't answer, which wasn't a good sign.

Your science teacher, Mr. McGrath, had mastered the fine art of overblown homework: exquisitely defined projects whose purpose was known only to himself and his God; repetitive components adding up to an ungodly sum of points so that the whole seemed like a giant scramble; and a scope that knows no bounds, apparently on the assumption that thereby Mr. McGrath is not stifling the creative ones. This meant that the best projects were mostly done by the parents, and students shrugged their way to a grade they didn't deserve. I wasn't going to fall into line. You were going to do the project, whatever it was.

"Brett," I asked from your doorway. "What is this project your mother asked me to look at?"

"Huh?" you said, looking up from a hand-drawn comic you were working on.

"The project?"

"Oh that," you said, looking back down at the sheet. "I-don-noh." The pencil started moving again.

"Let me see the project description," I said, and you pointed at your notebook without stopping. That particular habit of yours always irritated the heck out of me, but I decided to let it pass. I opened the notebook, but you had to point me to the page, which did finally distract your attention, in fact so much that you decided to reread the instructions yourself, until I yanked them from you.

Environment. Biology. Something about statistics. McGrath's explanation didn't enlighten me, but the examples set the light bulb off. My favorite was "Scat-ology": "Map out a wooden area and comb it for wild animal scat. You'll need a good animal-tracking book. What does your research tell us about wild animal populations? Use an appropriate graphing technique." No surprise that Doreen deferred this one to me. I asked you what your team had decided on, and with hems and haws you laid it out: you were going to search old police blotters -- from the days when the police were animal control -- for reports of marauding animals, in order to develop a scatter plot of animals who lived in proximity to people but who found it difficult to co-exist. You speculated about wolves, bears and badgers. I thought more likely: rabid raccoons and stubborn skunks.

Jared's father was a police officer, and Jared said that he could get the information without problem. You

didn't know whether he had asked his father about this or not. I smelled a distinct whiff of wishful thinking, but at the same time a hint of success. You were surprised by my reply: "This could be mapped." This was the perfect match, since I was in charge of Orange County's Geographic Information System (GIS), and I'd already offered to show you how it worked. "Cool," you said before becoming absorbed again.

The topic waited for another week, until we reached a point where the deadline was impossible to ignore any more. I called up Jared's father to see if he'd been brought into the loop. "Oh, we'd talked about it a couple weeks back," he said with obvious irritation, "but I thought he was going to find another project. At the station, we don't have blotters, or even criminal records, from far enough back in time to be of use to the kids. I suggested they try the county museum or the Chapel Hill Reporter, but I don't think there's anything out there." At that second, I was trying to imagine how we could bring this into the present and get at existing data -- Animal Control and road kill statistics? Nothing pleasant came to mind.

I confronted you the next morning at breakfast. "No worries, dad," you said and kept eating your cereal. "What do you mean, no worries?" You waved me off and said, "Jared's got it handled. He called the county museum and they have police blotters going back 100 years. We're going there this weekend." Oh, I thought, you might have told me. But I was equally surprised and pleased that it was handled.

Or seemed to be. I ended up driving you all to Hillsborough on Saturday. The team was you, Jared, Frank and Billy. The curator wasn't at the museum when we got there, so we wandered down the main drag in Hillsborough, past the historic courthouse and down to the river park. Eventually, we came back up and only then read that the museum was open every other Saturday. We had already packed into the car when we saw the curator walk with peculiar purpose to the door, open and close it carefully behind him. "Jared," I asked for the first time, "did you tell him we were coming today?"

"Sure," he said immediately and with gusto, then: "I mean, I told him. I don't remember if he said anything." I just looked at him. After I thought I made my point, I sighed and said, "Well, let's go see what he'll say now." I thought that was pretty equanimous of me.

You all piled out of the car and chatted and gravitated to the door without seeming to pay one bit of attention. A slight rain was threatening to turn into a downpour. The front door was locked, so I knocked. After some time, the curator came with a pained look to the door, but I doubted the curmudgeonly show.

"What can I do for you gentlemen?" he said, peering at each one of us over his glasses, stopping longest on Billy, who is black.

I waited in vain for Jared to explain what was up, so I said: "We were hoping we could see some records today. The boys have a biology project, and they want to look at animal control or police reports to see what kinds of animals end up in conflict with people." That seemed pretty cogent to me.

"That doesn't make any sense to me," he said to me. Then he looked back at Billy, as if speaking directly to him. "Can you boys explain what you want with the Orange County Museum?" Frank and Jared both started talking at once, and at one point Billy cut in, but Jared finally got them to settle down: "We want to see your historical police blotters," he said with a final smile.

"I see," he said. "Well, we don't have a public collection."

"Oh, okay," said Jared, as if that were it. I can't tell you how badly I wanted to stick my index finger in that guy's chest and tell him something about jerking people around, but I decided I should let you all resolve this. The finger in the chest usually doesn't do me much good, anyway -- I've felt like a raging maniac more than once.

Frank said: "We have an assignment."

"Have your teacher talk to me, then," the curator said, with a peculiar smile.

Billy added: "He gave us an assignment, but this is our idea. We really want to do a good job."

The guy registered as completely unimpressed, so it surprised me when he said, "All right, I think there's something here that can help you." We followed him in. He explained that a Chapel Hill resident had clipped the police blotter from local papers for 50 years, and had, when he died, bequeathed the entire yellowing and brittle mess to the county. Three large musty cardboard boxes were brought up by the boys from the cellar, and we took turns pulling out a sample and trying to figure out what we had.

"If you agree to describe the contents of each box on one of these forms," the curator said, "I'll let you examine them. Here, though. Nothing leaves the museum. Policy."

Jared had a giant smile, though the other three -- yes, you included -- had the look of sheep seeing their new guard dog for the first time: hang-dog and alert all at once.

So there you were digging through decaying newspapers and talking all over each other about how you were going to score the hits. It took a fair amount of time before you all realized, seemingly at once, that there were no hits: no jackals, no wolves, no panthers, no raccoons, not even a rampaging swamp rat. There was a long slow letdown. Even Jared didn't know how to solve this one; he looked to me.

"How about property damage?" I said after a bit.

"We want to do wild animals," said Jared.

"No, what if you look at property damage and see from the description whether a wild animal was involved? You'll have to do some guesswork, but you ought to be able to tease out some cases."

Jared looked to you to see if you were able to translate this, but you had no better sense of what I meant. It seemed like an admission of defeat to you all, but after a long hem-and-haw session I said, "Look, just start collecting property damage reports -- what was damaged and whether the cause is identified -- and let's just see what comes out, okay?"

We finally got started for real, and it didn't take long for the property damage cases to start rolling: car accident, neighbor busting a fence, break-in, a case of arson, garbage dumping, tree falling on a shed, and so on. Then someone, Frank I think, read aloud: "Chicken coup was opened from the top and six chickens were taken."

"Wow," I said, to get everyone's attention, "does the article talk about what did that?"

He scanned the page. "No, there are just a few words about broken planks."

"That must have been something big. A bear maybe?" I said and looked around. No one thought much of that suggestion, and the collective-you dropped your noses into the boxes again. I had to make the rounds a few times to convince you all to note enough details: whom, where (reported location and source), when, what, why (speculate if necessary) and who (modus operandi, if unknown).

We were there two hours, working away, before you all became too noisy and distracted to continue. You, Jared and I returned one time after we had processed some data to see if further searching substantiated our findings -- which it did.

You never did like my summary of events. I have here Jared's version, from an interview he gave early on:

Reporter: So, how did you get on the trail of this creature?

Jared: We wanted to find out what wild animals were harassing people. Our assignment was to map how wild animals and people interfaced over time, as more and more people moved in. We couldn't get data about wild animals directly. What we got was police reports from old newspapers.

Reporter: What did the police reports tell you?

Jared: That there was a pattern of property damage along a creek. That made us believe that a large animal was living there. It wasn't until we looked at the kinds of damage more closely that we had to eliminate all kinds of animals except one -- homo sapiens.

Reporter: But you concluded that this was not a person living in the woods --

Jared: Because the area was just too wet and too inhospitable.

Reporter: And that's why you called it a bog monster?

Jared: It was a goofy name, but it stuck.

Reporter: Who came up with this nickname?

Jared: Brett Densch did.

Well, there you have it. You came up with this name? Not so. Sure, it was you who put the name to this hypothetical woods dweller. But to get to the root of this name we need to go back a good decade further, to the day you were born, a day when your mother and I looked at each other differently and saw in each other's eyes: "This is not the place and not the way to raise a kid." We were living in Phoenix at the time -- actually in Mesa, and we were both working in the city. Your mother stopped working for a year or so, but our monetary needs brought her back into the job market and you into a childcare home. You didn't complain, but your behavior changed in ways that we didn't like, a kind of diffidence toward your parents, a fixation on other kids and your caregiver, as if you were punishing us. It may have been that you were happy in a shared environment, but we felt it was time to simplify our lives.

Your mother and I also hoped that a change in environment might change some negative dynamics between us. So we both put out feelers on family- friendly locations, and the "triangle" (Chapel Hill -- Durham -- Raleigh) came up very high on the list. We hoped to move to Portland, Oregon, but I didn't get a nibble, let alone a job, so Doreen deferred and we moved to Chapel Hill on the strength of my job and a few possibilities for her. It took her a while, but she was able to find a part-time position and a part-time child-care situation for you. Still, the transition felt like a big win: daily commutes measured in just minutes; twice the house and lawn; clean air and two-lane country roads; a community of college professors and biology PhDs, with equally smart and engaging kids; enough rain and greenery to soak out fifteen years of living in the desert.

We've visited Phoenix since, but you won't remember what it's like living there. Desert living these days is something unto itself, maybe comparable to living in Alaska in winter. During the inhospitable season, you live inside, moving from one man-made space to another, and you venture out experimentally, warily. Chapel Hill is the kind of place that you inhabit -- wet when it rains, sweaty when it boils, exhilarated on Carolina-blue days, disgusted in summer nights by the arthropodic abundance under electric lights, mesmerized when the cicadas echo from the trees like a permanent parade. We lived through one extended Carolina ice storm, when power was out for days, and a single fireplace served as a substitute for central heating. We felt like

pioneers, camped out in their drafty first- generation cabins. Fortunately, that was in our first few years, when the cold was still a novelty.

We were here five years when I first tried the phrase on you. For exercise, I had adopted hiking -- on trails in Chapel Hill, through the roads and paths of the Duke Forest, and around the few state parks -- and your fate was to give me a reason and justification. You didn't appreciate the walking, but mostly you complained about being in the woods. I thought that you'd internalized a Brothers Grimm fear of treed areas, but Doreen said: "He doesn't like bugs any more than I do." I thought I could do what I usually do, which nerves Doreen and never sat very well with you: make a big joke out of it.

"I forgot to tell you, Brett, I guess I should explain now," I said one day as we walked along the creek trail from MLK Blvd to the Community Center. "There is something you should know. It's -- well, it's an old legend I'm sure. But they tell of an ancient creature in these woods." I stopped talking and looked at you to make sure you understood the joke. "Something that lives here in the bogs. Do you know what they call it?"

You answered non-committally: "No."

"The Bog Monster of Bolin Creek, of course."

"Really?" you asked, raising your voice and looking at me.

"That's the legend," I said.

"Really?" you asked. "Really, daddy?"

"Really, that's the legend, or really, is there a bog monster?"

You were unable to respond, so I said, "That's the legend. But there are no bog monsters. Do you see a bog monster here?"

"No," you said, looking around.

"Neither do I. Maybe there's really nothing to be afraid of here...?"

You didn't answer, but after a few moments you got on the balls of your feet, ran ahead and stopped at a bend in the trail to wait for me. Ooops, I thought, this didn't go right. I resolved to repeat it until you got so sick of the notion that you'd lose any reaction to it. When Doreen picked up on this, she had a heyday explaining to me why this kind of irony is lost on children and asking what was I thinking, and finally pleading: Could I leave her only child alone with my pretzel psychology?

You and I never did work out what a bog monster would look like, but pretty soon we were discussing it like a bad children's book -- "daddy, I told you that's a silly story" -- not exactly the fear tamer I had hoped for, but it lost its lightning-rod status. After a year or so we forgot all about it. More years passed before you developed into the young man I know now, and when you did, you discovered, as the young are wont to do, that you had unexpected talents. This one was cartoon drawing. One fine summer day Doreen brought you home from cartoon camp and later that evening put a drawing under my nose. "Five years, and he's still afraid; thanks a lot, John." There it was, reminiscent of Yeti or Big Foot but with a Fort Bragg crew cut and appropriately short fur, labeled: "The Man-eating Bog Monster of Chapel Hill and Carrboro." It smiled a big carnivorous smile, with an oversized blood drop hanging from one incisor, and had large anime eyes. That was the only time you drew it, at least as far as I know, and I got the impression that you drew it as part of an assignment rather than any eruption of suppressed childhood angst, but I didn't ask you, in case the question itself would circulate and keep the unpleasantness in front of us. I think I may have thrown out the drawing.

When the four of you put your heads together, you saw the obvious zone of activity, along the course of Bolin and Booker creeks from the heights to the west, down to the Estes flats, where they come together at Little Creek; there were signs of a retreat over time, the only consistency being a series of acts that implied a prehensile and skilled set of appendages. You didn't know what this indicated, and retreated to the notion of ambulatory bandits ("What," I asked, "a lost tribe of marauding Indians?"). You all feared you had nothing in your hands.

"Don't despair," I said, "let's take another look at your data. Maybe there's a pattern we're missing." One of you, maybe Billy, proposed that maybe it was Indians, using deer trails. "Or some other animal," said Jared. "Maybe it's a bear?"

"Now you're talking," I said.

"There aren't any bears around here," replied Frank, morosely.

"Any more," I finished. I was afraid at that point that you would all lose your nerve and want to start over, the one thing I couldn't stomach. An improbable but intriguing result seemed more than good enough for Mr. McGrath's daft assignment.

"Okay," Billy said, "let's go with a bear." Right, you all said, at least for the next few minutes, but then, as you were breaking up, Frank spat out: "We're going to have to change. A bear leaves scat, and Mr. McGrath won't accept it if we say one was hiding around here and no one saw the signs. We're going to have to go with a panther. It must bury its poop, like a cat." Great, I thought, a stealthy and clever bear is one thing; a great cat wandering up and down our creek without anyone the wiser seemed to push the limits of possibility. But at least no one threw up his arms.

Two mornings later, the day the assignment was due, I heard from you during your breakfast (head in a bowl of cereal, comics laid out beside you), that discussions with Jared's dad had produced a new result: "He said the blotter crimes had to be persons, a group of people living somewhere along the creek." "So you're giving up on the animal angle? It's all people?" "I guess so," you said, slurping and munching. Okay, I thought, as long as the assignment goes in.

It did, and we got on with our lives. The next stage is the key. How did everything go awry? Who framed this as news? How in the world did a press release come out about an assignment by an earnest but puerile set of middle-school boys? Who put the tail to the donkey, or more precisely, to the bog monster? When did you say it, Brett?

It's too easy to mix things up in your memory, so I've asked questions of everyone I could, and perused the clip-outs and digital archives I could find. Facts: The assignment itself doesn't mention a monster of any kind. A news release from the school district appearing three weeks later stipulated that no students turned in an assignment about a monster. Mr. McGrath was never quoted in the press and so could not say anything about a monster, but the press release stated he was pleased with the assignment and its fundamental scientific soundness. According to the same release, the students speculated that, despite a large range reminiscent of a top predator and a carnivorous MO (mostly: creating access to prey of various kinds), a ring of human thieves were probably involved. This was not what was assigned, but a good effort and an honest result.

The first mention of this non-story appeared in the Chapel Hill Reporter two weeks after the assignment was turned in. No one ever admitted seeding the story to them, and the reporter who filed the story is gone -- whether up or down the journalistic food chain, I don't know. I do know that the reporter reported on a school board meeting three evenings before the Sunday edition with the story, and that the reporter was seen laughing with a member of the board. That board member was known to be friends with Jared's parents. I can't help thinking they were laughing about you, Brett.



When did you say it? You couldn't tell me exactly when, although you affirmed when I asked you: "I guess so." It must have been an offhanded joke -- 'my dad used to talk about a bog monster.' Wistful? Were you angry with me, the perpetrator of an ill-conceived fairy tale? Could it have seemed anything but innocent to mention? Not rancorous, certainly not fateful. I read somewhere that fate is any port of call you couldn't have imagined when you began your journey; at some moment, the unexpected becomes the destination, and you become little more than a passenger.

Here's the story:

### Local Students Uncover Historical 'Monster'

#### GIS and police data suggest creature's range and activity

A local group of middle school students uncovered a pattern in 50 years of yellowing police blotters, gathered from historical editions of Orange county newspapers, that indicate that for decades a large carnivorous animal stalked outlying areas now incorporated into Chapel Hill and Carrboro. The pattern emerged when the data was coded and entered into the county's GIS system with the help of system administrator John Densch, whose son is one of the student researchers.

Spokesman Jared Brightman explained at an impromptu press conference in his parents' home that the students had officially reached an opposite conclusion. "We thought it was a band of thieves," he said. His father, police detective Ferguson Brightman, affirmed this interpretation: "I still don't know what else it could be."

"It wasn't until later," Jared added, "that we realized this was an unsatisfactory explanation." The younger Brightman displayed a large map depicting the paths of Booker Creek through northern Chapel Hill and Bolin Creek from outside Carrboro to their confluence, with stars to indicate incidents. The map also indicated roads and trails and large areas of wetlands. "This map shows how unlikely it would be for humans to navigate among these sites, except by road. And if these acts were carried out by humans on roads, why would they go to the trouble of doing this just in the creek areas?"

Then Brightman put up a poster with a selected list of events. "Chicken coop broken into, three chickens taken, four left. Dog maimed. Garbage contents upset and spread around lawn; rib bones taken. Pond fish taken. Locked freezer in carport damaged during attempted break-in. Window over kitchen sink broken, no bird, rock or other cause found. These and many other events are inconsistent with human activity, which would show different ways to maximize the reward for the risk. These random occurrences are more like the acts of a roaming animal, by necessity a large animal."

When asked what kind of animal, Brightman responded that they were still unsure, but they had a name for it: 'The Bog Monster of Booker Creek.' He attributed this name to his fellow researcher, Brett Densch, the son of John Densch, pointing out that the family resides near the Cedar Forks tributary of Booker Creek. At press time there was no comment forthcoming from the Chapel Hill or Carrboro police departments about the students' investigatory work.

-- Okay. Yes, I gave Jared the map. I gave him the human activity argument. I provided him with the perfect opportunity to mix it all together and make a mockery of us. I don't know why. I was upset, I guess, that you had all taken Jared's dad's advice over mine. I was showing off. I couldn't imagine it would have the slightest consequence. My mind was elsewhere.

We all had a yuck about the Reporter article, though, as I said, the school district did go to the trouble of issuing a disclaimer. A day or two after the press release, I got a call at work from a reporter claiming to work for the Associated Press. Okay, I thought, I'll bite. "Sure, I can answer a few questions." It turned out that he



had already interviewed Jared and wanted to know my reaction to a few statements that seemed even a bit more provocative about those peculiar Densches. He wanted to speak with you. "Absolutely not," I said, not knowing that you yourself had already given an in-person interview to the Reporter reporter, now writing for the regional paper. The story had gone out on the wire? I was nonplussed. It was being played as local interest throughout the southeast? In the "wacky news" bin nationally? Being prepped for morning radio shows and morning weather anchors...

I wanted to call Doreen right away, but maybe you'll understand my dilemma. "Bog monster?! Now you're humiliating him in the national media?! Why you are so destructive with your own lifeblood, I'll never understand, John. Never."

I didn't want to go home, but when I did, it was without incident. We had a couple more days before it all blew up.

At one time, there were thousands of acres of bog in North Carolina. I wouldn't have been able to tell you that. I assumed that a bog was a northern cranberry- or peat-growing watery wasteland. I wouldn't have been able to tell you that bogs are a common natural feature at various altitudes and latitudes, one of many contradictions in the distribution of water around this world. The Chapel Hill area probably did once have its share of hilly Piedmont bog land, although our GIS maps will only show you the designation "wetlands," and these are now mostly commercial wannabe reconstructions standing in for the natural features we've destroyed. At least Bolin and Booker still run free, except where they disappear into concrete tunnels beneath the University and Eastgate malls, before emerging free and mostly unsullied -- the Booker dramatically from beneath the local Burger King.

I've walked most of the length of these old creeks and found surprising room for a bog monster to stretch out in the muck. If you trace the Bolin out to Lake Hogan Farms, you can even begin to imagine an untamed, dark, and forested time, in those few minutes once you have left one subdivision behind and before you see the next.

I can almost hear you say, "You can't follow these creeks. They pass through private property almost the whole way. Now you're just crapping me."

Brett, you'd be right, mostly. That brings me to an admission I hadn't planned on making, but this narrative seems to have taken on a life of its own. There may be no one alive who has seen more of this county than I have. Think about this. Delivery people, police, handy men, they all travel from one end of the county to the other -- but they never get far from roads and driveways. What if I told you if easily 50% of the county is more than 100 meters from a road? Maybe 20% more than 1000 meters from any public road? Who knows what's there? The landowner, sometimes. The hunters he or she rents to. The farm workers. Otherwise, the occasional agent from a timber company interested in the buying a tall tree stand.

And me. If you had walked over to my car at the time and opened the trunk, you could have found -- after some shuffling -- a reflective county safety vest marked "Surveyor" and a big, industrial looking GPS unit. I used these on random afternoons, when I couldn't stand the office any more or when I'd leave work a bit early, or what have you, to find an undiscovered corner of the county. Usually I consulted a random number generator to grab coordinates from the GIS map, figured out the best way to approach the location, and drove straight there. It was a compulsion, I guess. It had begun a few years before as an innocent game, but sometimes the urge to get out left me completely unable to concentrate -- and I just had to go.

When this first blew up, I started to walk these creeks systematically. I had to be cautious, of course. It's one thing for a salt-rock-shotgun-toting farmer to find me pacing off his hay field, it's quite another for a father to find me walking behind the family house, for all the world an unpredictable stalker. Eventually I walked the whole lot of them -- Booker Creek, Cedar Fork, Bolin Creek, Little Creek, even down to Mill Creek off of

University Lake. There's not a lot now that would count as a bog or even a true wetland, but enough to give you a feel. All these things we call lakes now -- Elizabeth, Eastwood, University -- they may well have been good bog candidates, way back when, maybe in between dammings by beavers and humans.

I'm really not sure, Brett, if we're at the end of this story or the beginning of another one. One morning, you were more morose than usual and Doreen glanced at me with that "you lunkhead" look when I made a point of it. "I'm fine," you said. "There's a love interest," she said after you went upstairs. That's all she would tell me, with you in potential hearing distance, and I knew I wouldn't really get more out of her until she was ready. I decided to see if I get more out of you. I found myself falling back in my own mind to my first struggles with love, and despite all the hard lessons I've learned, boy, I know I don't have the right to give you advice if you don't ask for it. I wouldn't take my own counsel. Sure, I can give you the statistics and try to steer you from self-destructive behavior, but otherwise my perspective is too clouded by my own unplanned life. And even if I felt justified, could I really tell you something about love that you won't have to learn on your own person?

I never thought much of words like "passion" and "love" because they made it seem like this thing comes from the mind. Not that I'm arguing that "raging hormones" and "lust" are a good substitute for what we feel. It's the intersection that gets us: a physiological state that leaves a deep and broad sense of lack -- and, every once in a while, a mental picture of its completion, in a feedback loop that heightens every sensation, every slight, every hope. It's an unsustainable state of disequilibrium that cannot be explained as desire, but that sometimes finds an object of desire.

What you may not be able to understand, Brett, is that I'm 42 years old and -- although my life has nothing in common with that of the skinny young man I was -- I'm still him. Sure, the humor has changed, at least beyond the need to protect myself with a quick joke. The impassioned and longing young man has become the impatient and distracted husband. The infinite potential has become a comfortable technocrat. The existentialist a realist. The sworn opponent of the failed nuclear family an uncertain and angry father. You get the picture.

But here's the mystery. I am still there with that young man. I can sit here quietly at a desk, or sometimes when I sit on my car hood in the middle of nowhere, North Carolina, and I can feel my way back. It is as if all the changes are incidental and the core is these few events, which feel as real to me as the day they happened, no matter how much they lose in fidelity. It's as if I'm stretching a latex sheet back through a short, dimensionally folded distance into the past, and I'm sitting there for the young me. Details are few, but the reality is full and undeniable -- a continuity I've felt for the last twenty-five years.

At the same time, the sheet is impermeable. I cannot interact; I cannot change a thing, employ my experience or benefit from hindsight. The girl will never look at me, or lean over to kiss me, always just that painfully unself-aware young man. The answers never change, the mistakes never get undone. The beautiful moments and the horrible ones, together. Take my advice or not -- I'm not sure anyone's advice could help you, for however much I or others stretch back and forward in time. Just don't be surprised when, later in life, you find yourself identifying more with the teenager than the person you've built of yourself.

The TV truck was waiting at Phillips Middle School: lots of good background shots there, enough woods to convey the mood, and a small creek if water were desired. Jared was on tap for a national interview before school began. We didn't know a thing because we don't watch morning television. Off you went to school, backpack, trumpet case and lunchbox in hand, like a sheep to the slaughter.

I can imagine you on the bus, unhappy with sleepiness, a tickle of longing in the back of your mind, looking out the bus windows, unable to fix anything in your mind until the very last minute, when you feel the tensing of the start of the school day, as you see the school parking lot open up before you. You observe a white truck where there should only be deep yellow buses, a large truck that slowly resolves into a television broadcasting truck from the local arm of a national network. You sense why it's there, but it seems too unreal to accept. The

whole world, after all, doesn't revolve around you. You're just a middle-school cog, in an education machine like thousands of others, a boy on a bus like hundreds of thousands of others, an awkward 7th grader indistinguishable from his worst self-image. If there is something special here -- she, whoever she is, only she is indecipherably more.

The front doors flap open, and you wait your turn, force your way into the aisle at the necessary moment, then jump down the steps onto the asphalt. You look back over your shoulder at the truck, a huge antenna arm extended skyward, a generator chugging away. Still wondering, you pass into the building like hundreds of times before.

Your first class is what, math? You are sitting in the class for 15-20 minutes before the distorting intercom activates. The principal's voice itself comes on. "Mrs. Winchfield... Mrs. Winchfield, would you please send Brett Densch to the office? Brett Densch. Thank you so much." A click off.

You look up at the box in disbelief, or maybe you have already played through the possibility so much that you show no surprise. In either case, a series of moments pass, during which your teacher and your fellow students process the message and speculate in their own minds why you are being summoned, sometimes with a mental "tsk" or "ooh." You get up and wonder if you should bring your books, but Mrs. Winchfield indicates with a small wag of her head that, no, you should assume that you'll be right back: Always assume you'll be right back, unless you are given to understand otherwise.

The walk to the office just builds the tension, and you have to slow your steps as you approach the office. You turn the corner and there he is: the early-twenties production assistant, with the headset with mic, the clipboard and a harried expression. Or maybe it isn't so hackneyed, but you are introduced to the staffer, who tells you that you should be congratulated for making such an impression at an early age, that this is a unique opportunity, enviable but, more importantly, your chance to be a participant in modern American culture. This kind of opportunity may only come once in a lifetime, you know?

You come around, or you wonder how you can say no, or you wish someone could decide for you. "You just need to call your parents," he says, handing you a cell phone with your home number keyed up. Doreen picks up, because she happens to be home. "On television? What?" she says. You explain in half sentences, then: "Never mind." You hand the phone back to the assistant as if to say this is now officially over. But he continues the conversation with your mother, who is the picture of disbelief, now, temporarily, before she thinks that this all stems from that one ill-conceived joke and decides that I have now completely undermined my own offspring -- believing no doubt that I had to be aware of this, if matters had come so far -- and she metaphorically throws up her hands. "Whatever. If it's what his father wants to do to his only child." "It's fine?" the attendant asks, with his digital recorder up to the earpiece. "Fine," she says and hangs up.

You are shuttled outside to where the small crowd of onlookers and the equally crowding TV crew have encircled the interviewer. He is perched on a director's chair, with an empty chair beside him. You probably don't recognize the man, but his face is better known among the great slew of Americans than all but a few politico faces. His shtick is weather, but his role is the easy, informal and wacky interview. "You're going to be great," the assistant says. "Just be sure to speak up for the microphones, okay?"

After you've been seated next to the weatherman, who peers up for just a moment from his assistant's notes to squint at you and then briefly smile, you wait. A considerable time rolls by, with no one paying a wit's attention to you, until you hear a voice from somewhere behind the camera: "One minute." "Okay," your conversant says to himself, and he looks at you and smiles. "Hi," looks down, "Brett." Looks up. "I am so-and-so. I'm going to ask you a few questions about this story. I'm going to ask you how you came up with the name, and why you think there's a monster in the woods around Chapel Hill. How does that sound?" "Fine," you may have said.

Once the lights come on and the camera operator gets very serious, there are only a few seconds until the producer points at the weatherman. "We're back in Chapel Hill..." The rest blurs in your mind, until the man shifts a little forward in his chair and half turns toward you. "With me outside Guy B. Phillips Middle School is Brett Demsch, the young man who is credited with helping to identify and name North Carolina's answer to Sasquatch. Brett, how are you this morning?" "Fine," you say, quickly, defensively. Not an auspicious start.

"Great," he says as he looks down. "Brett, tell me, how did you and your schoolmates decide that a Bigfoot has been stalking Chapel Hill?"

You look at him, a bit astonished, every bit the young teenager aghast at another incomprehensible twist in adult logic. "We didn't say Bigfoot -- "

"Right! -- So, how did you come up with the name 'bog monster.' That seems a bit more appropriate for Connecticut, my home state, or maybe New Hampshire. Are there bogs in North Carolina?"

"I don't know," you say, and let the first question rest.

"Then why 'bog monster'?"

"My dad -- " you say, but don't know how to finish that thought in a sentence. I understand why, believe me, as I keep writing.

On television, a graphic of the paper's three main conclusions replaces the speakers, during which a signal to the interviewer must have indicated, let's cut this short. "Your dad coined the phrase? He helped you map out the territory of the bog monster, didn't he?"

"Yeah," you say, again with a pregnant pause that shows you want to fill it with the truth, but your conversant finishes: "All right, I appreciate your coming out this morning to share this with us. What class do you have right now?"

"I'm not sure," you say, looking over your shoulder at the school, as if it could answer you (good for a laugh in 60% of viewer homes).

"All right, Brett, you get to your next class. Back to you, guys...." He waits motionless and smiling some seconds for the signal, and when it comes he relaxes his spine and takes off the mic as a surgeon might doff plastic gloves. He doesn't turn back to you, Brett, at all, and the production assistant comes up to move you away from the impromptu set and back to the school entrance.

That evening was hard. It began with our muted greeting of each other -- our eyes seemed to have the same magnetic pole and couldn't catch each other without diverting. Doreen moved with the motions of someone in soaked clothing -- soaked in disappointment. I walked the way you might to say, "This downpour isn't so bad." You, Brett, had homework and didn't stay long at the table. We were left sitting beside each other, chewing slowly, unable to speak. Not that this was new, and in a strange way this was already better than where we'd been many times before.

You deserve to understand. Imagine you and your friends at a table, at lunch, laughing the way friends do -- not exactly unself-consciously but with such practice and repetition that it becomes easy, routine, comforting. Then this kid you know -- son of a circus geek or an inveterate nerd or someone who stinks or the kid with the crossed eyes, who knows -- comes to you and says, "Brett, can you come over to my house this afternoon?" You (thirteen again) look at him incredulously. "No," you say with half a laugh and a look at your buddies. What was he thinking? But say he keeps asking, day after day, until you don't answer any more, you just glare and let that silence wrap around his ears, weigh down his shoulders and keep him locked in place, while you

walk away.

Doreen and I have been silent with each other that way. If you can hate a stranger who imposes himself for just a few seconds on your space and your mind, imagine someone whom you love, who seems to say the same kinds of nonsense and with the same indifference to your answers and your feelings and your sense of what's right, until you don't speak any more, you glare and let silence whoosh in with a great big icy vapor cloud of contempt, until you are both spitting it out back and freezing out everything you share.

There we sat at the dinner and couldn't begin to talk, couldn't look at each other, and yet we couldn't walk away. We were both angry and that was a relief in its own way. You don't argue out of contempt, although you can stop any argument that way. No, if you argue and shout, it's because you want something from your conversant, and as unreasonable, insulting, impossible or selfish as it may be -- it's still something that holds you together. I know this death grip well. More on that later.

Doreen, your mother, finally broke the silence. "So, John, did you see your son on national TV this morning? Anne gave me a copy, in case you'd like to see it." Then she held her words and her breath; she narrowed her eyes and hollowed her cheeks as she watched her fork collect the remnants of spaghetti on her plate. Her complexion seemed to drain of blood even more than usual.

"I didn't," I replied, "but I heard about it. I can't believe they put him on without our permission. George recommended that I sue."

She dropped her fork with a clatter and looked at me. "Don't try to put this on me or the television crew. You're the one who started this, you kept it alive at every turn, and now, along with your being likened to the village idiot" -- ouch! -- "your son was absolutely humiliated before a national television audience while trying to defend you."

"Now wait a second," I shot back as if a shark smelling blood, "you gave permission?"

"I told them nothing you wouldn't have," she said, "I told them that if you wanted him to talk to them, I wasn't going to stop you."

"Where the hell did you get the idea that I wanted them to talk to him?" I shouted. "I've turned down every interview request."

"Don't you curse at me, John. This whole thing is because you cannot be straightforward with your own child. You're always playing out these jokes, hiding behind them. Your own son doesn't even know who you are."

"He doesn't, or you don't?" I asked, still with an edge on my voice. Attack prevarication.

"Ha," she said with no humor. "I've given up." Pause. "But I've been trying to get you to participate in raising your son, and all I see from you is a constant tearing down."

"Wait a second --" I said, putting up a stop sign in my mind.

"It's not just this," she said. "This is bad -- very bad -- but it will pass. What I am worried about is that you don't connect at all with your son. You don't play ball; you don't share any hobbies with him; you don't share anything about yourself. You show up late for dinner, then you sit in front of the TV or that computer, and you live in your own little universe, no matter how much your family tries to bring you out." A sigh.

"Doreen," I said firmly, as if her name would bring her back from this brinkmanship. I wanted to say: if there's anyone who lives in their own universe... but I knew that wouldn't be fair.

"Doreen, Doreen, can't you do any better? Doesn't something occur to you? Isn't there anything you can contribute to this discussion?"

"What am I supposed to say?" I said. "Gosh, Doreen, your analysis is perfect again. It's all my fault. I should just shrivel up and die. Thanks for letting me know."

She looked away and sighed again. "I don't know why I even bother. You can't ever seem to get beyond your own little ego problems. Fine. I don't want to know anything about you. Just share something with your son beyond the fact that you imagine monsters behind every rock, okay?"

I looked at her incredulously. She got up and went to the kitchen. The storm seemed to have passed, and maybe the sun was coming out, I couldn't tell, but regardless we were both shivering wet.

The experts -- a phalanx of them -- emerged from God knows where. A biologist specializing in urban fauna. A statistician with an advanced degree in geography. The columnist with no patience for hoaxes. The science teacher with his own TV show. A former police chief. The cultural literacy specialist. A former chicken coop thief. The Bigfoot debunker. A muckraking reporter. The "shame-on-you" plain-talking parent activist. A local politician. For the most part, they took this opportunity to pontificate about my irresponsible effort to fool you and your friends, and then the unforgivable way that I let you advocate for me and my cheap publicity stunt, though a few thought you were the adolescent criminal genius and I your patsy.

You, Brett, seemed no more morose than usual, for which I was very grateful. I found my hands shaking just a little bit more; my sleep a bit shorter; distractions all the more important. I sat in front of the TV one evening after another, and watched more B movies than I'd like to admit. I watched until I was sick of them and their mechanically predictable plots, so much that a single question came up again and again: Just how many B writers are there, just how many imaginations flow like a vortex around that drain...?

You won't know this about me, Brett, but I once thought about being a writer. That may explain why this missive won't stop growing, but the more immediate cause is my prolixity at memo writing. I can write them at quite a clip, and my colleagues tend to pass the assignment to me whenever they can. My emails can be quite the production, too, so much so that my supervisor has more than once phoned me to get the one-minute version.

As a writer, I have a B sensibility, with a predilection for the grandiose storylines of science fiction -- so believe me, I am not disparaging those who make formulaic, half-baked movies. But you can only chew through so many of them before the inconsistencies and conventions itch inside your brain no differently than the tension that you're escaping from....

After many evenings, I started unpacking from my memory old stories that I had told myself, recreating an internal life that I had had many years earlier, when I still thought of getting them down on paper. In fact, I had started writing most of them, but never got far on any of them. It's a common situation: the elation lasts for a few days as words flow and ideas take form, then you find yourself before a problem, a scene that doesn't come into focus, and you let things lie, tell yourself you're strengthening the plot; after several days you know you have to get back at it, and when you look at what you've written, you see nothing but trite phrasing and paragraphs of filler and plot-propping characters, and a storyline that no different than a story you've seen four or five times before -- and which has no doubt been told somewhere on this world hundreds of times before. Why go on, then? It's so much easier to finish a memo; no one is surprised if it's vacuous.

The media hounds called our house for a few days, until they concluded I wasn't going to talk to anyone, and the feeding frenzy went on in a swirl around my apparently cold, lifeless body. Doreen -- it would be unfair to say that she reveled in my pain. I could see the struggle in her eyes and sometimes a stifled laugh, sometimes a swallowed sigh, sometimes with an edge that said, this is my man to make fun of, not anyone else's. I guess

that's a kind of protection, in the same way a man might want to put his arm around his little lady's shoulders (thought Doreen is at least as tall as me) and say, "Don't worry your pretty little head about all that."

I felt like I was at the bottom. No matter what they thought of my representation in the press, my friends, colleagues and acquaintances said I had brought this upon myself. "A smart aleck with an unpleasant tinge of arrogance," I saw with a furtive glance at an email that made Doreen guffaw. Much as this irritated me, I couldn't contest it. Even you seemed to have had enough of me. I don't know if it was because you yourself were suffering -- I didn't have that much access to your life. Even the few moments of weakness -- "a girl's involved" -- seemed to have passed.

The transition came for me one morning when I dared to open the local news in the newspaper. It was a two-paragraph story with an inauspicious two-line headline: "Farm to host monster fest." It described how a farm field along the Bolin Creek -- outside of Chapel Hill -- had been leased for a month-long summer festival celebrating the Bog Monster of recent fame. "The lessors are 'The Southeast Sasquatch Society' and the 'Renaissance Fayres Group of the Piedmont.'" My chance to guffaw, spilling coffee all over the paper and half over me. I thought: something to distract from my bagatelle. Of course, I knew that this would drag my name through the cow dung again. But I was pleased.

I could look Doreen in the eye again. She laughed, too, but couldn't see any vindication for me in it. I carefully dried the page, and downloaded the story off their website. She and I didn't talk much, and she went to bed most nights without checking with me. I began to sit in front of the computer until late at night, and write little chunks of stories that kept coming back to me. You were quiet, reclusive, impenetrable. Doreen opined: "Oh, there's a girl all right." I felt I understood your impassiveness, but I can't say whether you felt any of the empathy from your parents.

One story begins this way. -- A young man awoke slowly, feeling drugged or maybe weakened by long illness. His nerves reported back from throughout his body before he could move any part -- immobilized by sleep or drugs -- and he was aware of sores in his skin, aching joints, closed eyelids that were gunked and dried shut. He slowly gained control over his muscles, and tried to move. It proved to be impossible, but not because he was confined or injured: he couldn't move himself with his muscles -- they were either too weak or too uncoordinated. He forced his eyes open with a crackling sound. A film on the lenses left everything in a fog. After a long series of blinks one eye cleared, and he saw that he was surrounded by a soft light, emanating from all surfaces, floor included; the floor was a milky white surface with a regular hash pattern every three feet of metallic-looking runners; the walls did not have any hash, and seemed about two feet away from his head and again from his feet. The wall in front of his eye was eight to ten feet away. The height of the walls was impossible to determine from this angle.

He became aware of spittle running out of his mouth in a rut, and simultaneously of a disconcerting feeling that his head had become indented where it lay on the floor. The room was warm -- no, hot and extremely dry, like a sauna just before someone drops a ladle of water on the heating stones. He was naked, as he realized when his legs moved against each other. What he could feel of his skin was caked with dried sweat, and greasy at the joints.

Slowly, minutes or dozens of minutes later, he gained some strength and could begin to lift himself, to move his shoulders to a better angle, to adjust his legs to assist. His head wouldn't cooperate; it resisted as though it had grown to twice its normal size. His whole body was resisting, in fact. He didn't know why the rebellion, and inexorably fell back into unconsciousness.

When he awoke again, the room was darker. It may have been cooler as well. He lay still for quite a while, trying to collect thoughts. Where was he? A hospital? He could not remember where he last was, but he seemed fairly certain that he had gone to sleep in his own bed. He ran through memories, named his family and closest friends, to eliminate the possibility of amnesia. Or rather, perhaps he was suffering from a



traumatic occurrence that caused him to suppress the event and everything leading up to it. A hospital then?

Perhaps this was a treatment appliance, maybe a hyperbaric oxygen chamber. That calmed his nerves for a while, and put a number of questions to rest. Eventually, though, a thought came up that he could not dismiss, could not calmly reason away: what if he was dreaming in an extended coma? That would explain his emaciated self-image and the detail-poor environment that he found himself in, his paralysis, and the lack of memory. This was a frightening thought, especially because of the immobility. He could not stop the thought of agonizing days, weeks, months of enforced, unremitting stillness and sameness until he went mad or his body was allowed to die. As he lay there, still and breathing laboriously in and out, the word "death" began to sound in his mind like "release."

A long time passed, during which the room got darker. He tried to control his mind, with panic at the edges. He almost missed the change: near his feet a rectangle frame appeared in the wall, and a door moved inward. From the near darkness of the uncovered space emerged a body, held upright on four arms and hands and topped with two cockroach-style antennae and two extra hands holding a small plate. The hands lowered and then let drop the plate. The apparition retreated and the door closed. Some kind of a giant bug had just brought him a meal.

The young man had plenty of time to contemplate this, even after he slept again. The room was getting brighter again, a circadian cycle. The plate had something oozy looking, probably food, probably his mind's twisted reconstruction of hospital food, and the bug an image of a hospital aide. Did that mean he was up and about, able to chew, and just encapsulated in insanity? Was he gravity-welled on a bed in a hospital that his comatose mind was unable to perceive? The answer to this question had many implications, but the issue was at the moment undecidable. For a long time he debated taking the bait -- trying to get to the food -- in the end, he decided to.

He realized that brute force was not going to get his head where he needed it, so he tested his limbs for their positioning and purchase against the floor. Grease from his body made things more difficult. Eventually, he mastered a shallow roll of his head together with a wave movement of his body. After innumerable repetitions he had half turned himself toward the plate. He could stretch his lower left arm out and with some rolls and reps he felt the plate between his fingers. It felt like plastic but was as heavy as lead. He got close enough to use his thumb and pulled the plate a little toward him.

His fingers then explored the stuff on the plate. It felt organic enough, so he squished some into his palm and dragged his hand back to his body, lifted the forearm and deposited the sticky fingers and payload in his mouth. He chewed slowly. A familiar consistency, but nothing like the taste of food, neither a spice nor oil nor the distinctive odor of a particular vegetable or meat. It was the definition of bland, though it went down fine.

When his hand was back at the plate, he flicked his finger at the plate, which clanged no differently than a polymer would, but with no movement. Extra gravity? he thought in a moment of realization. He dropped his arm against the floor; the whack ached. Effect of insanity, or the paling of life in a dying body?

Or reality?, ventured a small internal voice he didn't recognize as his own.

He let the bug memory fade -- if it did not repeat it was an anomaly that should not detract from the central issue of his body's real condition. He noted that he had no urge to urinate or defecate. Was that thirst in his throat, or a coating from the food? Maybe what he swallowed was soap? Or some poison?

After a while, he felt something in his stomach. A lump, as if what he had eaten had coagulated and hardened and now was bloating him. The bloating feeling slowly gave way to the loss of sensation, freezing his muscles from the inside out, taking with it his nerves and sensations, first where they are scarce and vague, then in his

limbs and appendages. The last bit to tingle and fade was his mouth and eyes. He was both afraid and expectant, hoping death here would mean rebirth there, where he was really alive. Goodbye -- see you on the other side -- he thought of his body, as his eyes went black.

Doreen, your mother, doesn't think much of my science fiction affinities. I know you don't either, though the reasons differ: you prefer adventure where the frame is more real, the stakes realistic, and the hero's improbable success an all the more stark contradiction; Doreen reads psychological novels, self-help and spiritual tracts, and finds science fiction an empty evasion. "Empty, no," I reply.

Your mother has a psychology degree, which she uses more or less daily in her administrative role in human resources at Blue Cross. You still marvel at the reflective, wedge-shaped building off highway 15-501, looking more like a gigantic sculpture than a building. I find the building as interesting and bothersome as any trompe l'oeil, the kind of thing that engages you on first sight, makes you stop and think, makes you want others to stop and look, too; you feel all the more sheepish when you find yourself entering the building without another thought -- the first impression abandoned for common sense.

Your mother was just starting her career when we met. I don't know what it was that made us stick to each other, actually. I guess we were both desperate to find something that worked in our lives, and we functioned together. Don't get me wrong -- your mother and I love each other, and we're working on loving each other more. But if we had been on different trajectories, it's hard to believe we would not have just bumped off each other. That's part of the disappointment, part of the baggage that we bring together. Soul mates? More fellow travelers, I'm afraid, and that always makes you nervous -- the unnerving sense that you may be heading to different destinations and that your paths may diverge unexpectedly.

Let me see if I can describe to you the woman I had met. She was in her early twenties. She smiled a lot more then, and the smile had a way of animating her face in ways you may not recognize: a young woman, confident, enjoying life, sure of her friends, innocent even. I was a lot quieter and maybe not so ready to laugh or smile, but I could sit in a corner and watch her and her friends enjoy themselves for literally hours, which I did on more than one of the few occasions that brought us together. Eventually she noticed, and there were two possible reactions -- either freak- out or curiosity. She freaked.

I didn't see her for a number of years, then one day we crossed paths again. She seemed changed, and in fact was, in the wake of a very painful betrayal by a boyfriend. She had mostly forgotten why I had stood out, but remembered that I had had something for her. We went out, first as a consolation for her and, I suppose, a reward for me. After we dated for a few months, we found our lives intertwining, and we drew the consequence: we became engaged. A few weeks later she was pictured as bride-to-be in her parents' local paper, though no date was set.

When I married Doreen, she was a serious woman, someone who understood the consequences of marriage, household, offspring and life together only too well. I know she had remembered every detail of what happened between us, too. She tended to wear austere clothing, mostly pantsuits, with a hint of eau and mascara, and she pinned her hair back much of the time. She acted as if in training for something; her face grew taut, while its wrinkles seemed more pronounced, neither of which helped her narrow head and long nose, although her mottled blue eyes did well under this treatment. Tall and thin, she was attractive as a woman, but with a hint of abstinence or illness in her silhouette.

Having a child changed her a lot -- she lost the thinness, filled out her face, and became more relaxed, lethargic even, as if something had been decided with your birth. That's a mistake I've made several times. Nothing is decided for good -- if it matters at all it'll be tested again and again, no matter how certain you are of your choice. Having a child is the perfect example, a decision that comes back again and again for reaffirmation. Brett, even if I don't always shout my joy, I want you to know that you were never just one decision, but always the best I ever made.

So -- Doreen became your mother. She had some hard times, and I think you know this. What you may not know -- but deserve to, when you're 25 -- is that your mother experienced real depression when you were young. It was hard for me to watch. She was effusive and elated one day, reemerging as the young woman I had first met; then depressed and withdrawn, sometimes barely able to get out of bed, and suspicious of almost everything I did. Prescriptions pulled her through, but I don't know what she thought of me at the time. I know I'm no perfect husband. Right now, I should be up stairs, with her, thinking this through with her, but I'm sitting here, communicating with a mature son who doesn't exist yet. Who may never read this.

The lights were down, way down. The young man opened his eyes aware that something had changed. Where was he? He looked a long time before his mind admitted that his eyes saw the same indistinct walls and hashed floor as before. But something had changed. He contemplated how to best move his body. Just before he began to work it, something passed over his eyes: at first it was just a dark rush, but he eventually recognized small limbs jutting from a disc that looked like a headless sea turtle. It stopped over him. He saw tall stalks extending out the upper side, waving slightly in an invisible wind, and near the mouth two glints that slowly resolved into large, black, reflective globules, glossy like irises. Eyes.

The young man screamed with the half lungs he could fill. The disc reacted immediately, moved noisily backwards on four larger limbs -- not the small appendages to either side of the semi-globes -- that were jointed like a lizard's. Two massive hooks opened and revealed something hideously like an ant's mouth. From deep within resonated clicks, whoops and thuds, perhaps its own scream.

The stalks were atop the facial area and looked like antennae twitching in rhythm -- although a slight arrhythm worked its way in. They were maybe the length of the disc. The body measured 2 foot in diameter, perhaps a foot deep and another foot off the floor. Like the main appendages, it was brown and grayed, leathery, slightly haired. The antennae gleamed like plastic or obsidian. The little arms were black and dark, similar to the inside of the mouth and its mandibles. The eyes, shiny as a billiard ball, stared without blinking.

When the young man had emptied his lungs twice, he had to stop. The clicks also receded. They were both faced with a fight-or-flight situation. He was theoretically armed with long legs and arms, fists and a large well-protected brain. The creature was, on the other hand, not just hypothetically mobile and obviously much stronger. It also had the presumed advantage of understanding the situation, whether nightmare or delusion or twisted reality. The young man tried to assess his ability to gather strength into a single act of desperation, but he hoped and thought it wouldn't come to that. If aggression was intended, there had been plenty of opportunities to pull his appendages from their sockets as he slept.

He began to discern that some clicks and whoops did not come from the bug creature before him. Strategizing. The bug began to go backwards and a section of wall opened into darkness. The creature disappeared and the door shut.

For a long time, the young man gathered his breath and wits. The lights seemed to be intensifying. All of a sudden he heard an electromagnetic "whoomp" and felt the difference. To his surprise, his body was not naked. There was a full-length bodysuit, partially cut out, strangely airy and now suddenly steely as well. Bondage, then, he thought and decided to test it, not expecting much. For an instant, there was no movement, then WHAM! He literally flew up into the air and landed with a bone-echoing crunch. His skull might have cracked, but he had what seemed like a thin helmet on it. Blood flowed in his mouth and he spat some out. Slowly now, he lifted his two arms, set his hands on the floor and lifted his upper body up with a jerk. His head flew back and forth until he flexed his neck and it stopped. He pushed up further and pulled a knee in, then the other. He raised his upper body. He was half standing, supported by an exoskeleton that responded to his every muscle movement. The exaggerated movements felt a bit like the sudden jerky movements of an insect, but he soon steadied himself. He stood up fully.

He could look down and get a sense of his body. His legs and arms looked thin but strong enough, while his

chest was sunken and his fingers boney and weak -- as if the main muscle groups had been worked, while other muscles had simply atrophied. His skin was pale to translucent. The bend in his arms seemed punctuated by numberless dots -- perhaps microinjections? After examining himself for a long while, he looked up and noticed that the door wall had lost its luminosity.

Behind the transparent wall he could discern six bug creatures. Two, including, he thought, the one from before, were seemingly on the ground, although the contours of the room were indistinct. The other four were apparently hovering -- the edges of their personal aircraft were visible underneath the bodies of the higher two. The same two had something in the concave area of their oblong bodies, something shiny and pointed in a way that reminded him of a weapon, slanted so that he assumed that one of their major limbs, now resting limply on footguards, must have been double-jointed and could reach up and over, grasp and bring to bear. The bug world equivalent of a gunslinger?

As he stood, he tried to find signs that this was an unreal experience -- as it must be. But the typical flow and ebb of a dream was nowhere to be found. He counted the seconds, and nothing changed, except that the hovering bugs seemed to be moving up and down as if x-raying him in chunks. Maybe the antennas, he thought. That gave him a momentary ah-ha: evolution would never produce these freakish amalgams of bugs, leathery animals and primates, which had therefore to be products of his mind, perhaps unusually detailed and effective because his whole comatose brain was engaged in their creation. Let the antennas x-ray him.

The question was, whether the coma dream was preventing him from reaching consciousness, or whether consciousness was out of the question. If the latter, then there was no cost in believing the former, while ignoring the former was tantamount to suicide. But how to break the illusion, force his mind to consciousness?

"Who are you?" he asked the bugs behind the glass wall.

A few clicks and whoops followed. This approach wasn't going to get him very far.

He took a single jerky step toward the wall, and it went opaque.

You don't normally look me up, so forgive my surprise when you surfaced next to me and said, at the instant I saw you, "Can we go to the fair?" I was nonplussed. "Fair?" You seemed pained, incredulous and disturbed at the degree to which I was out of touch with the world. "The bog monster fair," you let out.

I thought at first that you were joking -- making fun of me, of course. I wanted to say that, but realized I ought not to shut down communication -- all Doreen's post-mortems weren't without their effect -- and so I said, with great parental matter-of-factness, "Oh, that fair. Are you sure it's appropriate? Our family has had to suffer a great deal because of the press about the 'bog monster;' this might only aggravate things."

"Oh come on, dad," you said. "Nobody cares about that."

"That's not exactly true," I said.

"Okay," you said, "if you live by what people say about you, then maybe it's not true. But nobody I know cares."

"And when a hundred cameras flash in your face with a statue of Big Foot behind you?"

You chuckled: "The camera people are gone, dad. You have to notice your environment more."

I couldn't argue because I hadn't seen them around either. I just figured that they were camped out somewhere

with our pictures on the trailer wall, waiting for the day.... A bit ludicrous.

"Okay," I said. "All right.... You're right. How about tomorrow?"

You were both relieved and panicked, if that is possible. "No -- no -- I want to go this afternoon." You let me look into your eyes -- I guess because of your desperation. It surprised me when I recognized your mother's eyes, slightly crossed in a narrow face, with a hint of the same frustration and distance, the eyes of someone left in line when the ship finished loading, or facing a ticket counter with all flights cancelled.

"All right," I said. "But why does it have to be today? I've got plans, too, you know."

"My friends will be there."

"Why don't you just get them to take you?"

"I can't really ask," you said.

Friends that you can't ask -- that was all the evidence I needed that this had to do with the opposite sex. I looked around for Doreen. "All right, Brett. Give me fifteen minutes or so."

You looked relieved, and as you left: "We don't have to go for another hour." And you were gone.

A metallic taste formed in my mouth, but I shook my head, stretched my shoulders and went back to the disjointed story taking form on the LCD screen before me. The hour went by in a flash, but I was ready to get out of the house. You, Brett, had to be reminded of our deal as you doodled in your room. Or it was an act; I couldn't tell.

I told Doreen where we were going, but she didn't seem surprised, so I knew how this had all progressed. Still, it felt good to be walking to the car with you, a couple guys heading out together, doing their stuff. We didn't talk much; you were preoccupied and I was getting more nervous all the time. The signs, half amateurish, half commercialized, led us to a field with an attendant (charging for parking in a cow lot?), and a hundred or more cars. The number impressed me. We walked toward a field from which spewed a thin cloud of straw dust and dirt, with distant music, displaying a number of large tents and pennants flapping slowly in the wind.

You started moving away from me as we approached, and I shouted, "Okay, Brett, we'll meet at the entrance in an hour to check in. All right?" You seemed to nod before you strode away, faster than I thought possible. I was left alone at the edge of the festival. A ticket taker was selling admission, checking re-entry stamps, and taking tickets that came from who knows where. He was dressed in something approximating late Middle Ages garb and had the wide eyes, unbridled facial and cranial hair one might project backward into such a rough-hewn age. The pointed-toe soft shoes were a nice touch, though they lent perhaps too much of the clown motif.

"One," I said to him.

He gave me some frou-frou Renaissance-speak and waited for my response. When I didn't play the game, he took my \$10 and bowed slightly and waved me into the fairgrounds.

So there I was, in the middle of the Bog Monster Festival. No one gave me another glance. A Renaissance Fayre crowd was engaged in preparations for jousting and hand-to-hand combat. A respectable Carolina rock-and-roll band was playing for dancers and picnickers. Lines had formed at a beer booth and a rice-and-chicken wrap place. There were a few sideshow attractions, and a few booths offering New Age wares. People did not seem as numerous as the number of cars implied, but even the thin attendance at so

many venues added up to a positive impression.

I wandered by the stage, then eyed the beer stand; I couldn't justify the indulgence and went on to the booths. I had no idea how I would fill an hour. The pyramids and homeopathic snake oil wouldn't do it, and the grunting, oath-uttering jousts weren't going to cut it, either. The sun was hot and irritating. I went back to the wrap place, waited for a good ten minutes and finally got a frozen lemonade.

With refreshment and a bit more sugar in the bloodstream, I wandered back to the booths. That's when I met her. You have to understand, Brett, that I wasn't looking for an encounter. I wouldn't mention it except that you may wonder how this part of the story started. Barbara Hohenstauffen. I was familiar with the type: long bushy hair, substituting volume for style, freckled, thick, white skin, luminescent brown eyes outlined in mascara, wide, smooth face, full if not overly long white teeth, not too tall, wide hips and noticeable but not too defined bosom, a gait that threatens to move into free-form dance at any point. Loose clothing, colorful lacy cotton flowingly cut. There was nothing unexpected about her selling pyramids and life-energy pap. The surprise was that she saw me.

The booth was empty when I took a look at some crystal pyramids that left a variety of spectra on the shelf that held them. I leaned over to try to read the blurb about the life-generating effects, but then thought better of it. I turned, and she was directly behind me.

"May I see your hand?" she asked. I thought at first that she must have suspected that I had taken a pyramid and concealed it in my hand. I opened my hand palm up and made to deny any such intentions. The whole while she had a smile on her face that seemed completely out of context for what I thought was happening, and for any other explanation except a crassly commercial one.

"Thank you," she said and took my hand in both of hers. She leaned over at the neck so far that her hair fell over and obscured our hands.

I could then feel one of her fingers tracing out lines in my palm, a sensation that made this moment intimate in a way that made my whole body tense. A faint waft of perfume reinforced the tension.

She felt that, looked up with a headshake to throw her hair back, and even took a half a step away. "Your palm fits you," she said, still with the smile and a small nod to encourage me.

"What?" I asked.

"I can give you a palm reading," she said as she let go of my hand.

I could feel my cheeks redden, a bit chagrined for having let this get this far. "I'm sorry," I said, apologizing for leaving the impression I might be interested, "I don't believe in this kind of thing."

She broadened a knowing, but not condescending or fatuous smile. "I know," she said lightly.

Of course, that made me suspect what she felt she was selling with a palm reading.

"I like doing palm readings for skeptics," she said as she moved away from me back into her booth. "They always surprise."

I didn't know whether to answer ("so do non sequiturs") or just walk away.

She didn't wait and wandered back behind her booth. I hesitated for a few seconds -- I suppose I was tempted to keep this completely unexpected encounter alive -- then turned away. From behind me: "You're the bog

monster, aren't you." Not a question.

I took just a step, and found myself immobilized again. I decided that I couldn't leave that unanswered, both as a communicative gesture and as a challenge. I turned and tried to say good-humoredly, "You saw that in my palm?"

She had said that without looking at me, and only raised her eyes after a few seconds. She seemed half surprised to see me still facing her. "No, I recognized your face."

Stupid, I thought. She was just mocking me, even a life-energy gypsy....

"But it makes sense. It's in your aura."

"My aura?" I tried to sound skeptical but not, for my part, mocking.

She squinted at me. "Yes, definitely." Then she looked away -- maybe down the way to the stage -- as she related the following: "All living creatures have an aura, a pattern of psychic energy that surrounds their physical being. The aura changes with your mood, but it's also as distinctive as a fingerprint, a signature -- a palm." She looked at me, the smile working its way in. "I see the pain in your aura." A pause. "You suffer for your creature." Another. "Because it bears your anxiety for you."

"What?"

"I can work up your profile," she said, looking down and speaking now as if rehearsed, "but it takes a lot of energy, a lot of time. I can't do an aura for free, it's way too psychically draining."

I didn't want to end the conversation on that point, so I asked: "Do you believe in the bog monster?"

She squinted at me and then smiled broadly. "Oh, yes, without a doubt." She turned back to her task, but added with a flick of her head: "Take my card -- in case you change your mind." I took two measured steps forward, reached into the crystal cardholder and took one. "Thanks," I said. Stupid, I thought and walked away.

That whole exchange took less than two minutes, and I wanted nothing more than to be driving away from this place. I wandered up and down a bit, trying to recognize your silhouette among the young people. Nowhere. It took twenty minutes and I saw you coming from the creek with a small group, on a path from a small shrine for the bog monster. A piece of this little festival that I hadn't been aware of. When you were safely off to watch the next band tune up and do a sound check, I followed the path down to the creek side. There was a reproduction of a painting nailed to a tree, an artist's rendering of the bog monster -- a hyper-realistic painting of a cross between a typical Big Foot and a gorilla emerging from the muck -- a portrait festooned with flowers and surrounded by small votive candles. A corkboard was covered by scraps of paper with sentiments -- "I'll marry you, bog monster" and "what a crock!" and "please grant me a cure" -- that fascinated me while I grew progressively more ill at ease.

On my return I saw your group moving among the booths, trying, it seemed, to extort free samples or buy some of the cheapest wares. You yourself haggled with Barbara H.; I could not tell with what degree of irony, but she seemed not to be engaging with you. I can't tell you anymore how that made me feel; I was probably pleased, not only because it would mean that she did not recognize you. I began to discern your group: no one I knew, but it had three boys and two girls. Always a volatile combination, I find. I have to admit that I watched carefully how one of your friends joked maybe too passionately with the girls over an extravagant scarf. I couldn't tell how you related to each of them; they did not seem to stop for your hamming-up and did not seem to pay particular attention to you. But you were part of the group, definitely, and I was pleased.



I tried not to follow you, even with my eyes, but the area was not large enough to lose sight of you once I had it. I listened to the band, and also tried not to let my eyes settle on Barbara's booth. I did take out the card I had pocketed:

PsychEnergy of Pittsboro, NC

"Because life is psychic energy"

Readings, Consultations & Wares

Barbara Hohenstauffen & Jerry Brookheim

I tried to enjoy the music for a while, but I had a crick in my back and I wanted nothing more than to be walking out the gate. Two songs came and went, and I discovered I had lost track of you. That's when I noticed your group huddled beside the stage, looking conspiratorial and silly. I had a sinking feeling that was confirmed a few moments later. One of the girls bounded onto the stage and whispered for a while into the singer's ear. She hustled off the stage, but not before he began: "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a special treat today.... You are all familiar with the modern and oh so local legend of the bog monster. With us today is Brett Densch, the middle-schooler who discovered the evidence of our monster. Brett," he said with his mouth glued to the mic and looking over at you, "please come up." There was a smattering of claps and whoops. You went up onto the stage with a wave -- thankfully nothing like a bow or blown kisses -- and stood next to the singer. "So, Brett," he said, "tell us a little bit about this bog monster you discovered." He relinquished the mic and you moved up to it. Your mouth directly against the wind screen, you began to speak, your voice booming deep and yet cutting sharp at that volume: "Thanks. I want to thank you all for coming out today" -- you shot a look at your group; this was probably part of the bet -- "and let me just say that the bog monster and I are on the best of terms, and he thinks this festival rocks!" Your fists went in the air, as if anticipating a thunderous response. None came, just a few random shouts and claps. You said a few other things that I have no recollection of, and went off stage. The group members were mostly laughing among themselves, but you seemed or tried not to notice. I could see finally and clearly how you were trying to gather the attention of the stage-whispering girl with your comments and your eyes. She noticed, but didn't respond; she mostly joked with the other boys. For me it was a mercy when you all went to get some lemonade.

After a few more songs, the band took a break. The canned music was still loud but quiet by comparison. I kept imagining that someone would turn around and scream at me like a pod person identifying the last flesh-and-blood human. Or maybe I was really the pod person, still concerned about being found out. No one seemed to even know that a body was sitting here, which made the moment with Barbara all the stranger, more stark. Then you showed up next to me: "Let's go." I wanted to ask about your group, but you were already moving. I guess a question had finally been answered for you.

The young man slept more soundly with his new exoskeleton, but when he awoke he found that its tension was gone and he was splayed against the floor. He was not surprised when the wall door popped open and a bug padded in. When another larger bug followed, he was a bit more apprehensive. He noticed that he was aligned against the far wall, which meant that he had been moved in his sleep. He tried to raise his head, but the muscles were still too weak.

The first bug -- perhaps the same from the last time -- moved to the side and the larger bug approached. It was no more than five feet from his head. It dropped to the ground with a thwap, and one large appendage bent back over and pulled something from its concave back. The object was a ball, a softball-sized silver ball with protrusions and etchings all over the surface. The bug bounced the ball in its foot/hand, as if weighing it, then suddenly moved its hand forward and down. The ball rolled toward the young man.

He didn't have many options. The ball was rolling toward his head, so he put out his hand to stop it. When contact was made, he received an electrical jolt unlike any in his life. It pulsed through his fingers, up his arm and across his body; a white light filled his vision for an instant; he could feel his entire body shudder. The ball seemed glued to his hand, until the electrical pulse weakened. He was unable to think during two complete energy cycles, then he made a monumental effort to push, and the ball rolled away from him. Half way to the bug.

That bug lifted its body and padded forward to the ball. It lowered the front half of its body, took hold of the ball with its two miniature black arms, and gave it a shove. The ball clanged on the floor and rolled toward the young man again. He tried to punch it, but his strength gave out when he struck the ball. Three cycles passed this time before he was able to push the ball away, and it rolled a foot. The bug, still tipped forward, padded up to the ball, grabbed it and pushed it half the remaining distance to the young man.

He cursed and added: "This is torture, it's not allowed." He relaxed his arms in protest.

The two bugs started clicking and whooping. The bigger bug got up on all fours and padded backwards to its original position. There was a minute of impasse, then "whoomp!" The exoskeleton powered up. The young man stochastically raised himself to a standing position. The ball still lay before him. He moved a step forward and gave it a great kick. He realized what a bad idea this was when he felt his large toe break on contact -- the cracking sound was unmistakable -- though the ball did become airborne and seemed to threaten the bugs' antennae. As it approached the larger bug, a field of some kind bled off its momentum, and the ball fell with a clunk before the bug. The young man lowered his body to a lotus position. He winced at the sight of his toe but otherwise kept his eyes on them.

The larger bug repeated earlier actions, though the ball came at the human more slowly, rolling to a stop about a foot from him. He carefully put his good foot behind the ball and gave it a moderate push. The shock was profound, but short lived. The larger bug pushed it back, and with a wince the young man repeated his action. When the ball came back yet again, the young man surrendered, moved to a cowering position in the corner, and just looked at the silver ball. The bugs started chattering. This went on for quite a while; the door behind the bugs opened then closed twice. Finally the larger bug came at him -- either to get the ball or to roll it to him again -- and stopped, dropped to his belly and flexed his main forearms/legs up as if to ask what the human was going to do. That's when the young man reacted. "You want me to touch the goddam ball? Do you think I'm afraid of it? Of you?" He crawled forward, leaned over just ahead of the bug, grimaced at him and slapped his hand onto the ball. Even though he knew no actual eyes were on him, he kept his on the bug -- as the shock spread throughout his bones with a burning ache, boiled in his stomach, and exploded in his ears. "Arrgghhh," he spat out once the charge decreased. The bug did not move. Then the blue-tinged white light filled the man's senses again...

He next found himself sprawled on the ground, apparently much later because the lighting had changed, with a burnt hand and no ball or bug in sight. His toe ached, but he noticed that it was wrapped and set.

He heard the "whoomp," began the motions to sit up, and listened for any motion at the wall door. He was upright and sitting before the door opened. After a few moments, a bug -- the first one? -- entered and padded half the way to him. It set itself down and let its limbs rest beside its torso. There was a long waiting period, during which the young man assumed they were testing his mental state. What had the episode with the ball done to him? For one thing, he couldn't say why he had reacted as he had.

Amid clicks and trills, the lights lowered. Next to the bug, a curtain of sparkles came down like confetti over a party, but it stayed in the air; slowly an image formed on the surface of the cloud. It was a crude representation of a star and planets, maybe with the detail that their eyes could discern. The third planet looked a lot like earth. Something resembling a spaceship emerged at the right lower corner and disappeared as it approached earth and shrank to its scaled size. After a few seconds, it emerged again and zoomed off the

screen to the right. The perspective changed: the solar system moved to the upper left on the screen, with earth enlarged so that you could see its orbiting; the orbits sped up until the motion was barely visible in a solid ring around the sun. Meanwhile, the star pattern in the main part of the screen began to change. A small number of stars, patently the near ones, began to move off to the left -- as the years passed. The young man understood. Dozens, hundreds, maybe thousands of years passed. Finally, the rotation of the sun's satellite slowed to a crawl, and the star pattern settled in. One of the stars grew in size until it was a sun with its own planets. The fifth planet, brown and white in swirls, expanded to fill the entire screen. Okay, clear enough. This was supposed to be his new home.

"All right," he said. "You just told me that I have traveled thousands of years across space to a distant world. The timescale is important, right. Everyone, everything I've ever known is dead, has been for millennia. I'm supposed to be resigned to this prison, right? A zoo, maybe?"

The bug seemed to be listening.

"Except that I don't believe you're real." He nodded slowly to make the point. "You're a dream, an illusion in an elaborate dream state. You don't exist. You can't exist. You're an impossibility. The only question is whether I will ever wake up from this hallucination.... Maybe it's my personal hell. Do you know what hell is?"

A brief clicking spell indicated a response of some kind.

"Okay, I assume you do." He half smiled, for the first time since awakening in this cell. "But before we discuss eschatology, we should at least have a formal introduction. My name is Derek Sorensen. Pleased to meet you." He lifted a hand in a half greeting.

The bug clicked a series, paused, repeated it. Derek tried to transliterate it in his head. "Click-cluck-agh" was the first part. He said, "Okay, why don't I call you Click-Cluck. My pleasure, Click-Cluck."

The screen beside the bug dissolved to black. What followed was a jumble of excerpts from television, Derek's vintage. A preview, he concluded, to the earthly library holdings of the bug people from their recent artifact-collecting mission. Maybe, coming back with a specimen of the planet's apex predator was just a bonus, and this collection of music videos and Clint Eastwood movies was their actual goal.

The outlines of his new life became clear. The main bug, Click-Cluck, came once or twice a day in order to cluck a few new things at him: he assumed they were words or phrases, but he couldn't be sure. He tried to guess their meaning but couldn't say if he was comprehending or fooling himself. Sometimes there were even quizzes, when the bug would stop and point with its withered forelimbs at itself or the plate of food or even at Derek. He would attempt to cluck the words. The bug brought him a dime- store notebook and a Bic pen, and he began writing down a vocabulary. There was a dull ritual to all this, such that Derek might even have reason to doubt his dream-state theory, but he convinced himself that his cognitive energy, so diverted, was capable of creating this level of dream realism. His book would be moved after he slept, indicating their interest in his efforts at xeno-linguistics.

For its part the bug seemed intent on learning English words. Every session began with clucks and clicks spilling out of its mouth in a vain effort to create the resonance of a voice box. Still, Derek began to recognize the cluck equivalents of "d" and "g" and "k" and "t." Vowels and some consonants were simply impossible, but these consonants bordered on the possible.

Derek did his best to click and cluck some sounds, but he had no idea how to make his tongue create the others. By his count, there were fifteen distinct cluck sounds. He suspected they would resolve into more with time, since he had only recognized five or six for a number of hours. The bug seemed to create most of the

sounds with a stiff tongue, as it moved against in-mouth protrusions that were much like teeth. Then again, some sounds involved the external mandibles in a way he couldn't see: when the bug spoke slowly, the contact points were impossible to intuit, as the sound itself evaporated; when the bug spoke normally, the movement was too rapid. A few sounds, rattles really, emanated from deep within the bug's frontal area.

Derek knew enough to realize that he was sleeping on someone else's time. The nights stretched on forever on those occasions when he couldn't sleep. The days were interminable, if he was not engrossed in something. He guessed this day was twice earth's period. The evening food seemed to contain some sort of sleeping drug that kept him down during the bugs' daily rituals: cleaning the room of his excretions, sweat and oils; administering more microinjections and conducting who knows what other tests; and reviewing his work in the notebook. For all he knew, they all called it a day when the drug took hold and they'd done the necessary.

He had grown accustomed to his bareness. The bugs, too, bore no clothing, although he had not yet seen their tail ends and could only guess what they hid back there. They did eventually provide him with a cloth that seemed thought as a diaper; when he had to go in the corner of his room, he used the cloth to cover the waste. The next morning, he would have a new cloth. The truth was that he seldom went: the glop they served dissolved almost completely in his digestive system, and it was sufficiently imbued with liquid that he drank little. He and Click-Cluck found a mutually understandable word ("clunk-thwack-ughghgh") to designate a container of water. It would come with a greenish hue in something that resembled a dog bowl, but he drank it up to show his cooperative spirit. The green stuff left no aftertaste.

After morning lessons, his exoskeleton would be powered down. He couldn't tell if it was completely disabled because he was able to move around regardless. Perhaps his muscles were coming back. They gave him something that looked like a balloon but felt more like a basketball; he dribbled it, bounced it off the wall (he wondered if they jumped behind the two-way mirror), and passed it behind his back to the sidewall. The room was too small and low to play basketball for real. When he grew tired, he would roll the ball slowly to the wall, which would open, swallow the ball and close.

Most afternoons, he would see the bug again, and they would run through more vocabulary. The bug would engage the cloud projector and show TV images -- frozen in blurry relief -- and point to something. Sometimes, the bug would ask for the English word and at other times would venture the bug word. Sometimes, the image would flow to reveal a movement of some kind: batting a baseball; kissing; walking up stairs; a car splashing water on people waiting for a bus; eating a steak; and so on. Very human-centric. Derek would describe it, sometimes at great length, and the bug would slowly work him down to the minimum, using some phrases that he recognized to mean, "Again" and something like, "More precise." The bug would describe the scene as well, and Derek thought he could hear the rudiments of their grammar: how sounds were added before the thing's name to indicate the action. He would transcribe what he could and try to recognize the patterns. He was not as disciplined as he might have been, and it took him longer to pick out patterns than it took the bugs.

After the afternoon's work -- or sometimes the bug wouldn't show and he would try to spend the afternoon as he could, helped by a television show or two -- he would be left alone with his dinner. In the evening, he recorded what he had done that day, insofar as it had not been captured in his vocabulary work. One entry:

I try to accommodate the bugs, as I can. They are, after all, me. It is a mercy, even if I'm stuck in a room that betrays the sensory deprivation of a comatose mind, that the bugs tend to my abandoned ego self. They are an impossible projection, but their world is consistent, coherent and not without intellectual challenges. I cannot tell you what would happen to me if I were alone in this isolation. This hallucination keeps me from uncontrollable insanity.

The evening would fade into darkness and he would recognize a powerful sleepiness coming over him, and he would resolve again to skip dinner in order to test his theory of drugging. On another level, he assumed that

his captive mind continued to need an unconscious period and that it invented the feeling of drugs in order to explain how this need overtook his apparent reality. The constrained prisoner needed less sleep than he found himself taking. He did skip his dinner a few times, but could never convince himself that drugs were part of the fare. He would wake up early; dinner was gone; and he was hungry. No noticeable hangover or sense of deprivation.

Days merged one into the next, and still he had no plan. It was enough, he found himself thinking, to live from one day to the next. With each unwilling breath he could feel how life can be its own reason, but somehow it seemed wrong -- a betrayal of the life that he wanted to live, the past that was beyond his reach but which could be his again, if only he could resolve to break through these walls. But what if he threw himself against the walls and the bugs stopped coming? He would know that he had condemned himself to the encroaching madness.

I don't read tabloids, but they must put their stories out on the wire sometimes. The Chapel Hill Reporter picked up one because of its local interest. I sank in my chair when I saw the teaser, just above the attribution to a weekly tabloid: "College town reportedly stalked by hideous creature." Accompanying the story was a sinister image of the creature, similar to what I had seen portrayed at the festival, manifestly drawn by the same hand, but to a very different end. In the short article, found on page E5, a pseudonymous local farmer "Bubby Frank" was quoted as having seen the monster walk away with several of his egg-laying hens hanging lifeless from its massive hands. A local police report, so the news weekly, confirmed the tale (though in an addendum the Reporter relayed that it was unable to find one at any of the local police or sheriff departments). Your name, Brett, was mentioned as the local youth who had uncovered its reign of terror over so many years.

I wanted to call the tabloid and see what I could find out about "Bubby," but that was an obvious way to self-immolation. Instead, I called the Reporter. It took two days, but the local editor who had run the article got back to me.

He sounded bemused. "John Densch, eh? Can't leave this story alone, can you? You know we had a story ready to run about your son and the Bog Monster festival, but we decided not to run it. It really aggravated the guy who wrote the story. I wouldn't be surprised if he wrote this one just for the tabloids."

"I hope this helps you see you made the right call."

"Oh sure," he said. "The whole story has fallen way beneath our standards."

I let that be for a few moments. "So who's the reporter? He's local?"

"Sure," he said. "He's done a number of color pieces for us lately. But because we didn't run the story it's not appropriate for me to give you his name. Sorry."

Sorry, sure, I thought. "Okay, thanks." I hung up and resolved to find him myself. It's a small paper; there weren't more than a handful of suspects, and only one with the quirky sensibility that would alight on bog monsters, terrified farmers and tabloids.

"Barry Moore?"

"Yeah?" He had what you might call a tough voice, gravelly and world-weary, but I think you know the type: poseur. I could imagine the well-trimmed beard, carefully ironed plaid shirts and a library of stances that he practices before the mirror.

"This is John Densch. I thought maybe we should talk."

He was silent for a few moments. "What do you think I want to hear from you?"

"Well," I said, "maybe you want to know the truth about this whole monster thing."

He chuckled. "And you're the one to give me the truth?"

"More than Bubby Frank," I said with an edge.

He hadn't expected that, but he caught up: "Bubby is a reliable, uninterested witness, whereas you're manifestly entangled, if not ensnared in your own self-interest."

"Okay, look, Barry. I don't care what you write about this damn bog monster. I just want you to leave my son out of it."

"Ah," he said. "Fatherly love. Very touching."

I felt a streak of anger flare up but didn't want to go that way: "It's the least you could do. He didn't deserve any of this. I'm the one you should be pillorying."

"I'm not pillorying anyone," he said: "I'm interested in the human story." And finally, because he couldn't help himself: "I'm writing a book about it."

"A book?" I was incredulous. "This is a made-up story; there's no book here."

He laughed. "You don't understand, do you, John? ... Look, I'll be happy to sit down with you and get your version. Who knows, maybe you'll convince me. There've been lots of Sasquatch sightings in Virginia I can look at."

We agreed to meet at Carolina Brewery as a first step in this negotiation. Doreen had her usual face on when I told her, but she was preoccupied with other matters and didn't say anything. You were at your own business. I drove straightaway to the pub and set myself at the bar, which was unoccupied at the time. I ordered a pale ale and waited. Barry surprised me when he arrived: a short and relatively thin man, unassuming in dress and manner, he wasn't the poseur I had thought, nor did I see anything about him that matched the deep raspy voice. He had a nervous energy about him, so you could understand the wiry frame beneath the comfortable outdoors clothing, and his thin face had the wrinkles of someone who had spent a great deal of time outside -- or had recently given up chain-smoking. His head was crowned by fairly long and stiff gray and black hair that strayed out from his head but mostly fell back in a messy sort of mullet. He had reading glasses hanging down on his chest. He set himself down next to me, but spent the next half an hour alternating between sitting, leaning on the stool and standing.

He discussed what was on tap for a few minutes with the bartender but eventually settled on a coffee. Only then did he address me: "John Densch."

"Yes," I said.

"Do you mind?" he said as he pulled out a mini-cassette recorder.

"Can I review what you write for accuracy?"

"When it's published," he said blankly.

I didn't respond, so he clicked it on.

"John, can you tell me what you know about the bog monster of Orange County?"

I relayed all I could remember of the beginning of this mess. He listened, nodding at various points; whether he was affirming my account or mentally noting supposed inaccuracies, I couldn't tell.

"Very good," he said, as if rewarding a trained seal. I wasn't impressed. "That is very interesting stuff. I have some details of my own, but it always helps to get the story straight from the wolf's mouth."

"What details?" I asked.

"This is a great deal more complicated than you know, John. But I don't fault you for that. In fact, the public explanation is the only one that makes sense. A kids' prank, prodded on by a vainglorious adult."

I quaffed to avoid cursing at him.

"In reality, John, there has been a systematic government effort to suppress public knowledge about a species of humanoid creatures variously known as Big Foot, Sasquatch, Yeti -- and now Bog Monster." He waited for my reaction, but when he saw that I wasn't going to dignify that with a counter-argument he went on. "I can show you the visual, biological and anthropological evidence another time. I can't carry it all, and really, a bar counter isn't the right place to evaluate printed materials. The point is that in order to recognize the value of the evidence you have to move beyond the conviction that there cannot be evidence. You need to realize that conspiracies do exist."

"I'm not adverse to conspiracy theories," I said.

"Good. I'm not talking about your Roswell conspiracies, Area 51, all that crap. There is one way, and one way only, to know the difference between crap and reality. The smell test. What does the evidence smell like? What is the odor emanating from the government denials? Do you smell honest sweat on the witnesses and experts? Without that, there is no way to get your nose off all the scat that crisscrosses your trail."

"Very poetic," I said, "but that sounds like solipsism to me. And why are you telling all this to me? I know how the bog monster story started, and it has nothing to do with government cover-ups."

"Okay," he said. "You know the beginning of the bog monster story. You also saw some evidence of large predator interventions over many years in the Bolin Creek area, evidence that is subject to some skepticism but convinced you. Right?" I half nodded. "Do you know the Indian legends and modern ghost stories that parallel and corroborate your son's half-scientific report? Have you sat down with the dozens of sane individuals who can provide firsthand encounters with these unexplained creatures?"

"And -- what if I told you that Duke University, maybe the largest federal grant recipient of any institution in the southeast, is implicated in this cover-up? That the far-flung pieces of Duke Forest serve as a shelter of last resort for the Bog Monster? That the Duke primate center, supposedly dedicated to the lemur, is a cover for research into an unknown endangered species, a species for which public acknowledgement could simultaneously mean extinction? Would you dismiss me as a crackpot? Or are the stakes sufficiently high now that you are willing to suspend your disbelief, and listen?"

"I don't know," I said. "What ghost stories?"

He looked down and sipped. "I'm collecting them for the book." That was the end of that.

"What evidence do you have for the Duke stuff? Who are these reliable witnesses?"



"Tell me," he said. "What evidence would convince you?"

"A body, I suppose."

"Exactly," he said. "Exactly what the government is going to make sure never happens. We have to agree on another standard if we're going to get anywhere."

"Anything else can be faked, or be the result of a misunderstanding. 'Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.'"

"Don't misquote Carl Sagan at me. He also wrote: 'If we've been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle.'"

"I'm sure he wasn't talking about Big Foot there."

"No, he would have rejected Big Foot out of hand. He wasn't ready to admit that science depends upon social conditions quite alien to its core. He also argued: 'Our species needs, and deserves, a citizenry with minds wide awake and a basic understanding of how the world works.' Yet he would never acknowledge how science blithely affirms the existing human order, while it goes about creating the appearance of order in the natural world. Science mirrors the conditions that enable its insights; change the conditions, and you change the science. That has always been true, both before and after the introduction of the all-consuming master narrative we know as Progress."

I didn't see any sense in pursuing him down that path, so I said: "That may all be, but to me it's beyond believable that these creatures have co- existed with us while eluding capture for all these centuries."

"Well, I won't bore you with the history of unexpected species popping up in unanticipated places. It's quite extensive, actually. And we'll have to agree to disagree about the importance of anecdotal and folk revelations. What really matters is -- the smell test."

"I smell bull."

"Of course you do. That's because it's in your nose all the time."

The Duke Forest is laid out in six large patches across three counties, 7000 acres of controlled access, forest in perpetuity. The Blackwood section, in Chapel Hill, is studded by great towers spewing the extra carbon dioxide that the rest of us should expect to breathe sometime later this century. All the chunks are used for biological and forestry research. There are roads and trails spread out throughout the forest, but great stretches are inaccessible and closed to the public. I've wandered into more than one thicket in my GPS ventures, and never seen anything untoward. But what was I looking for? That moment when the GPS's distance-to-goal zeros out. Any number of eyes could have been glued on me, and I would not have noticed.

In fact, I usually feel watched when I'm searching for point zero. You might think that being observed makes me feel more alive, but I see it more as a collateral cost in my quest. I'm always entering someone else's space, and that just makes me more determined not to stop. It is a funny thing, a professional deformation, I guess. The virtual Orange County I ply for information day-to-day is exactly the county that I pace off -- why is one public record and the other eternally private space? I can see closing off buildings, and the legitimacy of "no hunting," and "keep your sightseeing butt off my land" signs. But why can't I ever touch the land that you've been deeded? Why can't I see what you're doing with those twenty some acres, unless I'm two hundred feet up in the air? There ought to be a right for public access, once a year maybe. A two-week notice period. A public process with the right of appeal. Make it stinking hard. But let me touch the clay, feel the bumps on the tree bark, hear the cicadas, and then get out. Make an honest man out of me.

Barry and I parted on (to me) surprisingly good terms. His perfect paranoid vision -- a conspiracy always just beyond his ability to unravel it -- was compelling in its own way. I was afraid that he talked lofty but would sell me out for another sensational story in the tabloid -- or maybe I was looking forward to the confabulation, I can't reliably say. We agreed to meet again, under circumstances more advantageous for sharing his evidence, though I assumed I wouldn't see anything until it was just a footnote -- neither convincing nor easily explained away -- in his published book.

Your mother didn't say anything about this incident, but I knew I would hear about it, someday, sometime. I looked at me, working through something in her head, but there were no visible signs on her face, except the one, the distanced, troubled look that I know so well.

I was not willing to betray my thoughts to her, not only because Doreen would doubtless assess Barry to be pond scum, but because Barry was my connection back to Barbara H. "Oh, I was there at the bog monster festival that afternoon. I saw you two," he said late in our conversation, when I was a bit tipsy and he was drunk on his presentation. "I saw the sparks fly." That was an obvious exaggeration to which he appended a smile, but he said, "I've gotten a profile myself. She drew the line at that, or I'd be getting them weekly."

"Really? So what did she find in your aura?"

"A lot of crap. She says I'm obsessed with excrement."

"You seem to be."

"I'm obsessed with getting the smell out of my nostrils. She, on the other hand, was just responding to things I had already told her."

"Do you believe there is an aura around living beings?"

"Don't be ridiculous. She's deluding herself for the sake of her marriage. Turns out, her husband actually believes it. I imagine he is psychotic and can't help himself. She squints and pretends, and charms her way to a clientele mostly of middle-aged men."

"Why is an aura so different from your phantom humanoids?"

"I don't think you need me to answer that. Let's just imagine I'm trying to sell you on life aura, and just incidentally she's the one marshalling evidence of a giant humanoid cover-up. Do you even give me the time of day?"

"Time of day, maybe," I said, and we dropped the subject. Barbara Hohenstauffen was both more and less attractive to me after that moment, and the thought of her created a vague sensation of guilt, especially when I sat next to Doreen at the dinner table but found myself returning to the festival field, perusing crystalline pyramids and bee wax suppositories. Doreen was staring at me as I got back to my dinner. I suppose she just thought I had checked out mentally, but she might have been afraid of those moments -- she obsesses on the fact that my mother, your grandmother, suffers from dementia. I wanted to say what I was thinking, but that could to an all too awkward silence or another proxy battle over you, Brett, though really over our own disappointment with each other, a difficult thing to get your mind around over a shared meal in a small common space. Much too small for such moments.

Barry delivered on a visit to the pseudonymous Bubby Frank's plot of land. It was not too far from the Blackwood section of Duke Forest, but hardly adjacent. Closer to the Maple Farms ice cream store. Still, it is not impossible to imagine a large creature slipping over fences and across arteries under the cover of night. Mr. Frank was not present when we drove up his driveway. There was a small house and a few grit-stained

trailers arrayed around a courtyard of sorts. The chicken coop was dilapidated but alive with chickens wandering around and in and out. That morning was dark and gray, threatening but unlikely to rain. Barry kept an eye out along the road and into the little forested stand to the opposite side, as if fairly certain that we would be joined by someone, whether by a surprised resident or a surprise visitor.

What was there to say? I still couldn't picture the bog monster emerging from the half acre forest to devastate the coop; it was simply too incongruous. I looked at Barry, expecting him to shrug.

"You can't sense it?" he asked.

"What? The bog monster's aura?"

"No, cretin," he said without emphasis, "the fact that something is missing?"

"How could I know whether anything is missing, except maybe the owner?"

"Dogs," he said.

"The bog monster ate the dogs?"

"No. This property has no dogs. Frank's got something against them."

I waited for the bombshell, but then said, "And? Any marauder would avoid a place with dogs loping about."

He swung around and said triumphantly, "That's right! -- Come on."

We approached the house. He stopped at the near side of the house. He pointed to a floodlight aimed out into the common area of the driveway. A small box hung below it, barely attached and half smashed. A movement sensor.

"No dogs, but lights. There's another one of these on the side of coop. It's busted, too."

"So somebody broke them. Bubby maybe."

"He had no reason to. He's not getting any fame out of this. He's staying out of the limelight. Me -- that story barely covered my expenses for the amount of time it took to research and write."

We stood there for a few minutes, awkwardly checking things out, moving in different directions. The place felt suddenly much quieter, even tranquil, like a beach after a storm. I wanted not to believe Barry at all, but it didn't smell like crap. Mud, wet leaves, chicken shit a little. Finally, Barry took me over to the coop and picked up a board from against the wall. A 4x1 plank that was broken at one end. In the middle were distinct scratches and indentations, as if a massive hand had pulled that plank to its breaking point.

"Hmmm," I said. I could see where several planks were new and out of character on the coop. "Still, that's not really evidence, either. -- What about foot prints?"

"You'd think," Barry said, still contemplating the board. "But the incident came just before a storm. The ground was as hard as cement during the incident."

"Any of that good forensic evidence? Hair? DNA?"

"Yes, you would think we'd find some hair, right?" he said. "But remember I said a storm, with a fair amount

of wind and rain. I found nothing when I came out to speak with Bubby."

"That's a lot of coincidence for why there's no evidence."

"Coincidence?" he repeated back to me. "You really believe that all of this could be coincidence?"

"Not necessarily," I said, but not sure how to answer. "So -- you're saying that the bog monster planned this?"

He smiled. "Either that, or I'm bullshitting you. Take your pick."

I grunted, not sure I wanted to say what I was feeling. After a few more minutes, we got back into the car. As we entered onto the highway, I said what was on my mind: "If Duke scientists are supposed to be looking after this creature, why is he out making trouble?"

Barry looked at me as if to say, finally. "Indeed," he said. "The most mind-bending part of this is that the creature can't know that it's being cared for. That would be the end of the experiment, a simultaneous end to the balancing act between its need for authentic existence and our desire for order."

I thought about that all the way to 3Cups, a local cafè; Barry was fascinated by alcohol culture -- breweries, wine shops, bars -- but preferred caffeination.

We were sitting and drinking before I spoke. "So the creature is a prisoner, but one that believes in its anonymity and freedom?"

"Voil," he said. "The perfect symbol for the society that holds it in its thrall."

I don't remember what else we said -- I kept coming back to this -- but after about 20 minutes Barry had his phone out and was making an appointment for my aura profile at PsychEnergy for the coming weekend. I remember him slumping a bit when Barbara's husband took the call, but the appointment was put on her schedule. "I'll be accompanying him," he said with a complete expression of freedom to do what he chose. I wasn't sure if he was looking to reconnect with her or to capture new information for his next article.

"All right, Barry," I said finally, after I told him I had to go. "Let's assume you're not just feeding me bullshit. We've got several more problems, foremost of which is the lineage. Are you saying that there is a whole family holed up in the Duke Forest? And even if there is, how do they propagate -- are they completely inbred, the mother with the son, and all that crap?"

"Sure," he said, "I wouldn't put it past them, under duress, to propagate that way. But they are not alone, John. There are confirmed sightings all around us, Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, the entire western portion of this state. These creatures are unusual only in their dogged loyalty to this place, this outpost."

"So -- they import a bride?"

"More likely," he said, "they sent their children off to find a new life in the mountains. I think we have our last generation here. The raid on the farmer fits the MO of your creature 50 years ago. That means either they pass on very specific behaviors, or we're dealing with the same bog monster. Either way, we have a responsibility to them."

"Wouldn't our responsibility be to leave them alone?"

"Sure," he said. "If they were truly free. Every sentient creature needs to know how free or unfree it is. Our responsibility is to freedom, not safety. Let them decide how safe they want to be, once they know the truth."

With that, he emptied his espresso cup with a single toss. Mumbling something under his breath about liberty», he nodded, stood and walked out, before I got another question out, or even made to stand up.

I remember the first time I used the GPS and went out into the field. It makes a pretty good story, actually. We were enjoying a quiet summer morning, the kind of overheated day that you avoid, no matter how much you claim to have mastered the humidity. Carol from the tax assessor's office was down our way with an inquiry about a piece of property. She always prefaced a work question with a dozen or so personal questions and a number of "oh don't get me started" stories about contractors or vice principals or grocery clerks or customer service operators. I grew curious when this went on longer than usual.

"So, Carol," I began, sputtering off into nothing.

"Hmm? Oh yes," she said, straightening up some. "I've got a case that doesn't make sense. As far as I can tell, the property owner stopped paying the taxes a number of years ago. We get a check every year from one of the local neighbors, so the taxes are paid up. But I wonder if maybe the owner passed away and we never heard anything."

"Why would the neighbor pay?" asked one of my colleagues.

"Well," Carol said, "this kind of thing could happen if the neighbor wants to use the land without outright purchasing it."

"Squatter?" I asked.

"After a manner of speaking, yes."

"So," my colleague said, "what do we do?"

"It's difficult," said Carol. "It's not a crime to pay someone else's taxes. We need a death certificate and a reason to believe that the neighbor is aware of the owner's death. Then we need to catch him or her in the act of extracting value from the land."

"Harvesting, in other words," I muttered.

"Yes. Usually they can argue that they are just preventing the property from becoming a nuisance, until such time as an owner makes him or herself known. There is a legal provision for an enterprising neighbor to assume ownership after a number of years. It's called adverse possession."

"That doesn't seem right," stated my coworker.

Carol shrugged as if to say, I don't make the laws around here, so don't get me started. After we looked up the records and located the plots, she wished us all a bless-ed morning and went back to her office.

I had enough other tasks that I didn't think further about the case until late afternoon. I don't know why, but my curiosity got the better of me; I had never been involved as participant or witness in a con of this kind. I disappeared from the office with some vague words about needing a break, after having raided the closet where some surveyor's equipment was kept. I thought I had picked up a GPS, but it could as easily have been a measuring laser of some kind. I checked the coordinates on the atlas in my car, found the route there from our offices in Hillsborough, and headed out.

I hadn't seen all that much of the county at that point, mostly the main arteries and the few towns. The country roads I followed now were all in fine shape, lined by fields, forests, and occasional collections of smaller

home site lots. But you could see the disparity carved by the flow of money in our society: palpable poverty, not in exposed ribs and distended bellies like the late-night charity commercials, but in worn roofs, and in faded and half leaning walls. Cars in the front yard. Cars that don't run, wheel-less on bricks. A solitary figures walking from the local gas station and convenience store, with a bottle in a brown bag. Down the road, a three-story brick McMansion with a hobbyist farm around it. Around the next curve, a card table underneath a beach umbrella, with locally grown tomatoes cooking in the afternoon heat. "Leave money in the jar."

I pulled to the side of road at the location. A young but wilting tobacco crop was laid out in tight, neat rows. Beyond that, just as the satellite photo showed, a stand of spindly, mostly pine trees, looking about twenty years old, blocked my view of a pond and behind that a turn-around at the end of a driveway. The driveway, we'd found out, ran through the scamming neighbor's property under an historic easement.

I grabbed the GPS and the surveyor's vest, and headed for the heart of the property. I skirted the tobacco rows. The sun was behind a thickening afternoon haze, but the heat was unrelenting and I found myself sweating droplets down my forehead and in streaks down my back. I was grateful for the shade of the pine trees, although the cool breeze I'd imagined was nowhere to be found. Even the faintest breeze was like a whoosh from an oven. I wasn't quite yet asking myself what in the world I hoped to gain, but I did wish I had found another day to become a practical man.

The pond at the end of the property was little more than a swamp, with no outlet. Luminescent green, half empty, thick with scum. I thought it would smell awful, but the air was still enough that I circumnavigated it fine. At the other end there was a small cabin, next to a lifeless graveled site where manifestly a trailer had stood. "Cabin" was saying too much -- it was the size of a backyard storage shed, although with windows. The perfect for- show homestead.

A digital camera would have been smart, but I realized why I had come. Not to capture the place or the moment: I wanted to see it for myself, to exchange the physics-free expansiveness of the GIS system for an experienced moment in time and space. It hadn't really mattered that some petty farmer had figured out how to manipulate the system.

I walked up the driveway to get a view of the farmer's place, but stopped when I saw what looked like a confederate flag, barely fluttering on a sizeable flagpole. There was a pickup truck, too. Confederate battle flag stickers, carefully symmetric and brand new, gleamed on either side of the pickup's tailgate.

I turned around and hiked back to my car. The drive back to the office gave me a short moment of joy for having seen the secret of the place, but then a kind of sadness. It felt like a hard-wrought wisdom, born from the veniality of the world, but it was more my inability to bring my concentration back to my own little world. I don't know if you have ever felt that way, Brett, where your perspective suddenly broadens and you feel as if you can see further than your own experience, than your own eyes should allow you to. It's an illusion, but a powerful one. I was hooked.

The next time came after hours, and by chance. I was driving home and there was an accident along highway 86, so like others I ducked onto Mt. Sinai Road to get around it. At Turkey Farm Road, I took a right, and realized only after having crossed a single-lane bridge that I had scouted that location during an idle moment just after lunch. I pulled over and turned around, parked near the bridge. The site extended off to the right from the bridge. I had kept the equipment (I've got my own GPS now, by the way) in my trunk, waiting for the right opportunity to return it -- where sudden reappearance was likely to stand out more than disappearance -- so I grabbed it. This time my heart was racing, because I knew the property to be occupied, and because at the heart of it was a building in the woods, invisible to the satellites but on our plans.

I worked my way alongside the creek, afraid I might have to splash through it if I were spotted. I could see the house through the trees, but the outbuilding was invisible: maybe it had been demolished, just a digital

remnant of an earlier time? I wished I had looked up the permits on it. I moved up from the creek to where it had to be. I was almost on top of it when I recognized that the small knob in front of me was an earthen building, like a half-buried bomb shelter. I moved around to the front, saw only a rusty steel door with a lock or handle covered by a little box that itself was fastened by a Masterlock. There was no path back to the house, or just the vaguest outlines of one. What rested in that building? I pictured coming back in the black of a new-moon midnight, with night-vision goggles and a sledgehammer, and uncovering a mausoleum of cracked skulls and the possessions of the murdered. The lights go on in the house, and I've got one chance to escape across the creek. Dogs get my scent at the site of the break-in, and come after me in a hard run. I've got a pistol but nothing that would stop a pack. What then? What then?

I left, sobered by the possibilities, even if they were no more likely than laying down on the shelter and getting hit by lightning. I gave Doreen a big hug when I got home, and she wondered what had gotten over me. Later that night, lying on our bed, I resolved to surprise myself as often as I could, to follow these unwritten stories all the way to ground, wherever they might lead.

The young man was surprised when he said to himself: I just had a conversation in bug speak. The progression had been slow -- imperceptible at first -- but with weeks and months his comprehension had grown so that he was able to understand simple constructions and say a few coherent things with his artificial set of clicks and vocalizations. He had to admit that the bug followed his bug speak much better than he did its human speech. Perhaps clicks are easier to approximate than the subtleties of the human voice box; more likely, though, the bug was better equipped through disposition and education to learn a xeno-construction of its own language.

The bug said something like: Are you ready to begin?

Derek: Yes, mostly.

Bug: Would you like to do something new?

Derek: Yes, that would be nice.

Bug: Good, today we won't practice new expressions.

Derek: What will we do?

Bug: We should talk.

Derek: What will we talk about?

Bug: Shall we talk about you?

Derek: What do you want to know about me?

Bug: You know that you are on a new world?

Derek: You made that clear a long time ago.

Bug: Do you want to know more about your new world?

Derek: Mostly.

Bug: Do you want to know what we want to know from you?

Derek: Mostly.

Bug: First ask me a question.

He thought for a while, the kind of pause that occurs in a deep heartfelt argument -- here, though not in anger, no less so.

Derek: Why are you keeping me in this room?

Bug: Who has said that we are keeping you here?

A flush went over his face and a wave of adrenaline through his body. Of course, no one had tried to stop him from exiting, nor had he ever made the effort to do so, at least since their meetings had begun. First thing learned for the morning.

Bug: We want to understand from you about your world.

Derek: You have the moving images. Why do you need me?

Bug: We need, no, we want to understand through questions and your answers.

Derek: You took me from "earth." (He spoke the last word.)

Bug: It was not right. We do not take intelligent creatures from their worlds any more. That mission left thousands of years ago.

Derek: I am alone.

Bug: You are not alone. This is an interesting world. I am here to help you.

Derek said: "Thank you." He thanked the bug for more than its sentiment.

The bug seemed to recognize the emotional response, and caused the projector to engage. It was a scene from his first days, when he said: "Except that I don't believe you're real." The bug asked why.

Derek, with some hesitation: I'm not sure that I am here. I may be back on earth, "in a hospital, sick."

Bug clicked too complexly, or in a different dialect, to its hidden colleagues; Derek didn't understand a single click. A pause ensued.

Bug: I understand. That is your brain protecting you. That is good.

Derek: "Am I sick?"

Bug: No, you are a guest in our world. Later, you can come with me.

The bug exited, and Derek collapsed into a cross-legged sitting position. He hyperventilated for a few minutes, before holding his breath to stop the cycle, then was able to look at the hidden door and wait.

Derek spent many hours watching the bug in front of him. The bug had nothing to say about his staring since it wasn't using its eyes on him. The antennae, he learned, gave only an approximate view of the world, but had advantages: they were unaffected by heat waves (a problem beyond a relatively short distance, given the heat



and density of the air), lack of light, or which way the bug's happened to be oriented in a room. They processed their sensory information -- microwaves, what we call radar -- from all directions all along their length. A great richness of information, although at a lower density than a hairy predator's eyes.

The bugs differentiated fundamentally between creatures with hair or fur like Derek, and a leathery species like themselves. Apparently, the high metabolism implied by thinner-skinned biologies led to flightier, less predictable behavior in the individuals. Difficult to manage, difficult to maintain. The ball routine, he was told somewhere along the way, was designed to establish whether the individual was capable of dealing with a strange and threatening world. Derek's irrational response was paradoxically the right one -- if he had retreated to the corner in fear, he would never have been coaxed out of it.

The bug creatures were covered by a thick leather. The leather's thickness could be inferred from the edges of their concave backs, varying from maybe an inch on his teacher's back to two or three inches on the largest bug he had seen. The surface of the leather was gray tending toward brown. The saliva of the bug creature had an oil in it that, applied to the leather surface, gave it a sheen and protective layer. He once watched the bug collect a spittle ball in its little black hand and then launch it onto its back. The larger limbs bent back and spread the brownish liquid around its back and down on its sides. There was a musky smell to it.

The black downward-directed bug eyes were an evolutionary gift, but the tiny arms beside the bug face and the grand antennae were civilizational achievements. If Derek understood properly, the arms had been encoded into the creature's genetic inheritance many generations ago. The antennae were electro-mechanical enhancements that each bug was given as a very small creature, so that its brain became entwined with the electrical contacts. The antennae themselves could be and were upgraded throughout life.

They were a distasteful species for his mammalian sensibilities, but he could imagine the impression he made. They understood that he had different notions and needs for cleanliness, but their own habits made them inattentive to his bathing needs. His underarms did not smell as he thought they should -- earthen bacteria were no doubt eliminated long before the bugs ever joined him in a room -- but his body became slippery here and crusty there, his hair matted and disjointed. His skin was reddish and raw all the time from the heat and humidity, and he had to remove the exoskeleton frequently to rub sore spots and give them a rest.

The bugs were, of course, well adapted to this place. Their arms were incredibly strong, keeping the thick body afloat despite the massive gravity; they seemed to be able to lock joints even at less than full extension. The midday uptick in the room's heat made their leather glisten as the oils loosened up. If they were too warm at any point, they did not show it.

The antennae fascinated Derek. Waves rolled up and down the antennae, sometimes in unison and sometimes slightly out of step, an elegant technique that allowed the bugs to gain more definition by enhancing the Doppler effect. The bugs were conscious of the antennae's waviness, but only marginally, since they could not detect the movement of others' antennae and they perceived their own only as pulses of clarity. Armed with his keen eyes, Derek saw another kind of meaning. The antennae reflected patterns depending on that individual's circumstances. When the teacher was distracted, its antennae waved out of phase with each other. Derek thought they betrayed emotional state and tried to confirm, but the bug teacher just seemed confused when he pointed at the antennae and said something like, "their waving speaks to me."

Derek still thought "it," but in the course of their exchanges about humans, gender, and sexual reproduction, the bug teacher had let him know that it was a female. Other than size -- the teacher confirmed that males were larger -- Derek could discern no difference. While asking questions about the diagram of human sexuality floating in a projected image, the bug teacher explained that bugs were androgynous until puberty, at which time the sexual organ at their tail ends migrated upward (female) or downward (male), depending on population-survival needs or, in modern society, the deep-felt druthers of the bug. While the bugs did not wear clothes, they did cover both organ locations regardless of their choice. Sexual union was a somewhat

gymnastic event where the male maneuvered over the female and they attached briefly. Mammalian ecstasy was alien to the process, at least as far as a sex education clip could show.

He thought "it," but he had grown used to her presence, grown accustomed to her manner in the room, found the rhythm of her antennae soothing. When other bugs joined them, he was not at ease, for however much he understood that they were always watching, just outside.

Bug speak was an education. Derek had taken some Spanish, and understood that words were arbitrary sounds for ideas, that a language had plenty of non-sensical rules arising from centuries-old accretions. Strong verbs? To what end? But nothing in his experience prepared him for this language. Not that it was intricate: it had been stripped of its non-sensicality, apparently thousands of years prior, so that there were precious few rules to learn beyond vocabulary and word types. Sentence structure came across as consistent and logical, a natural and even aesthetically pleasing framework. But the structure was fundamentally unearthly.

The object of the sentence was always at the core. An action upon the object was prepended to the object like a verbal phrase: "the thrown ball" or "the to-be-thrown ball." What we understand as the subject of a sentence -- the actor -- was found only in the passive construction: "the by me thrown ball." The sentence could be varied and extended from there in different ways, but within the limits of a sensibility that put the object at the end of a short sentence, or in the middle of a lengthier one: "the by me expertly thrown ball working its way to you, hitting with a loud thud."

Derek did not notice the significance for quite a while. The "See Jane run" sentences that he learned at first did not seem different from our own, despite the lack of inflection on the verb, with a slight hook to the number of the object ("thrown" gets an additional thwack, depending on its final sound, if it is followed by balls instead of ball; this was subtle and didn't concern him). But when he tried to ask why not I throw / he throws, the bug teacher explained that where English centers around "vrrrks" (verbs) bug speak is predicated on "sdddds" (things). His teacher: You see a universe of actions; we see one of things.

Derek had shrugged at the time. But sitting with his eyes glued on the wall before him he felt keenly how different the world was for the bugs and him. The linguistic differences were not by chance. Earth mammals were creatures of precipitous action, impulse, rapid mental feedback loops (both good and bad). The bugs -- unfairly, maybe -- he saw as slow moving but deadly effective and efficient chameleons, their projectile tongues now replaced by a technological prowess that he could only guess at. Beyond this room, was he just prey? An object? A zoo animal or pet?

He could not lose the nagging thought still that through this wall was a portal to either madness or release. He knew he would have to take those steps soon. He just hoped he would not take them alone.

When the door opened that afternoon, no one entered. This is my cue, he thought. A vehicle slid in, like a plastic disc gliding on ice, only shaped more like a motorbike frame floating on air. He recognized that this was a human-friendly version of the floating discs he had seen bugs riding. He stood up and lifted his leg over the device, leaned forward and settled in. There were resting spots for both his knees/shins and his elbows/forearms. Controls were nestled where his hands came to rest. He moved a joystick on the right and a small lever on the left, with x-y and z axial movement respectively. With a single puff of unchecked forward acceleration, he floated out the opening into the darkness. It was immediately illuminated in a black light emanating from his vehicle's single headlight.

The space was otherwise mostly dark, with deep red hues at specific locations. He guessed that his eyes and the bugs were not on the exact same frequencies, and that his bike's light was probably designed to leave the natives undisturbed. Bugs were scattered throughout an unexpectedly tall cavern hewn from beige-reddish rock, some at the red-glowing spots, others floating at various altitudes. With some awkwardness Derek caused his vehicle to rotate 180 *and he could see a metallic structure atop the large, weakly glowing box that*

*had been his home for so many months. The structure had pipes and hoses of all sizes coming and going, with silvery boxes and illuminated electronics. No different than a containment device in a lab.*

*He rotated again, hoping to see his teacher. If she was there, he could not pick her out. No bug made an effort to stand out or indicate to him that he was expected. The disappointment rose, even as he realized that he was being tested again, measured, evaluated, judged. This was his chance to jump off the bike and go back into the illuminated box. He cursed under his breath and manipulated the controls. He assumed the exit from the chamber would be at the still dark far end, and so he worked his way there. When his eyes adjusted more, he could tell that there was no exit there, just more wall. When he glided up to it, he stared for a while at the rock (with a small bump against it), and decided that the rough surface was carefully cultivated to look that way. If it was really rock or something else, he wasn't sure.*

*He rose up to the ceiling, didn't find an exit there either. Maybe it was hidden, as his wall door had been. He lowered his vehicle and approached the door to his own chamber. Two of the floating bugs who had seemed so indifferent to his presence now moved suddenly out of his way, as if he were exuding an invisible force field -- perhaps that was a feature of these vehicles. The now closed door had no obvious markings from the outside. Perhaps there were markings in a range of light invisible to him, or perhaps the controls were manipulated by radar.*

*He felt around his controls for any additional ones. Then he looked down at the area beneath his torso, where the gas tank would be. He brought an arm around and put his hand into what became a mesh dissolving in his fingers. Beneath the mesh he felt various small items. One stood out: glass frames. He brought these up and placed them on his nose and ears, and looked around. Nothing different. He felt around the frame for an on-switch, but then realized that these were designed not simply to rest on his face. He gave it a push backwards and could feel pinpricks above his ears, into the bridge of his nose, and something slithering onto his eyes, which reflexively made to close but could not. A quick shock on his eyes made him twitch. Then he saw an image like the invisible projector unfold before his eyes, and he could see the room in overlay: mostly still the visible, but now also laid out in sparkly low-res with outlined shapes, markers and all sorts of information about the bugs around him, in alien symbology.*

*Whatever was covering his eyes kept them moist, but his lids were going crazy. He decided he had to get the glasses off, but he tried first to scan the walls for the door and opener. Nothing stood out. Just before his fingers reached the frame, he realized that a set of information followed his eyes as they scanned, and the information seemed to change as he reached into his field of view. He was able to use his hand to manipulate that information -- he moved his fingers until something happened. He thought his tenders must be suppressing undesired effects; he saw a door open in the floor of the chamber, and floating arrow shapes pointed him in that direction. He decided he could keep the glasses on for a while longer.*

*He eased his vehicle down toward the opening. It seemed like a swift body of water was below, with occasional glimmers and shapes gliding by. He looked around; nothing had changed in this chamber. He threw the lever down and descended with a lurch.*

*Sudden acceleration caught him off guard, caused him to lean and the vehicle to careen to the right. An enormous invisible balloon collided with him and sent his vehicle off in the other direction, as a stream of bugs passed by on his right. He almost fell off his vehicle, downward to he knew not where, but he was able to balance himself again. Even though the passage way was dark, his glasses outlined enough detail to show him that he was in a multi-laned, multi-leveled stream of personal vehicles -- all bug driven, as far as he could see. The stream was differential, faster in the middle and slower as you moved outward. At the edges there seemed to be a merging area where speeds were almost nil; his precipitous descent had moved him right through the merge zone. He figured, based on parked bugs, that his speed was now approaching 50 mph; the bugs in the middle area seemed at least twice as fast. There was no head wind, leaving an eerie silence, with odd empty tones like echoes coming from the walls, whose sources he couldn't place.*

*When he felt comfortable with his place in the stream, he tried to figure out his next step using his headset. The speed and maybe location seemed to be indicated in some rapidly changing and flashing figures, but he still had no useful understanding. He put his hand out and tried to manipulate the items that had worked to open the door. They bolded and flashed as he would have expected, but nothing indicated a success of any kind. Nothing like a map.*

*After accepting that he was hopelessly lost and helpless, he shouted (in Bug) to the stream: Click-Cluck, your needed help! Nothing happened again. He waited another five minutes, then shouted again. Another three. Another two. One. Finally he was shouting as loud and as fast as he could.*

*After ten minutes, he stopped speaking. The passageway seemed to trail off into infinity, and he resigned himself to ride it the whole way. He tried to relax as much as he could without risking another accident.*

*Another twenty-some minutes passed. A voice came at him from in front of the motorbike, always just ahead, Click-Cluck's voice: Where are you, Derek (D-rrr-kkh)?*

*Derek: I don't know. (That unknown fact.) "I'm on the motorbike in a highway somewhere."*

*Click-Cluck: "Bike with motor," that is what you have?*

*Derek: Yes, it was brought to my room.*

*Click-Cluck: You must get off the "highway."*

*Derek: How?*

*Click-Cluck: Go to the edge. I will find you.*

*Derek maneuvered up, felt himself slow, watched as the bug streams flowed around him and finally beneath him. Eventually, he was studying the rock-like surface above him, in feigned interest, to keep from watching the dizzying stream. Another several minutes passed, and he was bumped from behind. It was not Click-Cluck, and he wanted to turn his vehicle around to bump back. But then: Derek, go with Clum-Clum-Tock. The bug moved ahead and guided him back into the artery.*

*Barry picked me up at my house. I was willed to dissuade him, but he convinced me that this was the most convenient course of action and indirectly that I was being duplicitous or elitist or just a lousy friend if I asked him not to. He rang the doorbell and though I was standing at the door, your mother came to see who was there. Barry leaned in past me and introduced himself to her. There was an awkward moment when he paused to let Doreen say something about hearing so much about him, while she looked at me with a mixture of suspicion and bemusement. "Oh really?" she said to what Barry continued with, some self-serving statement about the fourth estate and freedom of speech. Not a word about tabloids, thankfully.*

*Doreen and Barry somehow conspired to get us into seats in the living room. They talked a bit about a mutual interest in educating the masses; I waited for the word "monster" to drop. Instead they started discussing industrial-age philosophers.*

*"It certainly is refreshing," Barry said, "to find someone with your interests."*

*Doreen glanced at me with that same bemused expression. "I'm sure you've met all sorts of people who know much more than I." But she smiled at him, in thanks for the sentiment.*

*"I will never understand," he said ponderously, "what passes for wisdom in this university town."*

*I jumped in: "Quoting Steely Dan?"*

*He looked at me as at an unruly pet you have to curb. I decided not to decode that Naked Lunch referent; Doreen had a half distracted look and was probably trying to place the line.*

*"We may rest assured," quoth Barry, "that mankind will either believe they know not wherefore, or will not know what to believe. Few are those who ever attain to that state of rational and independent conviction which true knowledge can produce out of the midst of doubt."*

*"Emerson?" asked Doreen.*

*"De Tocqueville. From Emerson we have: 'Society is always taken by surprise at any new example of common sense.'"*

*Doreen cleared her throat and recited: "Ess gheebt kinah ricktigus layben im fallshen."*

*Barry: "Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia. There is no proper life in a false one."*

*Now, mind you, Brett, you've got to recognize this kind of exchange for the parlor game it is. Some people have a stomach, a gout, for it, some don't. I was ready to smack Barry at the back of the head, afraid we'd miss my appointment, afraid the monster would make its conversational appearance, or maybe afraid that they would start talking about me through their quotations.*

*They managed another round of harmless syntagms, but Doreen began to flag and Barry gracefully led us back to the door. She mentioned needing to finish something up, and left us there. Barry smiled at me in a conspiratorial way but didn't say a word. We got into his car and headed off to Pittsboro.*

*"Your bog monster," Barry said of a sudden, "is a perfect expression of Romanticism. Think of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein."*

*I let out my usual "what?" and had no further retort.*

*As he raced down Fordham Blvd., Barry continued: "Goethe himself penned a poem about a vampire. The German Romantics, notably the researchers you know as the Brothers Grimm, were engaged in nothing if not pinpointing what we're all afraid of."*

*"I've never read that Bigfoot fairytale in their book."*

*"Think about the giants."*

*"That's a stretch. Besides, nobody I know has sleepless nights because of the bog monster."*

*"No, of course not," Barry said, sounding like a parent who has just realized how long their car trip could drag on. "It's not the fears that we can name; it's the nameless fears. The bog monster is a name, a cipher for what remains unnamed."*

*"So -- you're saying you don't believe after all? It's just the boogeyman?"*

*"Who says our fears aren't real?"*

*"You're the one who started with fairytales."*

*Barry accelerated around a corner and I felt myself compress against the door and wished I had locked it. It seemed a bit silly to lean over to do so now.*

*"The study of folklore and fairytales is about extracting the truth from projections. Lies and prevarications have their own relationship to the truth; nothing is meaningless."*

*I adjusted myself in my seat and looked out the window. "Pretty profound for a tabloid reporter."*

*"Au-ouch," he said, sounding hurt. "I suppose everything you do betters humankind. I know you work for the public good, but seriously. How much of what you do is feeding the beast -- bettering the system that collects taxes so that you can collect more taxes, so that you can better the system?"*

*"Right," I said.*

*We drove on in silence. It took about 15 minutes to enter Pittsboro. Barry maneuvered us through a few intersections onto ever smaller arteries. This being Chatham County, I had no idea where we were. The house was nondescript, a two-story steep roofed box with deep red brick accents, but did have something like a gravel parking lot in the front. A small colorful hand-painted sign announced their business and highlighted the proprietors.*

*We rang the bell and Barbara appeared at the door, dressed in a simple frock with an apron over it. "Hello, Barry," she said formally. "Welcome, Bog Monster -- "*

*"I think," Barry jumped in, "you'll find that his name is John."*

*"John, Bog Monster of Chapel Hill, welcome." Barbara smiled -- I think you must know and sympathize, Brett, when I say that it felt like a kind of sunshine, a generic affirmation and declaration, from her to me, without any reason or reason to believe it -- but, still, a smile that felt like a lifetime transaction, taking place in a moment.*

*She smiled with wide, prominent lips against not perfectly white but straight and somewhat oversized teeth. Her smile was matched in its unmeasured ease with her hair, a bit too unkempt and unbrushed, but with some gray highlights and its own balance against her big brown eyes and deep white freckled skin. Her eyes were subtly outlined by mascara, but otherwise her face was unmade, a contrast that made her eyes seem all the larger, the gaze all the more penetrating. A few glittery strands of narrow ribbon in her hair lay just out of focus, a peripheral tease.*

*Barbara pushed her screen door wide open and Barry took it. I followed her in. We went into a living room that was reconfigured as a small retail outlet, with all the booth items plus a small bookstore and a health food corner. When Barry came in, she said: "Barry, you can stay here or there." She pointed to a small antechamber on the other side of the entranceway, with bookshelves, a couple chairs and a small coffee table with magazines. She used her index finger to gesture to me to follow her, which seemed clichéd but not without a bit of old-school charm, meant to separate me from whatever presumption Barry rode in on.*

*I followed her through another room that had a couch and a closed entertainment center cabinet -- an overlap of commercial and private lives that was minimized through a wall full of paintings and wall hangings. We then entered a room that had two small roll-top desks, a couch and two wooden chairs facing each other. The windows were well shaded in white and deep red, and the furniture for the most part had a heavy, old-world feel. Candles -- tall, fat and small votive varieties -- covered the horizontal surfaces, but the room was mostly lit by two upward-facing halogen lamps placed in opposite corners. They cast heavy shadows throughout the room and yet made it seem taller, more substantial.*

*"I'll be just a moment," she said. She looked over her shoulder to smile at me, and then she went through another door.*

*I felt it immediately, as soon as she shut the door: I was not alone in that room. There was Doreen in the corner, no longer bemused, but still graciously willed to allow me to play out the line for my noose. Though I could counter that this whole thing was innocent -- the very definition of it through its naïve spiritualism -- Doreen shook her head, not for a moment willing to acknowledge the pretext. The girl, she said. Hey, I replied, she -- She nothing! You and your projections, she replied. She is getting paid, that's all. The fact that she chooses to lead you on with this little-lost-girl-as-spiritual-medium routine doesn't speak well for her, but certainly does not unburden you. -- Hey, I answered, you act all innocent, but --*

*She did not take the bait. This was the point at which she always became mum, both in life and in my internal dialogs. She saw where I was going, to a challenge and a question that she had resolved never to answer, never to broach.*

*Brett, I think you're old enough to understand, and you may even empathize, how it happens that two people can face each other over a question that has become an impossible set of words, excised from speech like a blasphemy, equally made meaningless by the conventional wisdom of day-to-day living, but always threatening to burst forth like a gash in reality that, once heard and believed, would never heal. The impossible words: "Have you been unfaithful?"*

*Sure, there are formalistic answers like "that depends on the definition of been." But outside a sympathetic court of law no one can hang their defense on so flimsy a reed, especially when your interlocutor is prosecutor, witness and judge all in one. There are answers that are conditional -- "I wanted to, I would have" -- but they are the special case, deserving of appellate reflection and careful reasoning. The majority of cases are open and shut. There are many denials, and sometimes the court falls short of justice for the lack of evidence. In our case the DA chose not to prosecute. The witness had to live with the stories untold; the judge could not make findings of fact or rule on mitigating factors. Unsatisfactory all around, not least for the accused.*

*I know Doreen would have liked nothing more than to unburden herself. I don't know how it began, or how it ended. I can remember the day I first told myself that something was going on, and I can remember the day we cried together over I knew not what. It was no more than a couple months. There was so much going on that year that we never talked about, even after we were reconciled in ways that both of us recognized as such. She steered us away from conversation where normally she would insist that we talk -- damning evidence -- but I could tell that it hurt her to do so. Some years before at a dinner party, a group of us had discussed cheating, and she had articulated the psychosocial reasons why confessing served no one. "I would never confess," she concluded, "that would be my punishment."*

*Now, mind you, the main justification for not telling me is that I could not forgive her. And yet I am to forgive that she does not tell me? Somehow that seems like a mistaken kindness and at such a juncture a too great price. I know the assumption is that the deceived partner does not know and that what he or she does not know cannot harm their relationship. But exactly that fails the test of reasonability. We're very few of us sociopaths -- none of the rest lies so well and hides frustration, disappointment and distraction so completely that the idea is beyond comprehension and therefore speculation.*

*Yes, Brett, I am speculating. But only because I never chose to collect the evidence and because Doreen never confessed. The details are all that she kept from me.*

*She waited for Barbara's return, not at all bemused but still defiant. The wait was a bit too long, as if Barbara had chosen to finish a chore with this opportunity, but when she returned she was all sunshine and ready to go. She had changed into a flowing skirt and loose muslin top with a camisole outlined beneath. She had tied*

*her hair back with a red bandana. In her hands were a small handwritten book and a digital recorder.*

*"All right, John," she said, and I realized it was the first time I hadn't heard something of a taunt in her voice. She motioned me into one of the wooden chairs, and she sat in the other. She started the recorder and opened the book and wrote a few words. Then she held out her right hand. "Remind me who you are."*

*I sat motionless until it hit me that she wanted my palm, and I leaned forward so that she could pull it back to her. She eyed it from a distance. "You are a strong individual," she said, seemingly to herself, "but it is easy to miss that -- I can see it in your lifeline. You may be misunderstood, most of all, by those who love you, because they see the side of you that is most apt to question itself.... And look, the bog monster has its own line." She smiled at me, and lifted my hand up before my face. She scooted forward and reached around the palm with two fingers. She deftly felt for lines on my hand and stopped with her fingers at either end of a crease in my palm. "This line isn't supposed to be, or if it is, it should be connected with that line. Do you see it?" I said yes. "This line indicates a great division in a life -- dueling personalities, or a great shock and disappointment."*

*She put my hand down, and started to do stretches with her neck and shoulders. "All right, it's time to relax. Do whatever it is that you might do to relax in a chair." She saw my mouth begin to move, and anticipated: "Except slouch."*

*I guffawed just for an instant, because that is exactly what I was going to say. Maybe it's a universal joke, but that affected me. I did some neck stretches myself.*

*"John, I need to hold your hands but I need you to keep your hands loose when I do. I will look into your eyes -- stare intently into your eyes -- but you can blink as much as you want, and if you find it strange or awkward, please feel free to look away. Okay?"*

*She took up my hands in hers, and I tried to keep my arms and hands as loose as possible, probably not what she meant (they can weigh a great deal) but she didn't say a word.*

*Her eyes moved from one of my eyes to the other, as if looking for an affirmation or confirmation, but she was looking for something else, something behind my eyes and expression. After a short while, it was obvious that she wasn't seeing me see her at all. This went on for three minutes, although it felt like an unbelievable amount of time to be that close, silent and in each other's face.*

*"John?" she asked, as if I had been hypnotized and gone deep into myself.*

*"Yes," I said, hoarsely and quietly, and it did feel a bit disembodied.*

*"I want you to concentrate on something. It helps me when I try to sense your aura."*

*"Sure," I said, a concession that she sensed. She didn't reply. Then I added: "I would be happy to."*

*"Concentrate on your earliest love."*

*We were still eye-to-eye -- she must have seen my disbelieving reaction, but she didn't let on.*

*"Okay," I said, when I could say it with some conviction.*

*"Your earliest love. What she or he looked like, what you did, how you felt."*

*"All right." After a few moments, I settled on the memory that I would call up, and I felt an urge to close my*



*eyes, but the image cleared my vision regardless. Then Barbara gave my hands a little squeeze and slowly let them down to rest on my legs. She held hers up as if she wanted to catch a three-foot beach ball. Nothing else changed.*

*Brett, here's the memory. Let's call it the red shoe incident. I can see myself in gym class. Back in the day, we would go to large locker rooms and change into our gym clothes, so I was dressed in shorts, tee shirt and converse basketball high-tops. Our gym teacher was stereotypical, a coach in spirit but a self-satisfied time-server who had moved into mental cruise control years before. This was "country dancing" week, which brought the boys and the girls together. The girls' gym teacher took the lead. All right, she was saying, we're going to practice dancing with a partner. I want all the girls to take a shoe off and put it in the middle of the gym. The boys will get a shoe from the middle, then find their partner.*

*The process of putting shoes in the middle lasted two minutes, plenty of time for the boys to strategize. You wanted to be with a partner who was attractive, maybe not so much because you cared who was on the other end of a dosado but because you didn't want to see the other joe smiling at you with a sense of superiority. It didn't take long for everyone to see the prime strategy: there in the middle of sixty or seventy white, blue and black shoes was a single red shoe. The shoe belonged to Amy. She was attractive and smart, and a charmer in her own way, though not the beauty of the class, or the girl you'd pick out to gloat over. But she was well liked, and so much above the average "claim" that that red shoe shone like a beacon to all our eyes.*

*Go, the teacher said. Instantly there was a pile-on in the middle of the room. I have no recollection of who came away with the shoe. What I remember -- what I can see today as if I stand there -- is not moving and looking over at Amy, seeing her blush when someone emerged victorious with her shoe. She looked wide-eyed at her friends, and put her hand to her mouth in sudden realization of what was happening for the cause of her shoe. I waited for her to show more shock from how this replicated the superficial relationships of our material and success-oriented society, but she was more than just a little bit pleased by it all.*

*There I am, looking at her and realizing that I want what everyone else wants, but not because of the red shoe in the middle of the floor. I want to be with her because of who she is. I wish I could shout it but I'm shut inside myself.*

*I don't know her all that well. Or rather I do, as much as I know myself, as much as I understand why I do anything. I like to tease her when we talk -- there's no surer sign of a boy's interest -- and she is suitably demure and quick with an inviting repartee....*

*I can feel the melancholy that was so common to me back then, while I walk to the middle to grab one of the leftover shoes (hopefully not too many sizes larger than those that went first). I lean over and grab a shoe, and wander among the girls who have been unclaimed so far. My mind aches with a deep encompassing sadness, but even more so with longing for a new balance. My sense of importance, a sense that comes from knowing you see the world more clearly than the crowd, doesn't begin to stop the pain. I walk by Amy, kneeling to tie her shoe, and proximity and distance seem like a magic formula that I cannot unravel from inside my own mind. If I could just reach out and touch her hand, I know I could ground the equation and understand.*

*Derek awoke. The room was utterly dark, until he was able to find his glasses. Several areas were lit up with bug information, but he couldn't tell much about them. He was lying on a perfectly round bed; when he stretched his legs, they extended off by two feet. The ceiling was about 4 feet. He was in his exoskeleton, still powered. Slowly, the day before was coming back to him: the decisions, the panic, the guide, the reuniting, a long slow conversation in which he realized how little he understood about bug world. He remembered slowly fading under Click-Cluck's explanations, and she finally directed him to this room. He had no idea what time it was -- he still didn't know much more about what time meant for them.*

*He understood enough to know that light, visible light, was more the exception than the rule. Eventually, using the glasses' sensors, he was able to locate the door he had entered, and he crawled out. The common space beyond the door was about 8 feet high, so he was able to stand up. He did a full body stretch and yawned. That's when he noticed Clum-Clum-Tock in the corner, perhaps asleep, but probably there on guard duty. Derek sat down cross-legged and rubbed his face while considering where he was.*

*You made a mistake, Click-Cluck had told him. You were meant to panic and hurt yourself. -- You need to understand that you are not without enemies.*

*Enemies? Derek needed the word explained, and some examples from earth history sufficed. But why? What have I done?*

*Click-Cluck seemed disturbed by this innocence. Not what you have done -- who you are. I need to provide context. For the moment, consider that our civilization is old, very old by earth measures, but that even a stable, long-lived civilization such as ours undergoes changes. Where galactic exploration was once one of our crowning achievements, we are now not much interested in the knowledge that such exploration brings. In fact, there are those who oppose the presence of exo-species: not so much because it is wrong to take specimens or because they are afraid of biological contamination; they fear the cultural influence. They would have all evidence of other biospheres kept locked up, and they would destroy all living evidence.*

*I am living evidence? Derek asked, to make sure he understood. Then: what other living evidence do you have?*

*We will discuss that at another time, said Click-Cluck.*

*All right, thought Derek, then the natural question: "Am I going to be killed?"*

*No, it is not our way to kill other living creatures -- unless extensive procedures are followed. You are safe, I think, from anyone but yourself. Consider the charged ball. You were supposed to flee the ball and cower in the corner of your room until the fear and lack of stimulation made your warm-blooded brain go crazy. We've seen it happen many times over in similar species. Yesterday's test was designed to make you go over the edge and do something that would either injure you, or make you distrust us. If you were content to stay in your room, no one would bother with you. But when you claim your rights as a sentient being, you become a problem for the exophobes.*

*Why did you let them do that to me?*

*It was carefully orchestrated; we had no knowledge... It would be foolish to imagine that in the future you won't find yourself in a similar situation. You will have to save yourself again.*

*I didn't save myself this time. You did.*

*You seem not to understand the test that you passed with the ball, Derek. You would be wise to think more about this. The sign of intelligence that we were looking for was not the ability to reason out why we did what we were doing, because we could hide our motivation behind a hundred subterfuges. The intelligence you needed to display was the willingness to risk everything for your innate rights as an aware being.*

*"John?"*

*"Yes."*

*"I find it works better if your eyes are open," she said, and gave me a wide smile when I opened my eyes. I*

*hadn't even realized I'd closed them. It was an embarrassing moment, not least because I could tell that her smile extended so far by encompassing a little chuckle. Still, the genuine article -- a joyful smile -- is hard to resist. "Now I would like you to think about your first memory. You are no bigger than a toddler or woddler. There are few words associated with this memory. It may be a smell, or a flash of recognition, or something you did every day. Don't tell me it -- I don't need to know."*

*I found myself looking into her eyes, wondering if they were seeing me, or the aura, or were concentrating on something on the wall behind me, or maybe they were disconnected from the brain while it was busy making a shopping list.... From this distance I could see the smallest details of the irises of her eyes: symmetric brown rays emanating from the pupil, with hints of green played off by the black mascara on her lids. The pupils were over-large in that light, giving a wide-eyed effect to her face, almost anime- like.*

*I was slowly drawn into my imagination. I am wandering the house, crying, maybe three or four years old, looking for my mother, upset about something. It seems that I've been crying for a few minutes; my eyes are quite damp, including the lashes. I stop suddenly. Why am I crying? What do I hope to get from my mother? I couldn't tell you -- you can imagine that the memory is vague almost beyond recognition. But as I moved back into that time I could see one thing clearly: the disproportionality of everything. I have so little control over my body, and the house intimidates me from top to bottom. There are doors and drawers and sliders and objects all around me that are too heavy, too tall and awkward for me. The ceiling vaults above like a cathedral. The whole environment dwarfs, disarms me. We are not yet talking about magnitudes of difference -- just three or four times difference - - and yet I feel like I might as well be trapped here.*

*I realize with a sudden and surprising certainty, that I am me, and that I am crying for my mother because that's what I do when I want something, whether I know what that something is or not. But I am me, I think. I stop crying, and decide that I could also not cry for her. I wander off to do something else.*

*Barbara's eyes were staring at me or through me. I didn't know if I should ahem or cough or say something, afraid that I might break her concentration on the beach ball-sized aura wrapped around me. Idiot, I thought, and raised my eyebrows: if she was seeing me, she ought to recognize that. I waited half a minute and was about to say something, when she said without otherwise moving a muscle: "I know you're done; just hang on."*

*That minute had me twitching because I didn't want to go wandering in my mind while I was looking at her, and I didn't think I should move. The enforced stillness manifested itself as an itch all over.*

*Then she relaxed and looked away, took up her notebook and started making keyword notes. I couldn't tell what she was writing -- either she was a doctor in a former life or a secretary specializing in shorthand.*

*"Okay," she said, as I took to scratching various itches. "That was interesting. I should have guessed that your struggle between need and independence would go so far back...."*

*I was dumbfounded. I thought: Oh my God, what could the odds be on that. (Another voice was saying, why in the world would you think yourself anything other than typical.)*

*A small, satisfied smile formed on her face. "Just a couple more. First I want you to imagine the moment of your happiest success. I don't mean the time you were happiest. I mean the moment when you felt most successful in life. Then we'll look at the deepest downer.... Okay," she shook herself and reset her arms in the position to accept my ethereal globe.*

*Again the eyes. The proximity had meanwhile become intimacy, artificial in the extreme, but undeniable as we sat face to face. The staring was easier. I realized what she was doing: staring the way a cat does, concentrating not on a spot but bringing in the whole field of vision. Seeing, and not seeing. Cats blend out*

*the motionless and wait to see the movement; I guessed she was doing the same with the motion of my aura.*

*Most successful? I can remember the day when Doreen and I decided to move to Chapel Hill: We are sitting at the dining table, the heavy chestnut one we still have, the sky outside reddening in the way desert skies do, and Doreen is listening to me describe the places I had visited, the work environment, the job offer. It was just one offer, but you may know the feeling, Brett -- and if you don't now, you will -- that one success feels exactly like the first step in multiple successes. Doreen is cautious about my enthusiasm, but seems to be loosening up, accepting that this may just be the solution we were looking for. We have a bottle of red wine open, and both have imbibed a fair amount. You are in the family room, playing. Finally, Doreen says, that sounds wonderful, and she gets up and comes over to me and kisses me. She may have said something about providing for the family, but it doesn't matter. I feel on the top of the world.*

*I moved my head slightly as I changed where I focused, and I hoped that Barbara would notice. She was as impassive as ever, and maybe even slightly more intent. Another silent minute. "Thanks for being patient," she said, as she relaxed and leaned over to make more cryptic notes.*

*I felt like asking, "What do you see?" But I was afraid of getting a perfunctory reaction and an even more businesslike manner from her. Maybe there would be a moment when it would make sense. I carried through an exaggerated stretch to occupy myself.*

*"All right," she said, expressed as if she didn't need to elaborate. When I looked lost, she added: "Now I would like to have you remember your biggest career downer." She settled herself in, and then said: "I don't want you to wallow in it. It's just a visit. Okay, let's go."*

*I stared straight into her eyes; if she noticed the intensity she wasn't letting on. All right, I thought, I know exactly the day, the time, the place. Well, the place is vague, but I'm sitting in front of a large red stained desk. Across from me is my supervisor in Arizona, with whom I had tussled over employee issues since becoming acting manager under him. He looks at me with a combination of a smile and a sneer, and then opens his mouth widely, as if to shout instructions to a large team or to cry a lament. Neither comes out. "The commissioners and I have decided," he says, "not to offer you the manager position. We are going to reconfigure the managerial positions, and someone with different skills will be needed in both positions. We are moving you back to your old job." I am dumbfounded. -- He explains to me that I'll be reporting to his management prot«g» from another division. Not one word about how he had as much as promised me the promotion. His solemn, challenging look is telling me: You've got no cards here; you've been outmaneuvered in every way. I know he's waiting for me to shout and sink whatever future I may have in the department, but I can't still speak. I can't imagine that this is the man I respected, whom I once called a mentor, now revealed to me as a cruel, venal, conniving S.O.B. I can't understand how wrong I was. I can't see my future. I can't see Doreen. It's all blank.*

*This time Barbara was waiting for me. I guess the angry aura is less interesting. Her smile was toned down, as if she was letting this episode pass discreetly. "Okay," she said.*

*I didn't say anything, realized the anger was still there, animating my tongue, making me want to burst out with something, anything.*

*"All right, John," she said, taking up her little notebook, "I spend so much time on the aura because it's the most interesting window on the human soul." She paused. "You don't believe in the soul, do you?"*

*"Not really," I said, although I responded in my mind: I don't believe in the soul as a commodity, but I'm not willing to cede the concept altogether to those who would market it.*

*"That's all right," she said, with a hint of womanly comforting. "You don't have to believe in aura, either. I*

*hope you listen to what I say, read what I am going to send you, and think about what it means. Nothing can make a difference in your life if you can't make sense of it for yourself. I know you'll have more than one laugh, you and Barry" -- a reference I was not happy to hear -- "but I hope you let things resonate within you."*

*"All right," I ventured.*

*She searched my eyes one last time, then looked out the curtained window. "Every living thing has an aura, John. It is partly a result of the physical energy of the organism -- the human body itself puts out about 100 watts at any moment. But it is also psychic energy, the stuff of our real souls, a substance of its own kind. Because it cannot be described in physical terms we have lost track of it, but you can see signs of it yourself, if you're only willing." She looked back at me. "Like when an infant recognizes a face from the first few minutes of life. When you look at a painting of a jungle and immediately see hidden eyes peering out at you. You may be used to ascribing everything to evolutionary biology: a baby needs to recognize its mother; a hunter needs to see dangers. But these little miracles bear witness to a non-physical reality, one in which we are utterly and undeniably attracted to each other. We gravitate to the energy of life. We can see it plainly only while the world is still magical for us, when we are very young and not yet blinded by the self-absorption of rationality." She paused and saw that I wanted to ask a question. I was looking to get her off the soapbox.*

*"Is that what you do -- regress so you can see psychic energy again?"*

*"I wish, John," she said and reached out with a hand to touch my knee. "I wish. What I do is use my peripheral vision as best I can to see what I can't see."*

*"Sounds paradoxical."*

*"We constantly see things at the edge of perception. A sudden movement at the edge of your vision. An odd sense that something is out of place, but when you stare at it you see nothing. Think again about the fact that we see faces everywhere -- remember the picture of the face on the surface of Mars? What is it that makes us perceive meaning where our rational minds expect none? Have you ever seen on a science show without feeling some sympathy the near hopeless struggle of spermatozoa? Our non-conscious minds are constantly connecting us to things over which we have no analytic control. With my husband's help, I've learned to look for aura at the edges of vision, in what I cannot see."*

*"Does it have a color?"*

*"No, I don't see a color; it's more an intensity, a potential. My husband can actually distinguish 7 levels of aura, with colors and spectra. We have both also learned to feel aura with our hands. What I see -- I can't explain it to you, in the same way I can't explain what attracted me to your face when we first met, or why I know when someone is lying and leading me on, or what someone's deepest, most cherished dream is."*

*All right, I thought, okay, for argument's sake. (Not able to shake the physiological perspective, I recalled later that she didn't blink when she stared, drying her eyes out and probably causing a halo effect.)*

*"I ask my clients to remember key events in their life to get a baseline and range," she said. "The changes that accompany memories pretty reliably reveal the state of your aura."*

*"What can you say about it?"*

*She smiled. "All right. Let's see." She read from her notebook. "Your aura is healthy, shiny and pulsing in the way we like to see. There are only a few problems. First, there's something missing in your psychic energy because of your general level of anxiety. I notice it as a weakness in the aura right at your forehead" -- for*

*emphasis she touched two fingers on my forehead -- "A brain can easily get out of sync with the body's energy. But we have exercises for getting that back on track. Second, you have a tendency to transfix on the past. It was quite clear in your remembrance of your first love. You moved too easily back in time; even your aura began to timeshift. This is fine as an exercise, but can sap your energy over time. When I treat someone, I work to understand why he or she has a preoccupation with the past, and once we identify the reasons for it, there are a few ways to work through it. Third, anger. Really, John, you need to begin to understand what animates you when you're frustrated. It's not healthy. And I'm not referring to your blood pressure or your heart. We're talking about your eternal soul. You do not want to poison it like that." She suffered the slightest hint of a shudder before she looked up, smiled as punctuation, and laid the notebook aside.*

*"Last few things," she pulled out a printed sheet of paper, "if you would fill this out as best you can, I'll be able to consult the astrology charts and analyze your writing. And now -- " She produced an ink pad and reached for my hand. I gave it to her with some reluctance, and she pressed it into the pad, then spread it sideways over another sheet she laid upon her thigh. She said matter-of-factly: "A rounded surface produces a better full-hand print than a flat one."*

*I can't deny, Brett, that I was affected by all this -- the proximity, the seeming clairvoyance, the promises of help. She talked slowly, even moved slowly, as if in recognition of the fact that we had entered a space where I felt unsure, out of control. She took up her materials, leaving the sheet I was to fill out, and stood: "Please fill out the sheet once I've gone -- there is usually some level of interference if I'm in the room -- and then, if you would be so kind, fill out the guestbook at the entrance. There are some customary amounts indicated there; we have a sliding scale, but we ask those who can afford it to help with our work." Short smile and a hint of a curtsy. "Any questions?"*

*There were a lot of things I wanted to say, not all appropriate, but nothing like a proposition. I wanted to know more about this thing that separated us, this supposed ability, this self-assurance at the fringe of society. But there was another question, which she anticipated after I gently shook my head. "Maybe next time," she said, "we can get to know that monster." I didn't speak. "I know you think it can't exist, but there is just so much in this world that we can't comprehend with our analytic brains. I can feel his being out there, and I know you have some connection to him. No, not through your dream, not the boogey story you told your child. Those are the symptoms of a deeper connection. Think about your move away from the West, away from everything you knew -- do you think that that was chance? And the sudden fame and notoriety of the bog monster story? There is nothing random in the world, John. Our lives are all telling a story, and only when we accept that can we begin to understand it. -- All right. Enough for today." She went out the door.*

*I dutifully filled out the sheet, including filling in my address and (work) phone number, both of which gave me pause when I imagined Barbara crossing paths with Doreen. Then I traced my steps back to the entryway. Barry was looking at a yoga book, with his head half cocked to the side, his free arm slightly raised, estimating from these few clues the pain he would endure trying the stance in the book. He looked up and shook his head disapprovingly, as if he read something prurient in my expression. I stopped at the guest book, wrote a brief "thanks" and tucked a check into the "contribution" box.*

*"Well?" as Barry led me out the door. "Is that not the closest thing you've ever experienced to a waking wet dream?"*

*I grimaced and pushed on.*

*"Sure, we don't need to talk about it," he said.*

*We got into his car, and he headed back to Chapel Hill. "Did she ask?" he said.*

*"Ask what?"*

*"If she could use you to contact the bog monster?"*

*"Why? What do you care? Are you afraid she's going to scoop you?"*

*"On the contrary," he said with a wide-eyed look that spooked me. "On the contrary."*

*Click-Cluck began history lessons. Derek sat cross-legged across from her -- the exoskeleton made this both easy and curiously relaxing -- and she dropped down on her belly. After speaking a while, she would stretch her limbs and then unhinge them and curl her feet back onto her back. Then, just as abruptly, she would bring her forelegs down and raise the front part of her body so that her downward eyes could look at Derek. Since there was no distinguishable pupil, he couldn't be sure where she was looking. Sometimes he thought she was observing his Adam's apple, other times his face. He got used to her ticks and antennae rhythms, so much so that they became a source of calmness; he often found himself breathing in their cadence.*

*Derek had a tough time with the lessons. He thought he was misunderstanding when Click-Cluck said that the current bug civilization was some 20,000 years old and that their historical era was over 100,000 years. She started with her society, promising that they would return to the highlights of earlier epochs. From its very beginning, this civilization was global; indeed, it had defined itself by defeating the regional states that had dominated bug history for some 25,000 years prior. This society was also grounded in Plato-like ideas of the preeminence of science and natural philosophy. Socially, there was a weak approximation of a democratic state: weak, because the governing class was elected by itself, not by the people. But there was a strong ethic of meritocracy, and slipsiding was undercut by an utter openness in all governmental proceedings. The governors sought their replacements among all progeny, judging them dispassionately for the appropriate analytic ability, coolheadedness and an utter dedication to the state. The triumvirate of their cultural self-understanding was rationality, evenhandedness and self-sacrifice.*

*But something is missing, Click-Cluck explained. The state is passionless. It provides competently and enables, but it has not allowed the bug race to rise above itself and create something new -- not in many millennia. There have been many revolutions in social norms and interests, but they are like froth on a tidal sea, sloshing back and forth without real meaning. At first, there was a desire to spread out into the great reaches of space: exploration and colonies followed. The inevitable reaction led to a dominating interest in perfecting life here on bug world -- health, productive lifespan, and wellness. The colonies languished -- some died, some returned home, some disappeared one knows not where in space, and others got by. Then another phase of exploration began, energized by the growing bestiary of discovered life throughout the stellar neighborhood. That phase, too, came and went, while samples were being collected and brought back to the homeworld. In the years during which these centuries-old exploratory missions have been returning, the prevailing public opinion has changed four times: first philosophically opposed; then excited by the galactic biological richness; then disinterested; and now ironically opposed, in the majority, because the stability of our domestic order seems challenged through the very richness that had been celebrated for hundreds of years.*

*"I don't understand these scales of time," said Derek in English. Their conversations often occurred in both languages, since neither was very adept at the other's. "Every ten years it seems like my society is re-inventing itself and running into entirely new problems."*

*You must understand, said Click-Cluck, that I'm speaking here like a "khdrreen" (she threw in the English word 'historian' because the bug concept is rather different). If we used a metaphorical magnifying glass and looked at smaller periods, these generalizations would resolve into smaller and contradictory trends. But the same kind of generalities hold for your civilization. You say everything changes every ten years. From another perspective, your world's religious wars have been the norm for over 1000 years, probably since the rise of civilization itself. Even in your most recent history, your conflicts have been defined by religious differences.*

*"I don't know. World War Two was a conflict among modern democracies, fascist states, and communist dictatorships."*

*Fascism and communism can be understood in a religious context, as totalitarian states that attempt to recast religious allegiance for their own sake. Democracies are much more like our own natural-philosophic society, but on your planet they are so thoroughly dominated by their capitalist overlay that the rational kernel becomes distorted beyond recognition.*

*"For us, democracy is still the most rational way to organize societies. A democracy can get the best out of our leaders by not trusting them too much. The people decide, for better or worse."*

*Our theorists are in agreement, said Click-Cluck, that rule by the "pphphr" (people) is illusionary. However, appearance seems more important to earth people than substance, so we would say that there is no deception.*

*Derek didn't want to get into an argument, so he redirected the discussion: "If you are not in a democracy, can you disagree with your government?"*

*Click-Cluck: Our government does not control ideas. Disagreements are expected. What the government controls are the schools and the libraries, the institutions of learning. Indoctrination is never far away. At times these places can get too far out of step with the society and cease to have any importance. But they always catch up with us eventually.*

*"So what do you want to happen? Is it time for revolution?"*

*Click-Cluck clicked in a way that Derek had never heard before, a weird hollow sound, a bit like laughter.*

*We need to find a passion in our world, a reason for more than survival. Don't misunderstand me. We survive very well. We learn, love, work, celebrate, all those things you know from your earth life, although they are also different on this world. While we survive well, many of us ask, is this enough? Is this why our planet created one global order, one set of guiding principles? Just to survive? Or is there more to be created?*

*"Does this have anything to do with me?" Derek asked, but Click-Cluck didn't answer. He let it pass, but watched her antennae whip as if in a gusting wind.*

*This discussion continued another day in another context. Derek was inquiring about the lifestyle of an average bug. Lifespan? Marriage? Children? 40-hour workweek? What? This led circuitously to the exemplary biography of one particular bug, whom we will call "Thunk." This was Derek's nemesis, the bug who had engineered his departure from his cell, and Derek recognized from a sparkle image that it was the same massive bug who had rolled the shock-ball at him. He's my boss, said Click-Cluck.*

*"Wait -- your boss wants to see me dead?"*

*He doesn't care whether you live, just whether you live among us.*

*"Why doesn't he make me stay in my cell?"*

*There are protocols.*

*"Couldn't he work around the protocols, maybe say I'm a thief or I've still got earth bugs in me."*

*That would not be very convincing. These protocols are not random things, Derek. We are a rational race; if there are protocols for how exo- creatures are treated, then Thunk would be risking censure for breaking*



*those protocols.*

*"Didn't he break the protocols when he engineered my escape?"*

*Not specifically. Our world has no vague conceptions of poetic or righteous justice. If Thunk finds no statement or reading of the protocols that forbids shoving a hover-bike into your cell, then by all means he is allowed. There may yet be a rebuke against his taking this step while I, as your main caregiver, was away, but that is different, a practical matter.*

*"How did he get to be your boss if he hates exo-creatures?"*

*There are many like him in our institute. Try to imagine our social organization. Our society does not regulate relations through the circulation of money and individual ambition, as does yours. We define ourselves by the skills and efforts we bring to improve society. Above all, we are not private beings, "sttghn" (citizens) in the sense that you know.*

*Derek listened to a long disposition about their ethic of social contribution. In the place of money was a rather strict accounting of one's 'social ratio,' the balance of one's beneficial acts, as evaluated by one's elders and betters, mechanically divided by the number of adult years lived. Coveted positions were assigned according to one's specific skills and one's ratio. This system prevented the accumulation of money and thereby the problem of hereditary wealth, though it tended to reward early achievers disproportionately, who were able to maneuver into the best positions for their age group, and the rest could never catch up.*

*Consider Thunk, said Click-Cluck. He is my school contemporary, but because of his accomplishments he was pushed ahead one year of education, and was in a trainee position when I finished my studies. Two years later, I was still a trainee and he had moved into a management position. While he is directly over me, his position is fundamentally different than mine: There is no career path from my position to his. Still, that he is only just above me is a sign of the ruling class's displeasure in him, which I'm sure has to do with his fixation on exo-creatures. He would not be expected to remain in our institute with his social ratio. He entered the institute 50 years ago because it was the highest position he could attain given his social balance. He would similarly be expected to leave to keep raising the ratio.*

*"Fifty years? How old is he?"*

*He is 170 years old.*

*"Wooooh," Derek said in an almost whistle. "You too?"*

*I am 166 years old. I started school younger than he because I knew I wanted to be female -- those of us who do tend to mature earlier.*

*Derek asked: "How old, -- how long do bugs live?"*

*You may find this interesting. Our lifespan is about 250 years. Perhaps you may ask yourself, why not a shorter lifespan like yours, or you may wonder why we have not achieved immortality, given our sciences and technologies? Many millennia ago, before the birth of our worldwide society, it was determined among a small set of natural philosophers and scientists that the optimal crossing point for lifespan and new blood was 250 years. Not every society adhered to this principle, but those who did tended to thrive. In our own society, there is a ceremonial congress every 50 years, during which the lifespan question is considered, and the result is always the same. This number is more than just a target. Our medical sciences have perfected the care of our bodies through this age, and at the end of this time, the physical body just wears out. With remarkable consistency, give or take twenty years. Research into further longevity is not condoned, so that no one need be*

*denied a life-saving treatment.*

*"What about the societies that didn't obey this principle? Wouldn't they have had techniques to live longer? Wouldn't there be a strong temptation for the ruling class to save itself, or at least some charismatic leader?"*

*These other societies were unreliable sources for knowledge of any kind, so we don't look to them for guidance. As for secret projects to extend one's own life, or the life of one's hero, one could expect that on your planet, but it is simply impossible here. Among other things, our lives are not private enough. Do you believe, for example, that our discussion today is private?*

*"I hope so," Derek said. "For your sake as well as mine."*

*There is no privacy, Derek. Your fixation on a private sphere may be a peculiarity of your species. Here, doors and walls are conveniences, not barriers. If someone wants to listen to every word you say, they can.*

*"Can we keep track of Thunk?"*

*Yes, I already do to a degree. And there are ways to review activities. But what you may be looking for -- the 'smoking gun' of a conspiracy, no? -- simply does not exist. It is not a crime to plot against you. The crime would be to deny your manifest rationality, to accuse you of being a mindless, squishy salamander. Disagreement, competition, even repression can be accomplished rationally, from end to end. One may disagree with the outcome, but if the method adheres to the principles of our society then one must adjust.*

*"If I get tricked into killing myself, you will have to adjust?"*

*Of course. As would you, were I to die saving you.*

*By one measure, Click-Cluck was much Derek's senior. By another -- if you believed in the premise of this world, which Derek did not always -- he was thousands of years old. Despite the great strides he was making in understanding bug speak, at least Click-Cluck's, everything he learned still had an unreal shimmer. He didn't bother his teacher with his itchy doubts, because he wasn't sure how she would interpret it -- a sign that his mind was unstable? Whether or not it was a dream world, he had no interest in spending his remaining time in a cell.*

*So, if the world was to be treated as real, there was a raft of questions that had to be answered.*

*"Was I the only one? If not, where are the others? And what about species from other planets? Can I see any?"*

*Click-Cluck answered: You are the only human alive. The non-cognizant earth animal species were not deemed important enough to keep alive.*

*"I thought you considered life sacred."*

*"Sskkk" -- Sacred would not be the right word. We don't kill. In this case, we did not work out the techniques, foodstuffs and exo-skeletons necessary for our planetary conditions, and the creatures simply died. We mitigated their pain. The plants were dried and preserved. The microscopic life was frozen.*

*"Were there other humans? How many?"*

*Other than you there were five humans, of varying human races and ages, none quite as fit or suited as you. Many thin-skinned animals from weak-gravity planets do not survive the rigors of hibernation and travel at*

*relativity speeds. You yourself barely recovered. There were difficulties as we purged your body of your symbiotic and parasitic organisms, and introduced our own. Many specimens are lost in this transition.*

*"They're all dead? ... Tell me the truth, did Thunk have them killed?"*

*They were dead before the mission returned. I believe at this point the appropriate thing to say is, 'I'm sorry.' I don't understand the logic of that, but I can sympathize that you must be saddened by being alone on another world, with a very alien species.*

*"Can I see some of the other survivors? Are any like me?"*

*When the time is right, we will visit another survivor or two. You will need to be prepared and first need to know our world better.*

*"Are any of them like me?"*

*Hairless apes, you mean? That is peculiarly earthen. These creatures come from very different circumstances and have their own evolutionary paths. We are none of us like each other.*

*You may know the feeling, Brett, a two-edged sense of betrayal that comes from the consciousness of a secret you must not only keep from those around you, but which you must embed in lies. It's especially bad if you find yourself imagining how your conversants would react if they knew. As we crossed paths before dinner, your eyes challenged me to hide my nervousness even deeper. I averted mine from Doreen's, and she seemed to accept that I would be angry about her co-opting Barry earlier in the day. You can have him, I thought. I hoped that, as the dinner wore on, my self-consciousness would disappear below the rising tide of family interests and tensions.*

*We chewed in silence a while before Doreen said, "I enjoyed meeting Barry today."*

*I looked to see if her face was wearing anger or suspicion; she projected innocence. This opening was a concession, her innocent expression a dare for me to respond with rancor.*

*"He's an interesting guy," I said.*

*With my last chance to answer angrily gone, she said: "Where did you two go?"*

*I had this line ready. "We like to go to Carolina Brewery." Brett, I hope you understand that this misdirection was intended to save us all some aggravation. I saw no reason to engage over this; we'd have an opportunity to discuss it later, maybe at a distance laugh over it.*

*Doreen looked disappointed, as if she had imagined we had dropped in on an art opening.*

*You seemed not to register this exchange at all, didn't even notice when we will fell silent. Doreen and I glanced at each other, acknowledging your distant expression. She wanted desperately to question you, but she knew that a single interrogatory worked like a dousing blanket on your participation in the family. I imagined telling you about my encounter and waiting for what you thought about this venial indiscretion. Your voice: "Get a life, dad. You worry about the craziest things."*

*Maybe it was that night or maybe weeks later -- I don't have such a linear memory -- I lay in bed thinking, and weighing whether I could understand any more what you were going through. I think of all the remembrance movies churned out by the baby boomers, and I can't help thinking they're simply wrong: portrayals of jocks and cheerleaders and nerds and outsiders in immutable groupings and with scripted self-awareness that*

*capture just the lifeless peaks of adolescent existence. The anguish and joy of being young is about the constant blending of what you know with the world that nearly every day presents itself anew.*

*Whaaa-tt, you would say that. I can see you in your room, immobilized on the bed, and I want to articulate what you are feeling, because I know you can't. I can express myself in all the clichés I've acquired over 40 years, but there's no way to apply them to your life without contaminating its essence with my experiences.*

*Lying on my bed I imagine you on yours, looking up at the ceiling like a prisoner on lockdown; you feel such anger against me, against your mother, against our arguments and our steely silence. You want to say sometimes, 'just get it over and don't stay together because of me.' But you know that you don't want the house split; you know your place isn't telling your parents how to live their marriage. You want nothing more than to leave all the words behind; they can't capture how angry everything makes you feel -- your parents, your satiric teachers, a few stupid peers who look at you like a freak, and a girl whom you think a friend but whose mouth has a cruel curl whenever you become earnest. You wish you could scream just once, "I love you!" But how much would that destroy, and it wouldn't be true anyway. You don't know what love is, though you want so much that your body buzzes like a tuning fork with vibrations from her. She moves so casually through her life, indolent and yet walking on the knife-edge of brutal manipulation. You wish you wanted to be alone, no more awkward repetitions, no more waiting for when your real life begins. You lie on your bed, so full of mental and physical energy, and you're absolutely paralyzed. There's nowhere to begin, no release, no outlet, no purpose.*

*All right, Brett, let's get on with it. All dramafication aside, we haven't had much of a story here. Not until after that car was found did we realize that coincidence could build an edifice of causality and trap us inside. The car was a 1999 Volvo sedan, parked off the road at the trailhead leading into the Blackwood portion of the Duke Forest. The keys were still in the ignition, the driver side door unlocked but closed. There were no signs of anything untoward, but the driver was gone. A missing person report was filed, uncharacteristically quickly, and the papers and the local media informed. The driver was a tenth-grade girl from Chapel Hill.*

*The initial reports had no information other than a description of her and how to contact Chapel Hill police. Then, without further explanation, a "person of interest" was described as a young Latino and presented in a suspect sketch (teen-aged or early twenties, as non-distinctive in his Hispanic looks as the young missing blond girl in her Caucasian attributes). His car was possibly a 1987 teal Nova with California plates; we were all asked to keep an eye out for this car, but it was assumed that the vehicle was heading west, somewhere on Interstate 40 in North Carolina or Tennessee.*

*It emerged later -- thank God -- that the person of interest was her high-school boyfriend of some weeks and that, upon being confronted by her parents, she had chosen to elope with this young man rather than forsake him forever. Her pretext for getting away from home was an afternoon with a girlfriend, and the couple's meeting place was that out-of-the-way stretch of forest. The police knew all this fairly early on, though they did not inform the public. First, they were not assured that the relationship was completely consensual, given the parents' accusations of brainwashing. Second, they found the boyfriend's car hidden in the woods, driven off the road at another location in a deliberate effort to conceal its whereabouts. This left open the small possibility that their rendezvous had taken an ugly and unforeseen turn. The incomplete report kept us on our toes, without any of these confusions, and without tipping off whoever had wanted to hide the car.*

*Chapel Hill does not get news like this very often, and the parental milieu reacted as if lightning had snatched one of its own in a titanic fiery display. I found myself reloading the local news Web pages, at first constantly, then in slowly lengthening intervals, for the better part of a week. Others volunteered, created or distributed posters, joined search parties, scoured the section of the forest where the girl's vehicle had been found (the boy's Nova was extracted and sequestered before its location was known). The family was represented by the father, who stoically and eloquently called for the opportunity to see their daughter and sister again. "Nothing else matters; we can work everything else out." Significantly, he spoke equally to his daughter and her*

*"abductor," but we just thought that was an attempt to create a relationship with this person or these persons unknown.*

*The story of the relationship came out after a few days with no substantive leads, and the police faced a lot of consternation over the secrecy. That's when everyone's attention fell with renewed emphasis on the forest tract. Stories came and went for days before the first mention of both the disappearance and the bog monster. The occasion was an editorial where the local paper chastised the police for their secrecy but praised their diligence: "She and her boyfriend seem to have disappeared in the woods as completely as the mythical bog monster who is said to frequent sections of the Duke Forest." Once the connection was made, it did not take too many "telephone" connections before someone was writing in a weblog: "We cannot rest until the perpetrator is found and brought to justice, even if we must burn the bog monster out of his lair to do so."*

*The next print headline: "Bog Monster Said Suspect in Disappearance." Speculation about the monster was actually six or seven paragraphs down from the lead, but the conceit was too powerful to let pass. Like rewiring neurons in a damaged brain, the connection got repeatedly reinforced in the media until the previously subjunctive felt like the always real. This led to a stream of phone calls from the media at our house asking about this monster, all of which I refused; the reality came home after a brief visit and conversation outside our home with a pair of uniformed officers about what I knew about the disappearance.*

*Did you know that they asked for my whereabouts when the girl went missing? I obliged them with everything and did not bother to express outrage at the mere supposition. No stone unturned. I was just happy I wasn't off on one of my GIS search parties at the time....*

*The boy's mother -- father nowhere to be found -- did not speak much English and was shown stuttering to a reporter in a mean-spirited editing job that was replayed night after night. One got the impression of shiftiness, but we found out later that she was saying approximately this: "Don't judge my son before you know the facts. The girl threw herself at him, and when he found out her age, he decided that the only honorable thing was to marry her. I'm sure when that's all done they'll come home." Of course, the time necessary for that came and went, and we still heard nothing.*

*Then, one afternoon, Barry called: "Have you heard from the police yet?"*

*"No," I said, confused, unable to guess the context.*

*"Okay -- okay. You can expect a call soon. We'll catch up this evening."*

*"What do the police want?" I asked.*

*"I don't think it's my place to say. Really, I don't want to get in the middle of this. You'll soon know from the proper authorities."*

*I had a momentary adrenalin jolt, but remembered that you were in your room and that Doreen was in the office. We were all fine. I couldn't get anything out of Barry before he hung up. I forgot about that strange call until the late evening, when I got another -- from Barbara Hohenstauffen. Have you heard, she said, and when I said, no, in fact, I have no idea why you and Barry are being so mysterious -- she thought better of the conversation and got off the phone in a hurry.*

*Doreen had told me that the phone was for me. She did not ask me who the voice was, but I figured that this would come up later.*

*The next morning, when I was at work, I got a visit from two of Chapel Hill's finest, two investigators. One was Jared's father, Lieutenant Brightman. "Is there somewhere we could talk in private?"*

*I led them down the hall to the conference room, which happened to be empty. Brightman was a tall, muscular, heavy man, with a short military haircut and a broad, pleasant face that took back some of the sharpness of his demeanor. His partner was a short, stocky man, looking twenty years or so his senior, a man who, judging by his irritated manner, had been asked too many times if he wasn't already retired, with a wrinkled tired face that was in all likelihood the result more of cigarette smoking than age or hardship.*

*Detective Horvath began the conversation: "We need your help in the missing person investigation of Hayley Blalock. I know that you've talked to officers already about the bog monster story, and that you've provided information about your whereabouts at the relevant times. You are not a suspect -- not even remotely -- but you have material information that we believe will help us."*

*"I'm happy to help, as much as I can, but I don't know what material information I could have." -- Meanwhile, I was already imagining that they had a fat dossier about my GSI/GPS habits and that they were going to ask me to consult as the most widely traveled denizen of the county, after they threatened me with a life sentence for a hundred trespasses.*

*"That's great," said Brightman. "Here's the situation. We sometimes need to reassure relatives in missing person cases, and in high-profile cases that can mean working with the family's private investigator, or being chummy with an interested reporter, or holding a weekly round-up of progress. In this case, we've been asked -- we were asked -- to include a psychic in the investigation." He said the word with some disdain, or perhaps self-reproach for finding himself in this position.*

*A sinking feeling, as if I was being pulled into a circle of uncovered deceit and self-deception around the word "psychic."*

*"Ferguson," I said, moving to Brightman's first name, "I don't know you need to come to me about psychics."*

*Horvath: "We've been asked to engage Barbara Hohenstauffen."*

*That sinking feeling again, along with a punch to the gut. "Okay, look," I said, "I did go to see her but it was really just a social experiment, a lark. I can't speak about her psychic ability at all."*

*"We're not looking for a reference, John," said Brightman. "She told us that she needs your help in this particular investigation -- because of your involvement with the bog monster story."*

*I had to laugh. "Ferguson, you of all people know how that story started and how little it means."*

*Brightman looked at me with suddenly hard eyes, though there was only a minute change in his amiable expression. "She believes that you can provide important information about a 'presence' that she feels in the forest. That's all we've gotten from her so far. We're here to find out if you will work with us. It will mean a great deal to the family." He stopped, but looked at me as if he were still speaking.*

*I wanted to say a hundred things, but only one made sense: "Of course, detectives. I will help as much as I can."*

*Brett, you were roused from your stasis when, that evening, we had a family conference. I had to explain everything from the beginning, and you needed to be a part of it. Doreen understood how important this was to me and was in a wait-and-see mode. We sat at the dining room table, hands portentously on the table, as if we couldn't control the mood that was building.*

*I didn't bother going back too far: Barry and his interest in the bog monster (only briefly -- nothing about his articles), his visit to our house, the appointment with Barbara. As the evidence of the rendezvous's innocence,*

*I produced the envelope with her written report, which, except for database extractions describing my horoscope and the type of handwriting I have, was not much different than I've already described. Doreen took a good deal of time going through the report, even went so far as to smell the pages; the personal profile pages were on beige cotton paper and did have a faint eau de toilette odor. I took you, Brett, back to the fayre we attended and described my encounter there with Ms. Hohenstauffen; you didn't seem to remember her. Doreen's eyelids flared at our discussion of this, but mostly, I'm sure, for the omissions of which I was guilty. I apologized to her for lying to her about the appointment. "I thought it simpler; it didn't matter either way, and..." I didn't finish, and she glared without any sign of wanting to answer.*

*I described my role with the police and Barbara. You asked me why the police wanted me, but I saw in Doreen's eyes: what does this woman want with you? "I don't know the answer to what started this, but Barbara seems to think that the bog monster is real and that I have some connection to it.... My fear is that the police believe that her connecting me to the bog monster is the same as connecting me to the disappearance. You should remember that I was at work and came home on time that day. I've got enough witnesses at work, and Doreen, you know when I got home because it was right before dinner --"*

*"Oh my God, John," said Doreen too loudly, as if an awful vista had just opened up before her. "You're a suspect?"*

*"No," I replied, "they told me I'm not a suspect. It's just that they can't understand Barbara's explanations."*

*"I'm not sure I would understand them either. -- Are you telling me that the Blalocks asked for this woman?"*

*"I guess so. I really don't know. For all I know, Barbara called them up and convinced them."*

*Doreen thought for a moment. "If she had done that, and talked about her belief in your connection to the bog monster, maybe they grew suspicious and told the police."*

*I nodded.*

*"So what do we do?" she said, suddenly matter of fact.*

*"I've got nothing to hide, Doreen, so I think it's a little early for a lawyer. In the meantime, we will all have a chance to see how serious anyone is about all this."*

*Doreen's lids arched again.*

*"We're invited to a s»ance to communicate with the bog monster."*

*Imagine waking up in a completely strange world, as Derek had done one morning, with the near certainty that everyone and everything you had ever known was gone, dead, buried and returned to dust. You may at first accept the message, but eventually the sheer weight of the disconnection will overwhelm you, with all the emotions that cycle into mortal anger. You may even find comfort in ambiguity, in the possibility that it is all in your own mind. But it faces you, whether from across the room or a strange globe, like an over-towering monster that grins at your loss and bares its lethal incisors. You are alone either way.*

*I woke up two mornings later, at the magical hour of 3 a.m. It is a time, in my experience, like no other. Four a.m. is already close to dawn and more hopeful. Two a.m. I've experienced too many times from the evening side of things to say anything negative about it. But at three a.m. you are always alone. The distant dawn should be on the other side of another brief sleep, but sleep comes hard at this time. Noises are louder and stranger. Thoughts have no barriers, little relationship to daytime concerns, and few rational limits. If you wake up at 3, you are just half a step from dream walking, and like a dream walker you are helpless before*

*the ideas that overtake your mind.*

*I woke up knowing my mistake. The bog monster did exist. And if it didn't -- then whatever it stood for, that existed. All my denials were just misplaced rational fatuity. What if I had a connection to that? It could be a psychic link, or maybe a pathological sympathy to that sink of evil. Or it could be more mundane: my geographical mapping skills somehow meant that I alone had the ability to recognize the existence of the evil. Yet I denied it.*

*I don't know if you've experienced a real cold sweat, Brett. My forehead exuded cold, and my back was covered with a clammy dew. I padded downstairs, mostly unaware of the plan that had already formed in my mind. I went into the kitchen, looked into the fridge. The food all glowed strangely against my eyes in the overly bright glare. I went to the office, and that's when I realized what I had come to see: I turned on the computer and began searching the Internet for a history of young women gone missing in the Chapel Hill area.*

*Each word was difficult to punch out at that hour: Orange County, NC. Woman. Missing. Missing Person. Jane Doe. Murder. Forest. Duke. I tried these and a dozen more. I found either way too many or just a few hits, depending on the query, but nothing pertinent. If there was a pattern, this was not the way to find it.*

*After thirty minutes, not far from abandoning the task, I happened upon an excerpted Hillsborough Herald from 1820. Expecting nothing but mill prices and the odd lard sale, I opened the web page. "Notice," the first article began, "the attention of the public is requested. On the evening of March 20, 1820, Dally Moore, a free mulatto girl of seventeen, was taken from subscriber's home. I have known her mother since Dally was an infant, and the fact of her freedom can be proved beyond any doubt. She is round five feet tall, with a yellowish complexion and bushy black hair, and with rings in her ears. Earnest Bryan is suspected of having a forged bill of sale and is believed to be taking her south to sell her as his property. Your assistance is needed to save this girl from an undeserved fate."*

*This wasn't even close to what I was looking for, except as collateral evidence of human depravity, but I couldn't help but be drawn in, first by the surname, wondering if there might some connection to Barry, then by the story. Did the parties know each other? Who was Earnest Bryan? Was he related to her, or in unrequited love with her? Or some other sort of oppressor and rogue? Who was Dally? If not the Bryans, who introduced the white into her genetic line? Was her mother freed, or was she? Was she an energetic young woman, with a bright future obvious to all around her, or a quiet, introspective girl whose defeatism allowed for no resistance? Meanwhile, she took form in my mind, a young woman on the cusp of an exotic beauty: an uneasy balance of European and African attributes, long-limbed and high-hipped, with exaggerated cheeks, big but deep-set eyes beneath bushy eyebrows, and coffee-brown irises glowing against her yellowing mocha skin. Her long silenced eyes stared at me with defiance.*

*She was lost again that early morning, defenseless on her way to a lifetime of slavery, and I was as little able to help her as "subscriber." Google knew nothing else about her, and I felt in my stomach that I would never be able to reach the end. I had to let her go, but couldn't. My eyes welled up and over, and I cried two -- five -- ten minutes for her, a deep full lamentation, with sobbing and convulsive breathing. I was crying for Dally, for me, for my family, for Hayley, even for Derek. When the tears and heaving stopped, the cathartic effect was complete. I shut down the computer, sighed and wandered upstairs. I lay down in the bed beside Doreen, breathing softly, and I said a brief prayer to the darkness, wishing for all lost souls final rest.*

*We left Derek in his new home, now part of bug society and educated somewhat in the political stakes -- if not exactly the personal risks -- of his bug world existence. He tried to normalize life. He communicated with Clum-Clum-Tock as much as he could; the bug did not understand mammalian speech and often could not decode his attempts at bug speech. What they did do together was travel. Derek would work out a target and goal with Click-Cluck, and she would arrange the trip with her colleague, and the latter would guide Derek*



*on the trip. Derek's glasses were now his constant companions -- his eyes were usually able to tolerate them for lengthy periods of time -- and he was conversant with all their features. He did not feel lost in the dark that pervaded most spaces. It helped that Click- Cluck had installed a full-spectrum light for his sleeping chamber, a way of acquiring vitamin D and keeping some visual acuity. He read books -- mostly e-books that had been scanned by the explorers that had snatched him -- and watched both bug and earth TV on a projected screen, and often exercised his arms, legs and neck by removing the exoskeleton.*

*Travel was what interested him most. The bug world was unbelievably large. Despite the substantial speeds of their underground tunnels and with much overnighting on the road, it seems that Derek never saw more than a small corner of their world. Well, this place is fine, his guides would say, but if you really want to see something special we'd have to fly for a couple days to such and such place. There was commercial flying on their planet, but it was hindered by the density and thickness of the atmosphere, such that planes had to travel even slower than on earth. Derek suspected this was another of their artificial limits, but when asked Click-Cluck just did the bug equivalent of a shrug -- stretching the mouth hooks like a yawn. Click-Cluck never even entertained the idea of putting him on a plane. She refused to explain why, but Derek sensed a fear of putting him in a situation with catastrophic potential. Though she would deny it, he assumed she wanted to provide no temptation to those who would rather he were gone.*

*The sites he enjoyed were temples dedicated to bug rationality, museums documenting and illustrating early communal life, industrial farms -- fed mostly by natural jets of sulfur and methane -- of the bacteria-like life-forms that were harvested and processed into food. There were gigantic natural caverns, glowing lava lakes and rivers, and cool-running water lakes and rivers. At one remarkable simulation hall, Derek was introduced to the surface of the planet: hot, barren, dust-riven and inhospitable, even to the bug creatures that had evolved here. At some point in the distant past, apparently because of an astrologically abrupt change in its orbital path, their planet had passed from a green to a brown planet, and almost all life had died out. Those forms of higher life that survived did so by evolving into niches of burrowing or shelled existence. The surface, for all of bugdom's long prehistoric and historical duration, was like a body of water for humans: a place to explore but quickly deadly, a source of sustenance and a way to travel great distances, but unpredictable and unforgiving of the ill-prepared. Derek asked Click-Cluck when he next spoke with her if they could visit the surface. She promised they would, when he was better able to care for himself. She said: You cannot rely on any one else, on the surface. You must be prepared to save yourself.*

*"I've heard that before," he said, but when she didn't reply: "Aren't I risking my life every day that I don't just lie in my room?"*

*This is very different, she said. We'll both know when you're ready to do this.*

*"I really need to see some sunlight," he said.*

*There was a long silence at that point between the surface dweller and the underground denizen. He felt some vindication at the formulation, but Click- Cluck's antennae were unaffected by stress or confusion, and he had to assume she saw no force in his statement.*

*The other open question -- when could he see other aliens? -- brought out the anxiety that the surface did not, though he did not know why. Once he was browsing bug programming on a projected screen, he saw what looked like an alien life form. After a few moments the channel went blank. He hadn't understood the narration at all, but the creature seemed to be immobilized in a bed of some kind. That made him uneasy. Click-Cluck ignored his questions, as if he were simply not making sense.*

*He appreciated all they did for him, but he also felt trapped. He knew they protected him by observing him day and night, but they also circumscribed what he could do. The surface and visiting other aliens were the two major examples of opportunities denied, but he also found them interceding whenever he tried to strike up*

*a conversation with other bugs. He could imagine that their thought was to protect both him and his intended conversants, but Derek gradually grew bitter about it. He tried to strike up conversations where he could -- in the freeway tunnels, at tourist sites, in stores. Once Click-Cluck had explained how bugs greeted each other -- "your peaceful passage of the day" was the standard greeting -- and Derek did his best to pronounce that. Of course, for all he knew, he might have been enunciating "your daily dose of bug squishing," but even at such a level of misunderstanding the mere fact of a primate floating among them, trying to speak with them, must count for more than all the linguistic mistakes in the world. Surely aliens were not so numerous that they could become more jaded than fascinated. Click-Cluck tried several times to explain that bugs don't introduce themselves without a reason, that such an act was difficult for her species to understand. Even so, Derek thought. What about that damn ball? Wasn't I expected to turn away from it? Wouldn't that have been an opportunity to ignore my intelligence, my rights? Why is it that these bugs can hide behind the same ill ease and fear that they demanded I abandon?*

*Two thoughts came to mind, and then a conclusion. First, he knew that he made them uncomfortable. Ungainly and gangly limbed, with oily skin that looked to them like stomach lining; mucus-oozing orifices; beady pupils with eerily white eyes; a huge skull; and a chomping mouth with rows of cutting and crushing teeth: he was all out of proportion for that planet, and disturbingly appointed like a predator. Sure, he was weak, unaggressive and dependent. But his body type otherwise fit the requirements of a hunter specializing in capturing and cutting open subterranean bug creatures. He understood that resentment against aliens was widespread. His mammalian in-your-face-ness was playing right into this point of view and agenda, but we must all be that which we are: He couldn't repress the exuberance of his joys and his fears, now that he had to live them out in this world.*

*We had just a few days before the s»ance. For my part, I had to withstand the urge to foot it out into the Duke Forest and soak up the mystery, maybe do some divining-rod work with my mind. There could be nothing worse right now. The prohibition on wandering was doubly hard, because I had a bead on the farmstead of the "subscriber" in Dally's story. No one with that person's name lived in the area, but a local road bore the family name, and through that I was able to uncover the likely plot of land in county records. I did not hope to trace their family history and holdings back to the time of Dally, but I longed to see the land. Maybe I would say a prayer, I couldn't predict.*

*You know, Brett, that I have a strained relationship with religion. As I age I'll probably succumb to the prudence of religious observation -- covering the bases -- but I don't feel the connection now. Oh sure, I've called on a higher being when confronted with an imminent deadline, a forgotten pot on a burning stove, a near-miss on the freeway. Panic has convinced me more than once that maybe there is a line inside my head to the divinity, and maybe now's the time to open it.*

*When I was your age, I fell into religion, in the way I fell into many things. I wouldn't call it peer pressure, because I had a certain pride in not being a follower and I even felt this was rebellion. It was religion in the sheep's skin of paganism -- loose gatherings of a great numbers of kids, parties really, with a religious tone and religious songs and clean skirts and a general sense of fun and acceptance. Fun did not always and everywhere mean acceptance. Sometimes, fun was a dangerous thing that could be turned against you like a tossed dagger, mesmerizing for the rest, searing for you. This place was different, and we all felt it. What we didn't know is why, because none of us were mentally prepared to ask the question: can't we just be this gentle and unassuming without a preacher or a uniform?*

*So, yes, I accepted Jesus as my personal savior, and I began a personal relationship with him. I gave everything over to God and felt better. I can't say for sure whether some part of me knew from the beginning, but as I stretch back I can feel how unreal it was. I said it and believed it, but without constant reinforcement it was doomed. We all reinvent ourselves over the years; even if we have dedicated ourselves to something, with each transplantation into a new situation it becomes blander, more threadbare, until finally it is no more than a lamentable imitation of the original condition. Thus my now ragtag relationship to God. Or, more*

*accurately, I have no relationship now, but sometimes I still apologize to him for leaving him behind, knowing full well that I have no business feeling sorry for the omniscient creator and no need to apologize to a creatorless void.*

*As much as I have turned away from heaven, Brett, sometimes I've been afraid that you have turned away from life. At some point in my young life, I realized that I could not stand aside and critique the world, that I needed to embrace it. I wondered if you had reached that moment. On this morning, for instance, you were moping over a bowl of cereal, staring blankly down. At intervals, I read the paper, spooned cereal, and glanced your way. You looked as if you were stuck on a fulcrum of time, neither able to reach backwards nor to move forward, a balance of inaction and observation. Were you feeling depressed, or just introspective? Did an adolescent wash of chemicals put your dreams, a new perspective on life just beyond the grasp of your conscious mind? Were you roiling inside, fighting circular currents among your neurons that were just about to make you scream to the ceiling? -- Am I just projecting my own unease?*

*While I contemplated that, Doreen came into the kitchen, and gave you a swift and happy kiss on your temple, an expression that you half batted away, half cherished. Some things change more slowly than others.*

*Derek woke up early, didn't understand. Someone was speaking to him, a human voice. He thought maybe he was dreaming, but he had to concentrate to put the words together. They didn't enter through his ears; the thoughts seemed to emerge from his language center fully formed, unvocalized, with not even a whisper behind them. Nothing he heard made sense, as if he had stumbled into the middle of a conversation, or rather, a lengthy soliloquy. He spoke: "Who are you?" There was no answer in the auditory stream, but Derek began to understand. It was someone telling his own story, relating some things about his childhood. "Who are you?" Derek asked more loudly. The words flowed on for a few minutes longer, then stopped.*

*In the silence: "Did you speak to me?"*

*Derek was startled. -- "Yes, I did."*

*"Oh, I see. That does surprise me. I did not expect to understand the replies so quickly."*

*"Why not?"*

*"Well, let's see. Because of where you are. I did not expect this."*

*"If you didn't expect an answer, why are you speaking?"*

*"Oh, I did expect an answer, but I did not expect to understand it."*

*Derek said with some emphasis: "Where are you?"*

*"That is a complicated matter."*

*"Are you in my mind?"*

*"So to speak."*

*Derek let out a long sigh, so much so that the next words were barely breathed: "Am I crazy?"*

*The voice said: "I don't have any evidence of that."*

*"But you are a voice in my head. I must be psychotic."*

*"I may be a voice in your mind. But I'm not a psychotic manifestation."*

*Derek was silent for minutes. Finally he wondered if he was alone again. "Are you there?"*

*"Yes, I'm here. I have no where to go."*

*Well, that's it, thought Derek. Insanity. His mind was slowly splitting up and would begin to dissolve. The other possibility -- considered again and again, then rejected, whether because he feared it or desired it -- was that this voice was sanity, and he was beginning to break through the illusion of bugdom. But if he was becoming sane in a comatose body, aware finally of the absolute fact that he was stuck inside his own mind, never to leave, then he would much rather be insane.*

*"If my mind is speaking to me, then I must be crazy."*

*"I suppose, although there is a very funny joke that I will tell you later, if we're still speaking."*

*"Seriously, I'm going nuts."*

*"That may be, my friend, but I'm not your hallucination."*

*"No? Then how is it that I'm speaking to you -- in my head -- on a planet thousands of light years from earth, when I was the only human to survive the trip?"*

*A sudden spark: maybe he wasn't the only survivor. A telepathic link?*

*"Well, actually, that's why I'm surprised we're speaking. I hadn't anticipated finding an earthling so far from home. At least at this time."*

*"And where are you? In a spaceship orbiting the planet? In a transporter beam somewhere?"*

*"Where I am is immaterial. What I am is human, mostly. And what I am doing is speaking to you through a technology that allows me to project my thoughts across time and space into the electrical patterns of complex objects like higher-order brains."*

*"Across time and space?" Right, he thought.*

*"Yes, to anywhere I want within the life of the universe. It's quite a stunning technology, I'm constantly amazed."*

*"And you pick this technology up at the local drug store, or what?"*

*"No, it's something I've had developed for me. It's taken -- quite a while."*

*Derek wanted to stop the conversation again, then decided to ask one more question. "What would have happened if you started talking to a bug?"*

*"Higher-order brains only."*

*"The intelligent creatures on this planet I call bugs, but I suppose they look more like giant land crabs. They don't think like us, their language doesn't really have verbs, and they click their mouths to make the sounds."*

*"The technology is designed to work with unlike minds. It sets up a feedback loop, where the mind does most*

*of the work, especially in assigning the words and phrases to the implanted meaning. But it's entropic. Sometimes we talk past each other for a while before I move on. I have to expect that the individual will understand more of me than I do of them. An artifact of having all the technology here on my side of things."*

*"Where is your side? Are you on earth now?"*

*"No, I haven't been to earth in eons. Where I am is immaterial, both figuratively and literally. I have a story that I can tell you, if you wish."*

*"What do you want from me?"*

*"To listen, to understand, to ask your questions. I am very old, and this is how I wish to spend my last days and years -- talking to live beings. I have no one here now. I like to talk to beings from the past."*

*"Can't talking to the past screw up time, change the universe somehow?"*

*"Interesting question, but irrelevant. The universe is always changing, we just don't know it. Why should time travel be any different?"*

*"But what if something you tell a person causes a war to happen, or earth to be destroyed, or an evil dictator not to die, what have you, and the you I'm speaking with is never born?"*

*"I should be so lucky," he said.*

*Just then, Clum-Clum-Tock emerged at the doorway, wondering with whom Derek was arguing. Both Derek and his interlocutor were silent for a long time, long after Clum-Clum-Tock disappeared.*

*We got into the car, as if for an everyday outing, with no one saying a word about what we were doing or where we were going. Brett, you looked out the window, bored and stoic, while Doreen busied herself with stowing the casserole and settling the cookies she had baked. It was a potluck s»ance, of all things, a potluck s»ance deposition. Laughable, if it weren't also tinged with the possibility of the loss of my freedom, a no longer unbelievable final link in the chain of circumstance that I have laid out here. It felt like anything was possible at the end of that drive.*

*Doreen looked at me once we got to Pittsboro, trying to gauge the fact that I didn't need to use directions to find the house. I kept my eyes on the road, but she knew that I noticed. Just one of the loops you can pass through in an instant... I went around the car and helped her with the casserole, not eager to lead to the door. She did not oblige me, and stared at me until I started up the walk.*

*We heard voices around the back, but I rang the doorbell. It was a warm September evening, the generous kind of late afternoon with Indian Summer heat and the rich smell of warmed vegetation. It took a minute, then someone wandered around from behind the house. It was Jared's mother. Your face lit up, Brett, and you went right past her to find Jared. All this family combined with the investigation -- it was disturbing. What if I were guilty and found myself pulling a gun when the inspector pointed his pipe stem at me and said, "It was you, was it not, Mr. Geographic Information System? Why did you have to do them in?" Illogical as it was that I of all people was worried about this, I was still irritated that they would consider putting my family at risk. After the feeling subsided, I conceded to myself that, this being Chatham County, it was na ve to assume interrogations or arrests. They were more interested in the subtle interactions, the dropped clues, the awkward silences. If I began to be concerned, they would relent, change the topic, and make me feel at ease, as if I were as innocent as the newest born baby, crying unawares in a hospital bassoon.*

*We walked around the side of the house and became part of the party. Ferguson Brightman was there, as was*

*detective Horvath and his apparent wife. Barbara was not to be seen, but her two small girls were putting together some construction paper decorations for the two patio tables. There was a couple that I recognized from the television and perhaps elsewhere around Chapel Hill, standing awkwardly near the little girls, Mr. and Mrs. Blalock. They had that look: that they had said yes to the wrong people and were just trying to hang on until it wasn't insulting to leave. Behind and to the side was the grill chef -- I recognized him immediately as Jerry Brookheim.*

*He was tall and thin, with the hunched back and rolled shoulders that you sometimes find on tall people who see no benefit in it. Most tall people, I find, get an unspoken pleasure from that moment where they stand next to you and you have to look up in acknowledgement of their physical advantage. But some seem impervious to this relationship and slump to fit in with the mass of people around them. This is not to say that Jerry came across as a slacker. When you saw his face and especially his eyes you saw his intensity. These were slightly protruding eyes, but they had an undeniable energy. It's more difficult to say why -- no softening from laugh lines, no slitting from squinting or looking askance, infrequent blinks, expressionless tense face -- whatever it was, they were intriguing. He seemed not to notice me looking at him, but as time went on I sensed that with his occasional glances around he was sizing me up, studying me.*

*As Doreen and I spoke with the Brightmans, Barbara emerged from the house with a big bowl of green salad. I watched for an expression from Doreen, but she was engaged and genuinely seemed surprised when Abby Brightman introduced her to "our medium."*

*"I have such a respect for those with psychic abilities," said Doreen. "It's such a gift."*

*Barbara smiled at her, then shook her head compassionately. "I don't feel I have a gift. I've been fortunate to develop what any of us has." After having said that, she smiled more broadly and gave the slightest nod in encouragement to Doreen. Then she looked over her side for just a moment at Jerry.*

*Without transition, Doreen asked: "How long have you been married?"*

*I was half cringing, thinking that Barbara would take offense at this question, which brought together her obvious apprenticeship to Jerry with her eventual marriage to him. But that shows how much I know. She managed to flaunt her hand with its sizeable engagement and wedding rings while she answered: "We've been married six years."*

*For her part Doreen nodded to invite her to go on. I eased myself away and made for Jerry. It was time to get to know him. He watched me approach with his blank expression but piercing eyes -- it was as if he was daring me to get close. "Hi," I said. "I'm John Densch." I wanted to put out a hand but his stance was such that you could almost see in front of him a line whose crossing came at your own risk.*

*"Welcome, John Densch." Without adjusting his eyes, he smiled briefly, and then his face went blank again.*

*"We appreciate the invitation," I said, unable to come up with anything else.*

*It was as if that banal phrase came across with a putrid smell. He looked away immediately and opened the grill; the burgers and dogs spattered, and smoke billowed and yellow flames shot up among them. After jabbing at them for a while -- I would have turned them if only to spread out the carbonization -- he closed the grill and looked around. His expression said: You're still here?*

*I smiled weakly, and he loosed a small but burdened sigh. "Barbara!" he shouted without looking at her. She slid over and put a hand on my shoulder. "Come meet the Blalocks."*

*She took her hand away, and I followed her to the nervous-looking couple. "Dana, Gary, this is John*

*Densch. "I put my hand out and they very tentatively took it, with a side glance toward our constabulatory fellow guests.*

*"Pleased to meet you," Dana said with a tone that said, I don't know the world any more.*

*I was wondering as well. If they believed that I could have been responsible for their daughter's disappearance (though apparently not her desire to disappear), then it was quite a bit of self-control to interact with me with such civility. I discounted their exasperated tone -- none of us can control ourselves quite so well when we are playing our selves in a mood we do not feel. The police detectives were free to play cat to our mouse, but the Blalocks were here as themselves: how much could be asked of their dignity?*

*Or maybe -- and this was just dawning on me -- there were more to this story than I had reason to suspect. Maybe they knew more than we were getting from the press? But if they knew where Hayley was, what was this game about? For however much I had been impressed by Barbara's sympathetic insights, I couldn't imagine that her abilities were at the heart of this.*

*Only later did we all learn that the parents had been contacted by Hayley early on. They so alienated her with their demands that she did not call again. They were convinced that she was on the lamb, but the police, still unsure, persuaded them to hold off any public announcements. Even the ATM surveillance photos of a hooded and sunglassed girl downloading credit card cash advances did not resolve the matter. The Blalocks resisted police requests that they cut off the credit card, because they -- the parents -- got comfort from the reports of Hayley's movements, and, more importantly, were afraid of what she would do if forced to choose between coming home or moving deeper into a drifter lifestyle.*

*We all learned later that this s»ance drama was the brainchild of the detectives. They were intrigued by my psychic connection with Barbara, and were playing a hunch, not that she had telepathic access, but that she had somehow been tipped off about a crime -- perhaps as my lover? -- and for her part was trying to profit from this proximity. The theory was far-fetched, but there was one salient fact that they kept coming back to: my now obvious similarity to a phantom figure who had over the years been trespassing throughout the county. I thought I had been subtle, but my wanderings generated numerous reports of trespass and suspicious activity in their wake. I couldn't blame Ferguson that he thought whoever did that could be an unstable character, capable of anything. -- Aren't we all capable of more than we want to admit? It's a paradox that as soon as we say we're incapable of something we are tempted by some mental necessity to imagine ourselves doing it, as if the assertion creates a vacuum that the mind must fill. Of course, for most of us, the void fills back in with other thoughts and that is the end. For others, I imagine, the first involuntary thoughts lead to an inadvertent act, and then to another, and so on, until, finally, their minds feed directly out of their poisoned imaginations.*

*Some time later we were sitting later at the tables, eating the tasty but too crunchy burgers and hot dogs that Jerry laid out for us. He did not sit, didn't seem willed to eat at all. Doreen was across from Barbara, with whom she had struck up a surprising rapport -- I suspected that her curiosity and Barbara's self-assured innocence led them down this path. They no doubt recognized in each other someone who cared abnormally deeply about how human soul expresses itself, if from different perspectives. At that moment, they were talking about alternative health regimens. All of a sudden, Jerry was standing behind and leaning over Barbara: he wrapped his two forearms in front of her neck and used this embrace to move her from one side to the other. He was smiling at us in an imitation of human warmth, but you could see a hint of alarm in her eyes as her breathing became partially constricted. I did not need to look at Doreen to know her expression. For my part, I could feel the protective and male rage rise up at this challenge not only to civil society but also to my relationship, such as it was, with his woman. No you don't, I thought and I was ready to leap across the table.*

*"It's so nice to have visitors, isn't it, my love," he said.*

*She reached up with one hand and pulled on the tighter arm. "Jerry," she said hoarsely, "please."*

*He feigned surprise and looked down at her. "Oh, sorry, dear." He let go of her, straightened up and then very deliberately rested his hands on her shoulders.*

*She smiled a half smile, cleared her throat, and said: "This is a very special evening." She took a deep breath and managed more of a smile. "I've been looking forward to sitting down with you and communing with you all about what the forests hold." She looked directly at the Blalocks. "I sense that there is good news for you, although I don't know if you will receive it this evening."*

*No one wanted to speak up at this moment, so she invited us to go inside and prepare for the s»ance. She would need just a few minutes to put her children to bed. We all got up, done with our meal or not, wandered inside. Our parlor would be the room in which Barbara worked on my aura. As I collected condiment bottles to carry them inside, Jerry poked my shoulder and stopped me.*

*"John Densch," he said, "do you have any idea why we're here today?"*

*I cleared my throat. "I suppose we're going to find out."*

*"No," he said flatly. "The show inside is just the sugar coating. The real work is going on here." He pointed to his temple. "We're trying to save you."*

*I felt I had to keep up my side. "I didn't know I needed saving."*

*He was staring at my left eye, did not switch as people normally do. "I don't mean from the keystone cops in there, and I don't mean your immortal soul. I mean from your projection."*

*"What projection?" I said.*

*"You cannot see it, can you?" he said with a certain satisfaction. "There is so much of the world that you can't begin to comprehend."*

*"The fifth dimension cannot be measured, except by the mind. Religious masters have since the dawn of mankind recognized it, and have sought to capture its essence in their catechisms, but without a rigorous understanding they could only misinterpret and distort their insights, until its reality was lost altogether. A group of new masters has adapted the most demanding meditation techniques from the world's religions, and are using them, without the comfort of a false metaphysics, to unlock the secrets of this and other dimensions, what you probably call the paranormal."*

*"You, John Densch, do not know what you have become. It is not something that you've chosen, and I see you are predictably ignorant of its causes, its realities and its effects. Barbara documented your cluelessness in your profile, though she misunderstood the cause. Your psychic energy has been diverting for years. You can't understand this, but I bet you can see its truth. John, can you explain what carries you out into the forest? Can you explain why your relationship with the charming Doreen loses passion and comfort daily? No? You have no idea why you feel so depleted, so self- absorbed, do you?"*

*"It's really very simple, so simple I can even describe it to you. You are building a projection, in your mind, in our collective consciousness, and even out in the forest itself. But the psychic origin of this manifestation is undeniable." He stopped searching for something in my eye and just stared blankly.*

*"I don't know what to say, Jerry." And I didn't. I turned and headed toward the back door.*



*"Hey Densch," he bellowed, once I was at shouting distance. "Don't think it's something special in you. It's the trees' energy that makes the difference. You're just the damn channel."*

*Barbara arrived after we had all taken seats in something of a circle. We sat on cheap plastic folding chairs, but the many candles, the room's red theme and the flickering shadows around us gave the circle a feeling of deep substance and seriousness. Barbara had changed her clothes and appeared in something close to a gypsy soothsayer outfit. She wasn't embarrassed by the cliché; you got the impression that this helped her feel her place. Jerry did not join us. Barbara seemed to avoid my eyes as she looked around the circle to try to get everyone's attention.*

*"All right," she said. "We are here today to try to understand more about what the forests are telling us. All of you are going to help. You have to understand that the success of this s»ance depends on every one of us. Every last one of us." At that moment, her eyes rested expressly at you and Jared. I think I saw Jared wink, but she didn't acknowledge it. Barbara described some exercises that we would do to loosen up, or as she put it, "tune our psychic circuits." We tried to imagine in groups of two what each other was thinking; there was no check-back to see how far off we were, even though we were counseled how to foreground our own thoughts for easier pick-up by the other. "Don't worry," she said, "this exercise isn't about success or psychic ability." "What is it about?" asked Horvath. "It's about," said Barbara with a knowing smile, "embracing the possible."*

*Horvath looked unconvinced, so the next stage was a surprise. "Close your eyes," said Barbara after we circled up again. She was silent for an awkwardly long time, then went on: "Now imagine the piece of the Duke Forest that you know best. It may be a stretch along the side of a road, with a sign about when the stand was last harvested or what happened to it during Hurricane Floyd. Or it may be it's a trail you run on. A trailhead you've seen and wondered about. Perhaps you have just imagined what it must be like, a quarter mile in and no one around. Picture this place." She let us feel the time passing again. I imagined the last time and place I had reached ground zero in the forest. "Without opening your eyes, please tell me some things that you see." Now it was our turn to be silent, until Detective Horvath spoke up: "I am walking with Nora beside a small lake. The dirt is beige clay and covered in pine needles, still wet from the last rain."*

*Barbara did not speak. We named tall tree stands; a sign describing storm-borne decimation, with a few shattered trees behind it; shaded darkness; gravel roads and the distinctive green posts with thick cable strung between. No-dog signs (why that, you wonder). A dusting of snow. Leaves swirling in the wind. Oaks, beeches and various species of pine. A lone turkey vulture circling overhead. A sparrow hawk on the prowl. The distant echo from the freeway. This went on for five or ten minutes.*

*"That was wonderful," said Barbara. "Please open your eyes." We all blinked and squinted despite the low light; the candles burned little holes in the fabric of our vision. "Look at me. Just look at me. Good. Now, when I look at you, tell me what I want to know." We had no idea how this was going to work, but I found myself eager to do just that. What was inside me that she wanted to know?*

*She looked first at Jared. "Do you see signs of this creature they call the bog monster?" He looked suspicious. "You mean, in the forest?" She smiled and nodded encouragingly. "Just where you were." He looked up to the right, as people remembering are wont to do, and she reminded him: "Look at me." He looked back and did his best to stare. "No, I can't see anything. Except you." There was no chuckle, but we felt a moment of relief. I was worried how she would handle him. "Let me put you back, then. Are there trees in your corner of Duke Forest?" "Many," he said. "Describe them, please." He did a very nice job of giving a panoramic summary of new- growth and mature stands, with a road trailing off into the distance. "Look down." He smiled this time. "No," she confirmed, "not here. There." He kept his eyes on her. "I see gravel." "Now," she said, "walk toward the tall trees. Keep looking down. What do you see?" "A ditch dug for run-off, a little grass, leaves, lots of pine needles." "If you were going to see a sign of this creature, what would it be?" "I guess a foot print." "Good. What would it look like?" "Big -- I guess Bigfoot big. Five toes like us. A big gait."*

*That was enough from Jared. With each of us, she looked at us and got more of what we would see if the bog monster were real: dung, a tuft of fur, a big silhouette, movement in the forest, perhaps a bellowing voice, oversized hands but gentle enough to pick up a tiny baby. Then you, Brett, and I were all that were left. "What do you see?" Barbara asked you. "I see," you began with a defiant voice that had me concerned. I saw the train wreck coming: she was every girl who had scorned you, or wanted something from you. "I see some fronds that I push out of the way, and there's the monster's lair." You stopped to see if she would protest. "There's a big mattress the guy nabbed from the dump, and a TV that he has to have next to the bed, even though there's no electricity to run it, and same for a small party fridge, and a kitchen table with last month's paper, next to an empty tea cup. There's more, if you'd like it." Barbara looked over to me without answering. I couldn't see a plea in her eyes, but we made contact: We both knew that this day she was exposed, in much the same way I had been exposed at the aura reading. This was my chance to crush all this ambiguity and get it out of my life, forever.*

*I didn't move for a while, until my response took shape. "I see eyes." My breathing forced a pause. "They are looking at us. At me. They are not human eyes, but they are intelligent. I guess something like chimpanzee or gorilla eyes. In a yellow brown hue that is not human. Not much white, or maybe it's reddened. They are not dilated predator eyes, but they stare the same way, asking something of us. Of me. I don't know what it is, and they won't look away, even though that would give me a clue. It would also mean the end. I think the eyes would disappear back into the darkness."*

*I would have gone on, but Barbara asked: "Ask him what he wants. In your mind." She stared just as intently as I at her.*

*"There is brown fur around the eyes, and a strong brow. The brow is knitted, intense. I've tried to ask the question in my mind, and no response. I don't know how to speak to the eyes."*

*"Of course you don't," she said. "There is no expectation that you would. Let the eyes go. They have their own place to go. Now close your eyes. Please, everyone concentrate on John. Go back to the forest, John. Close your eyes there as well. I only want you to hear. A light wind, perhaps. Some distant birds. Needles snapping under your feet. Now ask the question. Ask there and ask here."*

*I ahemed into the room beyond my closed lids, and said, "Bog monster, what do you want?"*

*"Listen," she said.*

*"I can't hear anything, here or there, wherever here is."*

*"Ask there again and listen."*

*"Nothing," I said.*

*"No," she said. "Lis-SEN. Don't talk. Listen."*

*There was a tiring, ear-bending silence. Nothing.*

*"Now," she said, "what would you hear, if the bog monster spoke?"*

*"Not a voice," I said.*

*"Good. What then?"*

*"A growl. Different tones. I think they communicate through tones."*

*"A language?"*

*"I suppose. Not like ours. Simple. A lot of pointing."*

*"Do you see something, John? Are your eyes open?"*

*I was astounded. "Yes, I guess they are. I can see him next to me."*

*"How tall, John?" "Seven feet, maybe. Not massive. The fur makes him seem much larger."*

*"How much would you say he understands, John?"*

*"I would say that he understands as much as I do."*

*"Does he want you to understand something?"*

*"I guess so. He is pointing into the woods. This is his home. All he has left."*

*"Is he willing to help us? Does he understand?"*

*"Like I said, I feel like he understands what I understand. I suppose it helps to be inside my head."*

*"If he can help, can he tell us about Hayley Blalock?"*

*"He doesn't know anything about her, except that people have been all over that forest looking for her. He's had to jump patches several times."*

*"He never had occasion to see her?"*

*"No. -- He seems grateful to understand why the fuss."*

*"What is it," asked Barbara, "that he would like from us?"*

*I hesitated, as it took shape in my mind. Then I spoke slowly: "He wants to be given his land. He wants some kind of guarantee -- like a handshake, but something recorded, a promise, or a contract, or something -- no, he wants more..." Finally in a sudden shout: "Je-sus, he wants a treaty!" I opened my eyes and shook my head as I looked at Barbara, then Doreen. Where did that come from?*

*My mind was fogged all the way home and through the rest of the evening. There was not too much to process -- more like my brain was afraid of processing anything, especially a potentially painful realization that I had been duped or that I had fooled myself. That moment would be devastating, as I teetered on the edge of believing that something indelible, unbelievable had just happened to me. In the morning I would feel more distance; that would be the right time to process, critique and dismiss.*

*Doreen and I were in bed with the lights out before we spoke more than half sentences. "John," she whispered. She waited. "Doreen?" "John, I want you to see someone." "Who?" I asked. "A specialist." "A specialist? Do you think I'm nuts?" "It's not about being nuts, John. This is about mental health." She finished: "You scared me tonight."*

*"I'm sorry, Doreen. I didn't mean to scare you. But I'm not crazy."*

*"John, I am only saying that you might need some help."*

*"Why? Because I could imagine what the bog monster is like?"*

*"It was like the thought was taking you over. That was disconcerting."*

*"It was disconcerting for me, too. But it was just the circumstance. Maybe she hypnotized me. Maybe she set this all up the last time I was there."*

*"I don't think so," said Doreen. Already more sympathy for Barbara than for me.*

*"Well, why don't we see how I do. If you find me talking to myself, I'll see any specialist you want."*

*"John, it's just a suggestion. You're under a lot of pressure. I just don't think you're handling it well."*

*"Maybe not," I said, "but I don't feel ready for a psychiatrist."*

*"How about a psychic?"*

*Ouch. I let the hit score, and tried redirection: "I didn't think you were sympathetic to the paranormal."*

*"There's a lot you don't know about me, John," she said calmly and firmly.*

*Maybe, I thought, she is ready to discuss what I don't know about her on this most unusual of evenings. "Like what?" I asked.*

*"For one, I have always believed in psychic phenomena. I have felt it myself."*

*"Really?" I asked, incredulously. "You're normally a pretty rational person."*

*"Says the person who got his aura profiled. -- Sure, I'm rational, but I'm not close-minded. It's happened to me several times that I've thought about someone I haven't seen for a long time, and they call, or I think about someone, and decide to call, and they just experienced some life-altering event."*

*"Like who?"*

*"Once with my sister Cheryl. I hadn't seen or talked to her in months, and thought, I had better check in. I called, and she told me she'd just gotten engaged. She hadn't even told mom or dad."*

*"But rationally, you know you have to consider these experiences together with every other moment that has no special meaning. In that context, they look a lot more like coincidence."*

*"Okay," she said, getting up on an elbow and looking at me. "Then what is the story about this gorilla or whatever it is? Do you really think you can talk to Bigfoot?"*

*"No," I said. "I know rationally that it's all chance and suggestion. But the experience, the connection seemed real."*

*"John, there's no chance involved," she said. "Yes, there's a reason for everything, and no paranormal explanation is necessary here. This treaty story, that's pure you. What you attributed to Sasquatch -- that's all you. 'Give me my space, I need my private space.'"*

*"Oh, and you don't need your own space."*

*"Sure," she said, "I need space. But you totally misunderstand if you think it's meant to keep you out. I need a space where we can do more than talk about Brett and plan our next vacation. I need more." And before I could raise it -- "I need more from you."*

*"Fine," I said, knowing that there was no cost in saying so, because a mechanism for "more" wouldn't be worked out, not then, not there -- not even now.*

*Doreen felt it, too, and though she might want to say, "Here's what I want from you," she knew that there was no way from that discussion to a negotiation. She let it lie, too.*

*We had flip-flopped positions -- I now the rationalist and she the paranormalist -- but she saw no contradiction in that because she rationally believed, while I irrationally wanted to believe. And she was right, of course, a fact that made me sigh deeply. I was ready to let go of the evening and sleep. Doreen wanted to talk some more, but I rolled over and mumbled a good night. I don't remember if she replied but I was soon unaware.*

*Three days later, the local paper showed me why this had been a very bad idea. Under his own byline, Barry had penned a story that was headlined: "County Employee Communicates with Bog Monster." Then in smaller type: "Creature 'No Longer' Suspect in Disappearance." The story meticulously laid out the facts of the case, including Barbara's involvement, although she benefited from being a nameless "psychic hired by the police." The narrative of our s»ance was particularly impressive in its detail. Barbara was the only possible source, unless Barry had planted a mic and recording device in the room. I thought that perfectly possible, but I'm sure he would prefer to interview Barbara in person. And her motivation? It had to be the good press, or failing that, the notoriety. Anonymity would serve her purposes: findable for those interested, unknown for the skeptics. It was the perfect postmodern packaging, and I the dupe. While everyone else grabbed their piece of the media pie, my reputation cooked away: kooky for my colleagues; bizarre for fellow citizens; of continuing interest for law enforcement; and suspicious to my family.*

*Still, I didn't call Barry to give him a piece of mind. I could hardly blame him. The treaty-seeking Bog Monster fit perfectly with his own bizarre notions of Sasquatch, and his quest for Bog-Monster libert» was almost certain at the back of my mind. Let him enjoy his bit, I thought; it's the last thing he'll get from me.*

*That day was hard -- everyone tiptoed around me -- but it got worse the following day. I was invited to the Chapel Hill police headquarters, the natural and inevitable outcome of the whole affair. I could hear in my mind over and over again: Talking to a bog monster, are we, buddy? When are you going to drop the ruse and come clean? Where'd ya bury 'em?*

*Detective Horvath met me at the reception area; Officer Brightman was nowhere to be seen. Police Captain Stone shook my hand and then left me in Horvath's good care. A uniformed (albeit in khaki) officer, Sergeant Abigail Frommeyer, joined us in the interview room. She was studiously stonyfaced, while Horvath was the jovial BBQ acquaintance.*

*"Look, John -- I can call you John, right, thanks -- it does seem like Hayley Blalock is alive. Someone is living off advances on her credit card that her parents refuse to cut off, slowly making her way to Mexico. Whoever is collecting the money doesn't seem to want to leave the country. I'm afraid that Hayley won't admit it to her boyfriend, but even if she has, Jos» may be afraid of a felony charge for statutory rape -- he can't rely on getting married to clear the slate, not in this state, and he may be old enough to get charged with a felony. Some day they'll have to commit, one way or another, and I just hope that they can reach an amiable resolution. Too often this kind of thing ends badly." He paused. "This is all good news, right? But since you've come in, I thought we could use your help in clearing up some other cases." He pointed to a stack of papers that the policewoman had next to her. It was in that moment that I realized she was an Orange County sheriff's deputy, and that I knew my days of idly walking the county were at an absolute end. She mirandized*

me.

"Mr. Densch," she said, "I have here a variety of trespass and stalking reports from the Sheriff's Office. The descriptions of the perpetrator resemble each other quite well, and they match you. I can ask you about each individual case and inquire of your whereabouts, or we can clarify this with one general question: Do you have in your possession a surveyor's highway safety vest?" She waited with the same cold expression, even though I must say her voice was much warmer.

"Yes, I do," I said. Horvath, who must have expected my answer, nevertheless shifted forward in his seat and became more intent.

"Is it reasonable to assume that you may have been involved in some of these cases of trespassing?"

"It is reasonable, although I would have to look at each to be able to answer in specific."

"Sure," she said. "Of course. That won't be necessary at this time. A number of these have reached their statute of limitations, even if they could be prosecuted, and the others will be closed with the notation that you stipulated the safety vest. That information will only be passed on to the district attorney if we get more of these reports. Do I make myself clear?" A stony smile.

"Yes," I said, barely able to stop the "ma'am."

She looked at Horvath with a half nod.

"Well, John, that really is a surprise," said Horvath with disingenuous sadness. "That changes everything."

"I'm not sure why," I said. "Look, there's a very simple explanation. I work with a map of the county all day and every day. I just wanted to see some of the real county. That's all. I wasn't looking for people, or scouting, or stalking. I was just seeing the real property."

"Oh sure," said Horvath. "I understand that perfectly. You see a plot of land on your computer, pull up the owner, value, the improvements, and you wonder, what does this look like? Do they have trees or a field? Is the house pristine or rundown? Is this a hill or valley? I understand completely... There's only one problem." A pause. "This puts you anywhere in the county at any time." Another. "There are some cold cases we need to discuss with you." He looked back at Sgt. Fronmeyer.

She took two fat notebooks from beneath the table. On each spine was a name and case number. One name was Hillary Bingham, the other Jane Doe 27. **I could feel a squirt of debilitating acid in my stomach, and my mouth had the cold metallic taste of blood.** "I'd like to ask you about the date of ---- ----," she began. **After saying what crime occurred that day, she lifted the top sheet from the stack of trespassing cases. It seems that someone matching my description was in the general area of the Hillary's disappearance, trespassing and scaring a woman who was walking her dog on her own property. Now, mind you, "the general area" meant some miles distant, and there were no witness accounts to place this individual closer to the crime. They were fishing, in other words.**

"Yes," I said, anxious to iron this out, "that was probably me. I think I remember that afternoon. It was a cool November afternoon, clouded and a bit blustery. I was going to the middle of a large stand of trees -- we did have at least one recent satellite overlay at the time, so I could be fairly confident of that -- and I remember hearing something, but I never saw anyone so I just continued. I suppose she must have heard me and headed the other way."

"All right," she said. "Were you in the vicinity of \_\_\_\_\_ that day?"

"No," I replied.

"Can someone provide evidence that you were elsewhere at 5:30pm on that day?"

"I don't know," I said, "I imagine I was on my way home."

"Then no one would be able to say where you were or weren't."

I shook my head. It was a few moments before I realized: "Maybe you can compare when the trespass report was called in. If you can establish when I left that property, maybe we can determine whether I had time to drive to \_\_\_\_\_ and get home in time for dinner."

"Drive to \_\_\_\_\_ and attack Hillary Bingham and leave her for dead, you mean?" asked Horvath.

"I guess that's what's meant."

"If you did attack her, what might you use to disable a woman like her? She was 20 years old, five foot six and 150 pounds. There was a struggle. What might you have hit her with?"

I looked incredulously at him. "I didn't hit her. I didn't see her. -- I don't know why I'm still here, answering these questions. Hayley didn't disappear, after all, and there's no connection between any other disappearance or any attack and me. Sure, I like to walk and see parts of the county that are private property. That doesn't make me capable of any of the things you're implying. It's just crazy."

"Did I say that Hayley hasn't disappeared?"

"You said that she's alive and using her credit card. That doesn't sound like she disappeared."

"Right," said Horvath. "I suppose so, if you think disappearance must mean murder, or if you have reason to believe that, John. -- Anyway, the Mexico story is what her parents believe. We still have her listed as a missing person, under suspicious circumstances."

Fronmeyer looked uncomfortable and said: "Maybe you'd like to have a lawyer when we next speak."

"All right," I said, "I guess I should. I'd like to go now."

Horvath pointed to the door.

I got up and went to the door, feeling awkward and unsure. How does one act when every simple motion feels like pulling iron chains through water, when you know that every little gesture can be misinterpreted as arrogance or guilt or indifference? As I pulled the door open, Horvath called out: "John, sometime you should explain to me why didn't you tell us earlier."

I turned. "What?"

"That your son knows Hayley. I'm told she was his girlfriend a while back."

That was the lowest point, maybe even the lowest point of my whole life. I didn't imagine for a second, Brett, that you were involved with Hayley's disappearance. But I was saddened by how little that I knew about your life, and my heart ached because I knew the police were not going to pull any punches. The threat was unmistakable. If they thought they couldn't get me directly, they'd go after you.

I got in the car and drove back to work. I could muster no surprise when told that I was being put on administrative leave. In fact, I was pleasantly surprised when Richard, my boss, said that it was paid leave -- maybe the police had not yet let them know about my wanderings under the guise of official duty.

"I'm sorry, John," he said, "but the county's counsel says we have to take steps. You understand."

"Sure," I said.

He looked at me, for a moment feeling that he had to say, I know you didn't do it, but unable to bring himself to say it. I could recognize the moment so well, so easily, and did nothing to ease it for him. I guess I was equally trapped by my bitterness.

I left everything lie on my desk -- it was temporary, after all -- and headed out the front. I opened the outside door and held it for a woman standing just to the parking lot side of the door. No irrational behavior from me.

"John Densch?" she said.

It took a moment before it registered. "Excuse me?" I said, hoping she wasn't saying, hey, didn't I see something about your criminal genius in the paper?

"Mr. Densch?" she asked earnestly.

"Yes," I said, awkwardly still holding the door.

She moved back a few steps, and I let the door whoosh shut. I was rather suspicious, but she had a very business-like, one might even say officious, manner, such that there were whole categories of suspicions that I was able to let go. But was she FBI? Some moral police that I'd never heard tell of?

"My name is Samantha Ogg."

"Ock?"

"Og-g-uh," she said crisply but with irritation.

"I'm sorry," I said. I'd never had a very good ear and this one put me to the test. I looked at her expecting more.

"I'm here today to speak with you on the business of the Triangle Association of Scientists and Teachers of Science." She cracked a weak smile.

In my state of malaise, I was taken aback, so much so that I almost burst out with a gallows laugh: What now!

"We are a committed group, dedicated to the furtherment of the sciences and to the reduction of irrationalism in the population. We are not anti- religion, except where it oversteps its epistemological boundaries and demands the suspension of empirical scientific understanding."

"Are you looking for a contribution?" I asked hesitantly, no doubt with a threatening guffaw on my lips.

"Not at all, Mr. Densch." She held up a forearm in a somewhat declaratory gesture. "We are asking you to do the right thing and publicly disassociate yourself from the recent stories about an alleged bog monster inhabiting the triangle region. Such stories, with their inevitable psychic babble and encounters with the paranormal, do nothing but encourage the broader public in its tendencies toward irrationality, fear and



self-delusion."

"You want me to disavow the s»ance I attended? There were two police detectives in attendance, Ms. Oggie. I was an invited participant; I didn't ask for it. I haven't said anything about it publicly."

"Yes, all true, Mr. Densch -- it's Og-guh -- but the report in the paper turns on your performance. If you had not stepped in with your portrayal of your psychic twin Sasquatch, the story never would have been carried. Mr. Densch, you did yourself quite a disservice that evening, yourself and the cause of science and societal progress. People do not need to be encouraged to abandon reason and rationality. The broadest swath of citizens believes in Bigfoot, UFOs and pyramid power, even while they are entrusted with the governance of the greatest social experiment in human history. They do not need educated professionals pandering to their irrationality."

"I didn't do the pandering -- Ms. Og-ck."

She looked at me, a bit nonplussed that I could be arguing the point. I studied her expression for a while, then -- when she did not go on -- I offered: "I understand your concerns. My life would be infinitely simpler if the whole misunderstanding had not taken hold. So -- believe me, I'm very sympathetic. But I am now a 'person of interest' to the police for incomprehensible reasons, and I've just been put on administrative leave here at my job. I don't think now is the time for me to make public statements. I've got to find a lawyer."

Samantha Ogg was a short woman, with a wide waist and, as far as I could tell beneath her generous skirt, strong stocky legs. She had long and heavy-set arms, which she used in rather stochastic gestures. She wore a loose top with no discernible bosom, and wore her thick broom-blond hair brushed back but otherwise unbundled. The most distinctive part of her attire was her bright winged eyeglasses: they seemed to have survived decades of mere bad taste to become undeniably but unintentionally retro-cool.

I estimated her in her forties, although there was something so refreshingly purposeful in her manner that I was willing to drop fifteen years off my estimate.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said in quick tones. You could tell that she wasn't prepared concede that I was the victim here, since she had come with such aspirations to right wrongs. "I'm disappointed to hear of these consequences from such an unfortunate misconstrual." There was also something of the "you play with fire" accusation in this, but I could tell from her expression that she was genuinely burdened by my plight, if only in the way one might mourn a bird, dead in front of a plate glass door.

"Since it would be wrong to ask your help under such circumstances," she continued, "I would like to know if there is some way in which I could help you."

This is, of course, where in a hundred celluloid dialogs the worldly-wise hero says something like, "Sure, toots, you can get those lousy coppers off my tail." I wasn't feeling so jovial as to play the role, nor did she seem to deserve it. "I don't think so, but thank you, Ms. Og-ck, for your offer."

"All right, then," she said, and did a half turn before freezing, as if a run- away thought had usurped her brain as completely as the blue screen of death captures a Windows computer. "Perhaps," she said after a few moments, enough time for me to wonder if it would be rude to just walk away, "I could speak with you as a private citizen. Then when this matter is cleared up, we would be able to move quickly to quell the misunderstandings about this bog monster."

"Sure," I said. "That would be fine."

Still partially turned: "Lunch then?"

I didn't understand immediately. "What -- you mean right now?"

"If you're free," she said, half smiling at the irony.

I didn't know what to say. I really wanted to go home, lick my wounds, and sift through and organize my thoughts, with the hopes of protecting my mind against feeling personally and irrevocably responsible for this horrible turn of events. On the other side of the equation: lunch with this woman with whom I had nothing in common except that we both thought this bog monster an invented disaster. On the one side, my own space to ruminate and cogitate; on the other, human contact and perhaps sympathy. All the same, not an easy decision.

"All right," I said finally, "that sounds fine."

We negotiated meeting fifteen minutes later at a Chinese restaurant in Durham; I needed to go by an ATM. The drive was an opportunity to weigh the choices and make another decision, but it seemed too caddish to leave her standing. She was waiting when I entered the restaurant.

"Okay then, we'll just get a table." She hadn't yet requested a table for two; it seems that she was familiar with my temptation.

I followed her back to the table and we sat across from each other.

"So, Ms. Og-ck," I began, to avoid silence.

"Please," she jumped in, "call me Samantha." In her voice, there was audible relief at getting past the awkwardness around her last name.

"All right. I'm John. So, Samantha, tell me about yourself. -- You obviously know a lot about me."

"Oh," she said. "Okay then. There's not much to tell. I am a staff scientist at the EPA facility in Morrisville. I'm a biochemist. My husband and I live in Raleigh -- we like urban living, shows and museums and the like. No children. We have lived here about 15 years, well, 16 next August. I've been involved with the association ten years, and I'm currently the chapter president. That's why I'm here. Our executive committee agreed that this case demanded action." She smiled embarrassedly, remembering that she had agreed to hold off.

"Where are you from?"

She was confused for a moment, then said: "Cleveland, originally. We much prefer the warmer climate here. Donald would as soon move farther south, but there aren't any appropriate labs south of here. The CDC, perhaps, in Atlanta, but I much prefer the environment to contagions."

"What does Donald do?"

"He's a writer, a technical writer. Manuals mostly. He works at home. Contract work. It pays well when he's working. When he's not, well, we tend to eat much better." An ambiguous smile.

"He's a good cook?"

"Yes. He is. But when he's working we usually eat out. Neither of us has the energy to face the kitchen after work, or when we've got a show to see, or when we just want to go to a bookstore."

"Sounds like a good life."

"Certainly," she said, as if she was wondering where I was going, I suppose because she usually gets the 'and when are the little ones coming' question at this point.

"So -- what does your society do? Are you usually engaged on such a micro level, influencing individual citizens?"

"Oh, we've got activities on all levels -- from individual interventions to inner-city summer camps to Washington lobbyists. It's a full-service organization," she said with a smile.

"All in the name of science?"

"Science, yes," she said, "but more it's about the scientific method and rationality. As I said, we're not anti-religion and we're not in the business of dictating morality. We see our role as fighting bad discourse -- religious thought masquerading as science, irrational ideas presented as logical reasoning, political sloganeering distorting scientific studies, and the like."

"Sounds maybe less like the promotion of science and more like philosophy."

"We're in favor of the philosophy of science, and the science of rational political engagement. We're not modern-science bigots, Mr. -- John. Rationality is the father of science, and rational discourse the legacy of the scientific method."

"There's a lot of confidence in that, Samantha. Don't you ever find yourselves disagreeing so much you have doubt rationality just a little bit?"

She chuckled. "Sounds like you've been to some of our meetings. But, no. Rationality does not mean 'no disagreement.' Rationality means, on the one hand, repeatable experiments according to the scientific method and, on the other, discussion, argument, disagreement among the humans who interpret their results. We are none of us as smart as we are together. Our obligation is to remember that an idea that we cannot test or contest can never be a human truth."

"That's pretty heady stuff before lunch," I said. The waitress, standing beside the table, had let Samantha finish; we ordered our food.

Our conversation lagged after that point, until I offered to tell the whole story of the bog monster, and she accepted. She had informed herself, and was able to anticipate many of the things I had to tell. When I got to the s»ance and described how it was that I 'channeled' the monster, she kept nodding as if I were confessing to her.

That notion made me ask: "It seemed real. Is it wrong to at least consider the reality of one's experiences?"

"How is it wrong," she said. "There are so many ways. Our senses are constantly being fooled -- they're simply inadequate to the task of disambiguating causal relationships in this world. If you are an animal, it suffices to know that fire burns; you run when you see a forest fire. But if you are human, you need to master fire. Believing it is the fourth element, or something that a trickster god has left to us, is simply insufficient. You need to get past what it looks like and understand what it is doing. It is oxidizing - - it is a pure version of what happens all over and everywhere in our bodies. Our senses can't begin to tell you that --"

"Although," I cut in, with a sandwich dill in my hand serving to punctuate my point, "there are all sorts of fire-in-the-belly metaphors, and things like that. People naturally make that connection."

"All right, but do you want a barber-doctor who believes your fever is caused by the element of fire, which he

will lessen through the application of leeches, or a medical doctor who has medicines that will kill the bacteria attacking your body?"

"Well, what if I prefer a medical doctor, but still believe there are unexplained things in this world, things that may belong to our native sense of the paranormal?"

"That's it exactly," she said, moving forward in her seat and shaking her head for a moment like an excited child, "you've put your finger on it. That's exactly what we cannot allow ourselves. Of course, there are unexplained things in the world. Of course, the fact that we don't understand them makes them seem magical or strange. But we cannot at that point say, okay, science hasn't made it here to this point so I'm free to be irrational. No, exactly not. I acknowledge that there are limits to science, and I may wish to believe in a religious tradition because it offers comfort or because I have been raised in that tradition. But I cannot say, the monster felt real so it must be. No. Your feelings are ambiguous; you could as easily convince yourself that Mickey Mouse is real if you rely on what your mind tells you. You must disambiguate. The real is not the ambiguous."

"The real is not the ambiguous. Hmmm. But what if I don't recognize it as the ambiguous -- it just felt real."

"But you had your rational doubts, did you not?"

"I did."

"That's why this point is so important, John. All around us, people are insinuating that it is okay to go with the ambiguous, the felt, and the imagined. At the same time, we are facing a cold hard reality that is telling us to be more cautious, more circumspect. Take the automobile, John. An immense infrastructure, with a century of collective scientific and technical knowledge and the labor of many millions, makes it possible for you to zip along the freeway at 55 miles an hour. You play your radio, look out the window and hum to yourself. Your body and your senses tell you that you are at rest, and it seems as if nothing could happen to you while you're in the car. You feel invincible. But in fact the momentum stored in your body would kill you in an instant, should your progress be stopped by a larger and harder object. You may be tempted to forget this fact, but at your own peril. You know better than to direct that car at a wall, but not because of what your senses are telling you. That's what this struggle is all about."

I let the lesson sit, and looked out the window. Then I gave her a glance that I hope told her I was not ungrateful for her interest in me. I could only conclude: "I feel like a train wreck right now."

I was standing in the kitchen, drinking coffee and looking out the window, when you stormed into the house. You were utterly surprised to see me there and had the expression: did something happen to mom? I felt enough irritation at that that I didn't let you off that hook right away. Finally you said, "Hi dad." Then you stutter-stepped to the fridge and took the milk out. You had a big cookie in your lunch bag, for some reason, and you sat down to milk and a cookie.

"Brett," I said, trying my best to be equanimous, "I was told today that you are familiar with Hayley Blalock."

You looked at me with overly knitted brow.

"That's the girl who disappeared. Whose disappearance led to the s>ance. And whose continuing absence means the police keep asking me questions."

You were chewing again. And?

"Why didn't you tell me you knew her?"

"Idunno." Did you ask me?

"I was told she was your girlfriend."

"Wha!" you let out, along with some milk and crumb remnants. After you got your reaction under control and mopped up a bit with a napkin, you explained: "I knew a Hayley, maybe that Hayley, in third or fourth grade. She was in afterschool, I think. But she wasn't my girlfriend. I guess it's the same girl. She looks different."

"How did you know her?"

"We had afterschool together. Probably."

"Anything else? Why would someone say she was your girlfriend?"

"I went to her birthday party, I guess."

I thought about that for a moment, with a growing inkling. "Who else was in afterschool, and went to that party?"

You had a skeptical expression, like, 'how am I supposed to know that?'

"Jared?"

You looked distracted, then: "I guess so. He was in afterschool, too."

Derek sat watching Click-Cluck. It was something he enjoyed: the undulations of her antennae, the way her black forearms rubbed each other when she was distracted, her slightly cocked stance because the left rear leg locked in a different position than the others -- all the little idiosyncrasies were familiar, endearing, in their own way humanizing. While he watched her he sometimes remembered his high-school girlfriend, distractedly working on some project, projecting an equal number of unique, unintended but pleasant attributes. He reminisced about a certain look she gave him, and the following smile that always sealed the deal for him -- and just as quickly he remembered there was no smile coming here.

He knew she had been receiving reports about his nocturnal visitor. No one had asked him anything about it, but that was just a matter of time. 'Are you losing it, Derek?' He couldn't answer with any assurance either way, but he wasn't going to give up the company.

Click-Cluck couldn't guess what he was going to tell her now, unless she was observing him when away. Click-Cluck, he said in his best bug.

Yes, Derek?

"You should know that I've accepted a dinner invitation."

She rearranged her body so that her two antennae had a better bead on him.

You have done what?

"Your boss contacted me -- quite secretively, it was through the television projector -- and invited me to dinner. I've accepted."

He waited to see what her antennae did. Nothing. Maybe she wasn't surprised after all.

Why did you accept?

"He said that I will be able to meet other intelligent alien life forms. And he might even take me to the surface."

Still nothing. She rotated again and went back to her business, as if to say, well, that's done. I can scratch this hopeless cause off my schedule.

"That's it?"

You made your mind up, Derek. I won't bother you further about it.

"I thought you might try to dissuade me."

Why?

"He's dangerous, you said."

I think when he can control you this way he is far less dangerous.

"You don't think he'll take this chance to get rid of me?"

His goal is control. I think you will understand when you meet these aliens.

"And you won't counter offer?"

"kkkktdddrr?" she clicked.

"Counter offer. Try to get me to give up his offer by making your own. Maybe arranging something similar for me?"

I have nothing to offer, she said. More precisely: 'my for you sole and unaided self.'

"Are you there?" asked Derek. He waited for the voice in his head.

"Of course."

"Don't you ever sleep?"

"It's all just time -- I can respond any time I want and you wouldn't know the difference. I might be responding to you before we have even met. How's that for a mindbender?"

"It seems rather ridiculous. Suspicious. Why is it that you have a sense of humor just like mine, for instance?"

"I would laugh if I could. Don't forget, Derek, that your own brain is putting this discussion together. We are both human, but our languages and our experiences don't match one iota. You will have to hear my story soon enough. It's your mind that is making sense of our discussion, and it can only do so in terms that it understands. Consider it similar to dreaming: You know everything coming at you is a series of stored experiences, but still they carry a meaning that goes beyond the superficial stream."

"I've accepted the invitation I told you about. I'm going to meet with Thunk. He's promised to let me meet some intelligent aliens. He might even take me to the surface. -- He seemed very agreeable."

"That's nice."

"Still," said Derek. "I can't help thinking that this is a trap, a mistake. Why was Click-Cluck so calm? Is she in on it? Or am I a lost cause? -- What do you think?"

"I think I can only reflect back what you tell me. I have no idea what's at stake or what you're not thinking of. I suspect that Click-Cluck would tell you if this was more dangerous than the alternatives. It might just be something you have to go through."

"I guess." Then: "So -- tell me some more about you. I want to understand."

"It's difficult. I need to tell you the story in order -- that may sound strange, given what I said before -- but I think your brain will do better with what I have to say if it gets the pieces in order. Are you willing to take this one step at a time?"

"Sure."

"I ask because my listeners tend to be impatient. I won't be overlong, but if you don't think of this as a story you tend to want to compress the parts to get a whole. I have only the parts."

"One part at a time. I've got time."

"Time is exactly the point, cowboy. You think you have time because you have a measure of days. Days are just the beginning. You have to begin to think on a cosmic scale. Galaxies come, galaxies go. The only constant?"

"The passage of time?"

"Time is nothing, Derek. Energy is everything. And the control of energy is the control of everything. I am the gatekeeper, he who controls the energy."

Doreen and I sat in the living room -- which we never did -- and the silence seemed to comfort -- me at least. Earlier, when she came home, she had asked me what was wrong and listened to my story. Then she asked her questions. We ate a fairly calm dinner, and you went to do your homework.

"A lawyer, then," she said.

"Yes, I've got to find one."

"Let me talk to our house counsel. I can get a recommendation."

I looked her in the eyes. "I want you to know that I have done nothing wrong." Then, after a sufficient pause: "Except the trespassing thing. It's stupid, I know, but there's nothing to it. I promise you."

"I have to say that I wondered," she said. "Sometimes I'd call and you wouldn't even know I had left a message. And I felt I couldn't ask you."

"I understand," I said, for the lack of something better.

She hadn't said that she knew I had done nothing wrong, but in a parallel way I couldn't ask.

The silence, rather than expand the distance between us, seemed to bring us together that evening. In the

silence was the impossibility of the guessing the future and the question whether we would be sitting together in a year's time. It was unsettling but made the moment more powerful: just sitting together, sharing our marriage as it teetered on the edge of my life's dissolution. Uncertainty in itself can be an overwhelming thing.

All of a sudden, I heard her sob. She was already trying to wipe her eyes clear when I looked.

I felt helpless. "I'm sorry," I said.

"That damn monster," she said weakly, and smiled at me for the irony of making it real just so that she could damn it.

Things can move quickly in the legal world when they must. I had an interview with a lawyer the next afternoon. He came highly recommended, "though he's not every one's cup of tea." I didn't know what that meant, but Doreen said: "I think in this case that can only be a good thing." There were a couple other choices, should I not feel comfortable with Mr. Kettle, but I got the sense they might be just a little less available. A bit of professional sharing the wealth, perhaps, with this recommendation?

Again I was faced with the question: How do you communicate innocence? Do you pretend this is no big deal? Do you dress the Sunday penitent? I opted for the ol' work clothes, though not the old work clothes.

I was quite underdressed, as I surmised in the waiting room when evaluating his secretary. She was on the older side, but thin, smartly dressed in lustrous rayon, attractively coifed with long brunette curls, and expertly made up, with perhaps too much blue mascara for her crows' feet and the circles under her eyes. "Mr. Kettle will be with you shortly," then the curt smile that you may think extinct but you will come to realize it's been preserved for a different class of people.

He came from the outside door, and greeted Ms. Van, then disappeared into his office. She avoided my glance until she went back to typing at the computer.

The door popped open five minutes later. "John," he said with force, as if we knew each other. Or maybe there was a question in it.

In any case, he strode to me and we shook hands. "Come on in," he said, and showed me the way with his hand. I assumed the two of them exchanged glances behind my back.

I took a seat opposite his desk, the Wake Forest law degree behind him and a few rows of law volumes that looked as much prop as resource.

He sat down, and then much to my surprise took to straightening some paperweights on his desk. I waited for him to say something. "Go ahead," he said with a brief glance.

I didn't expect that. I must say I didn't really expect him either: ten -- fifteen years my junior, a compact but wiry looking body, a sharp jaw but somewhat uneven face, as if there were a bit of paralysis. He wore his hair simply, a mop cut that made him look even younger than he was, despite the gel he put in it. He already had a five o'clock shadow. His suit looked fine but somehow didn't sit right.

His eyes were coal black. I was half afraid that he was high, but I decided he had very dark irises.

I cleared my throat, then said: "You probably know about the Hayley Blalock disappearance."

"I do," he replied, and reached directly for the stereotypical yellow legal pad. A new one. His eyes finally settled on me.



I tried to describe the sequence as best as I could. He looked pensive throughout, wrote things when I was stuttering, and seemed to be lost in thought when I gave the meat of the matter: "They think I'm hiding something. But really, I just liked seeing what the county looks like in real life."

"Hmmm. Why don't you just use a satellite photo service?"

"It's not the same," I said.

"No, it's not. Did they read you your rights?"

"They did."

"Did you answer any questions after that?"

"I did."

"Oh boy," he said, and drew a line under something. "That's when they surprised you with the tidbit about your son?"

"Yes."

"Why do you think they are interested in you?"

"Like I said, I think they think I'm hiding something."

"Okay. But there has to be something else. Does someone not like you? Did you sass them? Do you beat your wife? Is your son a sadist toward little animals? We're at the point where the police will look at anything to try to find corroborating evidence, even if it's not admissible. They want to be sure themselves before they go to the trouble of finding the legal evidence they need. So -- you're in the gut stage. Someone has it in his or her gut that you're guilty of something."

"I guess I am, because of the trespassing. I don't think they understand."

"I've got some news for you, John. Nobody's going to understand that. I don't. A jury sure as hell won't. You will have to give up the notion that you're an innocent who is unjustly charged here. In the court of public opinion, which is exactly where we are right now, you're guilty until proven innocent. Sure, things are better in a court of law, but not much. The facts and rules of evidence speak there, but they are nothing without a story. Nothing but chatter." He sized me up, I think, to see if he should continue or spare me. "By way of example, let's imagine they charge you with one or the other serious crime, and you refuse the plea deal. And believe me, they'll jack up the charges just to make sure you'll take the plea. But let's say you insist on your innocence, damn the consequences. Let's even imagine that the evidence is shaky. I've still got to be careful about impugning the state because those fine people in the jury don't want to believe that you're sitting at the defense table because of some cop's gut feeling. They'll listen hard to understand the story the state is telling. And they'll be skeptical of our story, even before they hear your little tale of trespassing."

"The prosecutor and I will exchange eloquent closing statements. 'You must convict this invidious criminal, this sociopath who masqueraded as one of us.' 'This is all a huge mistake, a remarkable series of coincidences that you must see through.' Then the judge turns to the jury. 'Members of the jury, I'll tell you what you need to determine innocence or guilt, but it will be up to you to make sense of the evidence presented here. The prosecutor has given you a story about how the defendant committed the crime; the defense attorney has given you another about how the evidence leads to his innocence. You must weigh these stories and choose the more coherent one. This is the reasonable doubt test. You are not here to come up with your own theories

about what could have happened, or to surrender before an unknowable past. You can reject this or that detail, but you are obliged to find one of these two stories reasonable. Only then is your job done."

All I could think was: guilty.

"All right, then, John, what's our story?"

But there was nothing else I could say. "I wasn't anywhere near the crimes -- I was just exploring the county."

He half sighed and started writing on his pad. "That'll have to do."

"It's the truth," I protested under my breath.

He wrote a while longer. "The truth is an illusion of small people, Mr. Densch." He continued writing. "Justice has little relationship to truth. 'Beauty is truth, and truth beauty. That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.' That has a nice ring to it, and it makes some sense, since both are abstractions with a vague definition and a vaguer function. Justice is concise. It is the administration of rules in the spirit of the principles that led to the rules." He stopped writing and looked me in the eye. "Does that sound circular? It means that your principles may have their roots in vague ideas of truth and equality, but you must be able to articulate these principles in order to make rules that match them. The belief in truth is just the hope that everything will work out. But justice is concrete: describe your first principles, derive your rules from them, and then apply the derived rules in that same spirit. Voila. Justice."

I didn't know what to do with that. "Can I at least get justice?"

"Oh, I can assure you that. I will see that justice is served. Whether the result pleases you, or matches your hopeful sense of the 'Truth,' that I cannot guarantee."

I looked at him, aghast.

His face was frozen for the next five seconds as he realized he'd talked himself out of another job. Then he smiled grimly as he considered how to undo the damage. "Of course, I will do everything in my power to assure the result we want. I can't imagine this case will go to trial. There will be no plea, either, because they'll never charge you, or if they do, they'll withdraw the charge."

"Why are you so positive all of a sudden?"

"Because we'll beat them at their own game. They want a PR war -- they'll get one."

I looked at him, waiting for the explanation.

"We will be the first to find Hayley on the lam, in some sunny southern clime, and they'll be too embarrassed to charge you with anything."

Derek communicated with Thunk and his bug associates via the cloud projector TV. When it was his time to reply, a large image of a typewriter would appear. Each key was the size of a playing card, but he got used to writing that way and could bang out a reply quickly. Thunk communicated through written English, rudimentary and often cryptically ill chosen, but mostly grammatical. Derek guessed a computer did the translating.

For instance: "We will accost with haste born on wind."

Derek assumed that meant: "You're on your way?"

"Yes, with gratitude."

"I'll be ready."

"Pleasant thoughts."

Derek waited quietly, squatting in the corner, his radar glasses perched on his nose but off his eyes. Clum-Clum-Tock was nowhere to be seen, perhaps purposively pulled off the case, perhaps innocently otherwise occupied. An hour or so passed, then all of a sudden the floor latch opened and three bugs eased themselves into the chamber. They were big bugs and had a certain thuggish quality -- random deep scratching on their hides, bulging legs, thicker slower-moving antennae that looked like stretched whips -- that made the room seem rather small.

They were clicking at him, but he couldn't understand. He thought he heard "your following of us," but it could as easily have been "stupid mammal, your desired following of us to your death." One foumped down through the opening, then another. The third waited for Derek, who repositioned his glasses, stood up and eased himself onto his vehicle, then hovered forward and down. He moved slowly into the traffic in the tunnel, and could see the two earlier bugs ahead. They had activated some kind of marker that allowed him to track them visually. The third bug was still speaking to him, advising him to enter the traffic stream. All four began the journey in earnest.

The journey lasted for hours. Derek had figured out how to tune in bug TV on his visors, and so he could occupy himself with his relatively fruitless attempts to understand the self-representation of bug culture. The language was still usually too difficult -- he suspected sometimes that Click-Cluck had taught him a private or oversimplified language -- and the visual images did not seem to tell a story. In fact, the screen usually showed no movement and sometimes showed an indistinct tableau and sometimes an overly close-in shot at a bug or a rock or a console or who knows what. He couldn't figure out how to get to his earth video library from his headset.

The trip along the channel was mundane but he could feel the significance with every minute that he moved farther away from his mentor. She and he both knew the risks; he couldn't be sure that he would ever see her again.

Chatter woke him from a fitful half-sleep, and he realized they were readying to leave the tunnel for a smaller side shoot. In fact, they diverged into ever-smaller side shoots, as if suddenly in a giant colony or a city. When the tunnel was no wider than a single bug, they came to a near stop. The first bug turned off to the side and released a door, through which they each in turn passed. The style of this domicile was different than what Derek was used to: high chamber; slick, angular walls; furniture, such as it would be for the horizontal bodies of bugs; and absolutely no light. They passed through another door, one which opened itself, into a larger chamber with similar characteristics. A number of bugs were already in attendance, including one that Derek thought he recognized. Thunk.

Derek approached, but his escorts peeled off and disappeared.

None of the bugs approached him, but Derek realized Thunk was already communicating through the screen on his visor.

"Welcome here, earthener."

Derek didn't know how to reply through his visor, so he tried to speak: 'My joy at arrival,' a greeting he had

heard others give.

"Speak please not our language, although I may beg."

That sentence alone gave him a feeling for why they may not have wanted him speaking their language either.

A big cloud projection appeared, and a keyboard floated at his head level.

The conversation continued on the pleasantry level, with no apparent purpose, until Derek noticed that one figure in the room was not a bug.

He hadn't noticed the creature at first because it was supine and fairly covered in metallic bands and swaths of cloth. It might have been mistaken for an injured or misshapen bug beneath the accoutrements, if not for the face. There was a configuration -- not like earth fauna, but reminiscent enough -- that you knew was a collection of sensory and feeding organs. It was more symmetric, with two closed slits that were likely eyes and two separate open slits that looked like nostrils. The mouth seemed to be underneath the chin, or on the bottom of the main part of the face. There was no hair, but the skin seemed to have nodules rowed upon each other, like giant goose bumps. The nodules were muted red in color, but the skin beneath flashed deep blue and red, in occasional patterns like an octopus or cuttlefish. Behind and above the facial features were two nearly separate globular lobes that seemed have popped out of the cranial bones. The body was probably five feet long and had four equal but lengthy appendages that began somewhere near the midpoint. It did not move; the eyes never opened. Derek slowly noticed wires and devices affixed to the brain lobes.

"What is wrong with your guest?" he wrote.

"No wrong thing. The guest chooses to feel at home."

"It is asleep?"

"Dreamed."

"Dreaming?"

"Always dreaming. Very relaxed."

"Okay. Is it not well? Can we speak with it?"

"Communication takes later possibility."

At that point, Thunk caused the projector to recede, and the bugs floated up on their discs and led the way into another hall. There were two banks with a recessed area between them. When Derek dismounted and took his place among the bugs, he recognized this as an eating situation: slop of various hues and consistencies was arrayed in the middle of the depression. The bugs would reach out with a large leg, holding something that resembled a spackle knife, and scoop up portions. When they had what they wanted, their little head arms would form and feed little balls to the mouth. A lot of clicking as the mouths worked, not substantively different than their language but much more monotone. After a time, Derek picked out speech between the munching.

A special bowl was passed around, and each bug formed a small food ball and ate it before passing the bowl on. Derek did the same. This was very different than the bland stuff that he was accustomed to eating: stiffer and prickly to the touch, it smelled musty and rotten, and tasted and felt like a layer of mold dissolving on his tongue. The slop was a welcome contrast afterward.

After a substantial time, no one was eating any more, and the conversation was widespread and diffuse like the roar of a field of grasshoppers. Derek had no chance to participate, so he decided to just relax. He was certain that Thunk would address himself to him when the time was right. The conversation went on and on, until Derek thought the bugs were falling into a whisper. In fact, it seemed as if his ears were covered by invisible boxes, auditory chambers, into which the bug speech could only echo. Then he grew aware that his vision was graying in the visor, and his skin felt as if every nerve was numbing.

Poisoned, he thought. Or drugged. His breath was getting shallow, and his heart seemed to be experimenting with stopping its beat for a while. A cold sweat spread out from his forehead to his whole upper body. He didn't think he could move -- his muscles were balking, and his brain was felt as if it was locked in motionlessness by the inertia of a gaggle of flywheels.

So it ends, he thought and waited. -- Was that a voice? Into the perfect silence the high points of a human voice. Then a hushed series of syllables. Finally a calm and quiet soliloquy, a voice he thought he recognized, hovering somewhere over him. He realized his eyes were closed and he was lying on his back. Or at least it seemed so.

Wait. "Mom?"

"Oh my God," he heard.

"Mom?" He tried to open his eyelids, though it felt like that threatened to flip his whole body off into space. "Mom, I can't see you."

"Derek," the voice said. "Just wait -- I'm getting the doctor." He heard shuffling, voices, clangs, a buzzer, other indistinct sounds. He thought it was seconds, but it was as if his mind was shouting "much later..."

He opened his eyes. He was not lying on his back, but sitting in a chair. His body was covered by a blanket, and his arms were nestled with bands over them on concave armrests. It was some kind of wheel chair. Slowly the voices became distinct, and his tunnel vision expanded: there were two attendants dressed in white, and his mother, and another person who looked like the authority figure in this drama, a doctor of some kind, a well-dressed trim middle-aged woman with the manner of someone used to control.

He looked from one to the next, disbelieving, unable to muster the strength or resolve or concentration to activate his vocal cords. His mother's hands went up to her mouth, as if she was afraid to break a spell or an illusion. She was waiting to hear his voice. "Mom," he said finally, hoarsely, triumphantly. She slowly melted into a sob and covered her face.

"Hello, Derek," the doctor said. "I am so glad to meet you."

She was smiling so he tried to do the same. But it was more important: "Where -- am -- I?"

The doctor delayed just for a moment. "Derek, you are in the Oregon State Mental Hospital."

He looked at her with some concern that this was all wrong, even while he was beginning to recognize that this was exactly -- exactly -- what he had expected all those days that he doubted the bug world.

His eyes told her that he needed more explanation and that he was ready to hear the truth. "You have been a resident here for half a year. You were in a coma for some months, then one day your body came alive, sometimes violently, and we had to bring you here to provide the right environment for caring for you."

He said: "I've -- been -- dreaming."

"So it would seem," she said. She approached and put a hand on his shoulder. "You have been much missed here, Derek. I know there must be many many questions. But let's take it slow. I don't want you to overdo it. There is some danger, if we aren't careful, that the swelling will return. That could mean more dreaming." She glanced at one of the attendants. "Randall has been providing care for you the whole while you've been here. He'll take you back and put you in your bed. I would like you to sleep. He'll give you something to help with that. I'll escort your mother to her car. She's been here every day since you came, and she'll be back tomorrow to see you again. Could you say goodbye to her? I'm sure that that would mean so much."

Derek nodded agreement to all. "Bye -- mom."

She leaned over him and gave him a tear-soaked kiss on his cheek. The wetness itched on his skin.

When he woke up, he knew intuitively that it was early the next day. He was on a bed in a well-lit but sterile white room, smelling of chlorine and must; the sheets were stiff and starched but clean. The sky was cumulus gray through the window. Somewhere a clock was ticking, and voices rumbled in with car noises and clatter and steps. He let the reality sink in. Steps against the tiles. Legs and shoes. Humans. He lay for a long time, although when he thought back he could not remember what had occupied him. Probably still weak from the illness or accident or whatever it was. There was no mirror in this room to see if his face was damaged. He found no bandages on his body, but that did not mean much at this point; an examination for scars would have to wait.

Randall looked in the window in the door, and opened it with the clank of a lock. Oh yes. The walls were now on closer inspection lightly padded. The sheets were thick paper. No glass in this room, either. Precautions.

"Good morning, Derek." He stopped half way in the room. Derek imagined that he usually found his patient in safe bands. Randall was a big fellow but on the heavy side and probably not all that handy with rampaging patients.

"Good morning, Randall. I'm happy to see you." His voice was still hoarse but not as weak as yesterday.

"Shall we get some breakfast, Derek?"

Sure, he thought and made to lift his upper body. The strain on his muscles was immediate -- even if this body had been a flailing machine the usual motions were no easier than if he had lain still in coma.

"Oooh," he moaned.

"Still kinda hard? It'll take some therapy, I think." Randall was at his bedside, but willing to wait until he felt better.

"What," asked Derek with a breath in the middle, "happened to me?"

"Oh," said Randall, raising the upper part of the bed. "I don't think Doctor Warren would want me to talk about that."

"Why not?"

"She doesn't want you getting upset. Something about your brain. It's kinda tender."

"What made it tender?"

"I'm going to let the doctor answer that question."

"Am I really home? Is this a dream?"

"Not the last time I checked." Randall planted his feet on the ground and Derek slipped out of bed. Randall caught him and did a slow pirouette and eased him into a wheel chair behind him. Had that always been there?

"While I was in a coma, I spent over two years on a planet of full intelligent bugs the size of stingrays. I learned their language. One of them knew English. I was there just yesterday, can you imagine." He tried to glance behind him, where Randall was pushing the chair. When the attendant came around the side to pull the door open, Derek looked up at him. But Randall did not look down.

"It was real, as real as this. Maybe more."

"I suppose it would seem that way. You've been out of commission for a year, my man." He brought his gaze down. "It's hard to imagine what the mind would do with that."

Derek was silenced. As he rolled down the hall, he mumbled: "It would play games with you."

Dr. Warren let Randall go, and positioned Derek's wheel chair in front of her massive oak desk herself. She came around behind it and smiled encouragingly. All the accoutrements of a well-read and self-conscious doctor were there: diplomas, bookshelves full of medical dictionaries, drug manuals, journals, and textbooks. The expected controlled chaos on her desk. She was still smiling.

The window behind her fascinated Derek. Tree branches waved; a bird flew through in a blur. Somewhere outside a truck was accelerating, and its booming rat-a-tat came through the window.

"Derek," she said. "I want to say how pleased I am at your recovery. It's been quite a roller coaster, for both your family and your medical team. There were some negative voices. But I want you to know that your mother never gave up hope and I never did either. We knew in our hearts that this day would come."

Derek said without thinking, "Thank you."

"We're just pleased," she repeated. "Now, I would like to talk with you a bit about your therapy. There is a great deal to be done, but we have to take things slowly, methodically. We have quite an extensive plan -- " She lifted two sets of stapled sheets, covered by tables and lists, and looked at it before she completed the gesture to hand one copy to him.

"Dr. Warren," Derek said, and then had to pause. "I need to know first what happened." Another pause. "I don't think I can feel settled here until I know."

The doctor looked at him like a beneficent ruler confronted by a petition to step down. "All right," she sighed. "You need to know."

"Yes," he said.

"Well, let's see," she said, shuffling folders to pull his up, then throwing it open and lifting a good hundred clipped sheets to get to near the bottom. "This states that you were committed to Salem Hospital in a suicidal state almost one year ago today, and that it was suspected you had overdosed on medications. That night, you slipped into a coma." She let go of the stack. "The rest you know."

Derek shook his head, confused. "I don't remember that."

"That is not surprising," she replied blankly.

"I don't remember being suicidal. Depressed. I didn't take drugs." The pause and his aching conclusion: "It doesn't sound right."

"It doesn't sound right," she repeated, with the rhythmic emphasis of a doctor to her committed patient.

"I think I may actually still be on bug planet."

She put the therapy sheets aside in an acknowledgement of how this changed things. "All right, Derek. I have a question. I would like to know how you can be here and on this bug planet at the same time."

"They gave me some kind of drug, and I think it is making me dream this."

"All right," she said. "Isn't it also possible that this world is real and that your mind has made you dream the other world?"

"Yes, sure, that's possible. It's just that I remember getting the drug, and some things just don't seem right here."

"Sure," she said. "I understand. You and I and your therapist will take some time to try to figure this out together. Will you keep an open mind? Can we agree that you will keep an open mind and talk with us about why one or the other world doesn't seem real?"

"Yes, I promise," he said, and smiled weakly. He really was getting tired.

Before the doctor could even call him, Randall was behind Derek and pulling his chair away. He took Derek out backwards into the hallway, and then switched into forward. In Derek's weakened condition, the hallway before him seemed to extend into infinity. Randall picked up speed steadily as he pushed. "One thing," he said to Derek as he leaned over his right ear, huffing: "Don't forget where you'll be happier. That counts for a lot." He kept pushing faster, soon wildly, and Derek was about to shout for help when the walls became transparent like wet toilet paper. Derek recognized that he was in a bug tunnel, even though he did not have his visor on; it was as if his eyes were electric and illuminating the tunnel. The hospital hall gradually disappeared, as did the near-collapsing Randall. Derek was rushing toward some unknown destination, strapped in his hovercraft but directed by someone else, one of the bugs flowing with him through the silent dark.

Brett, you may remember, if you've gotten this far, that I started this so you could better understand what happened to us. We've gotten way off topic with my story telling. I thought it would help you understand me -- Lord knows, I've never talked about any of this with you -- but these tales don't get to the heart of the matter. I was in a state of numbness, of incapacitation and anticipation, and there was nothing to me out of my funk. I daydreamed; watched TV; thought of writing a screenplay about my life; pattered in the house and yard; shopped with the retired crowd and house spouses; cleaned a little, and made evening meals.

You seemed unaffected. That is the advantage of teenage malaise -- you don't get the "but for the grace of God" looks just because you come across distracted, self-occupied and indifferent. I wasn't sure just how you were doing inside, until one day you said you wanted to go to the beach with some friends, to take advantage of a January heat wave over the MLK weekend. Doreen was concerned and asked question after question. I was pleased that you were getting out of yourself -- and maybe jealous, for both the opportunity and the attention.

"Mom," you said, "I'm not shipping out with the merchant marines. It's just a hundred miles away, and Billy's parents will be there the whole time; his dad'll drive us, and his mom will come later."

I could see Doreen making a mental note -- okay, buddy, I've got names and I'm going to call your references



before you have a chance to do damage control.

I don't know what you did the few days you were gone -- I was still languishing when you got back, waiting for the confirming call from Kettle that Hayley had been located. Much too self-absorbed, I found myself imagining your trip mingled with my memories: I would imagine you into a scene and in a few seconds you would be replaced by your stunt double, a younger me. At other times, the present would morph into the past like a dough kneaded upon itself.

Wrightsville Beach -- Santa Monica Beach. Interstate 40, at two ends, more or less. The warmth of the winter sun has a cool tinge from the wind -- not the overheated stuff the summer kicks up. You and your friends run headlong into the surf, overcoming the cold of the water, and wander out to where the waves first break. The energy of the waves rocks through you, and once in a while a sneaker comes in like a cold tackle from the back; you're spitting salt water, clearing your eyes, shouting to each other.

Maybe you wander up or down the beach, padding through the soft sharp wet sand, and check out the bodies of those who train to show, protective if a girl friend is with you, otherwise just a bunch of young wolves on the prowl. The sky is pale blue but the sun still piercing bright. You can feel your body: tired, stressed, and doing just what it is designed to do. Pale skin, a belly just a little too big, not much muscle mass on the arms, it doesn't matter. This is life, this is how your body is supposed to be. Your mind can wait.

There I am, and there are my friends in the sunset. We sit in the warm shadows of a bonfire. Roasting hot dogs, eating a lot of sand in the process. We joke, can't let the conversation end because it feels too awkward to sit there in silence -- too much like home? But this collection of moments became an inescapable part of me, the very definition of joy and relaxation and the balance of a moment. You may already see the same thing in your own imagination: looking back at the perfect unconscious smile.

Then it's Doreen and me walking late afternoon along the beach. We're holding hands, as we did when we first were together. She looks younger, though a bit haggard, which could be her hard-living lifestyle or a certain anticipation of motherhood, I don't know. I feel satisfied, I remember that: An attractive woman with me, who loves me and has promised to be with me forever. But there's more. It's the bodies again. I can feel how right it is to have a mate, yes, a sexual mate, and it's not just my mind, my conscious mind -- it's a nagging pressure and a half-finished mixture inside my head that says, you need this. And she is this. I look over at her, though I know her mind is elsewhere. Whatever else we have or don't have, there is this.

Then it's you, Brett. You are walking on the beach, talking with Billy, while Frank and a couple other friends jog ahead and toss a Frisbee among them. I know there are times you feel that longing, and you feel alone with it -- maybe as if you'll always be. As we cross paths in that moment, I am struck, with another crushing wave over the shoulders, by how hard it is to be young.

The voice came not only to Derek. There was a small boy in a Californian suburb who lay still in his room, heard his heart beat and imagined the vague outlines of a creature that dragged its limbs forward with oophhh -- ooophhh -- oophhh -- ooophhh. Nothing could stop its progress, unless he jumped out of his bed and ran to his parents' room, talking into the crack in the doorway: "Mom (or dad), I hear a monster." Or: "I can't fall asleep." Or: "There's a noise." Or: "Something's scaring me." One of them would emerge from the bedroom, try their best to shame this behavior out of the boy, take him back to his bed. Sometimes a kiss on the forehead would be enough to send him asleep. Sometimes he would wait with resignation for his eyes to close, despite his anxious desire to keep them open. Other times he would imagine whole movies to get his mind off the fearful revelation of his heartbeat.

Once, in a sea of these miniature traumas, he was particularly unhappy with the sound thumping in his ears. There was no escape -- either from the pounding or a weak ringing or creaking from who knows where. Just stop, he thought, please just stop. Then he realized there was a voice: "Hello." It emerged from his own mind,

but he thought he heard it, too. "Hello" -- again. That is too weird, I'm not even thinking that. He tried to imagine something -- a great battle, or a series of unlikely acts strung together to save himself from an unbelievable army of assassins. The voice (infinitely weak, but his own) came in between, regardless. "Hello," he heard himself say.

"Hello," he thought.

"Use your mouth, please, it helps me to understand."

He said: "I don't like talking to myself."

"You're not talking to yourself. I am someone else, but you hear my voice in your head."

"You can't be real." He really didn't like this, and covered his head with his pillow.

"Are you afraid?"

Gut reaction: "No." Then after reflection: "Yes."

"I understand. Should I go away?"

The boy wanted to say yes, but even the few seconds of silence were enough to remind him: the pump engaging again and again, no different than the shuffling of a monster; the creaks somewhere; maybe daddy's voice somewhere off in the distance.

"Should I?"

"No," the boy said. "We can talk for a while." He was already energizing his mind with the narrative he would spin out: spies, soldiers and great epic battles about winning and victory, without blood or explicit death.

"So," said the voice. "Tell me something new."

Okay, Brett, you were back at school, and I was home, and everything was as awkward as possible for us. Your mother and I had switched roles -- she became absent and distracted and suspicious, throwing herself into her work and avoiding me, and I tried to engage you both in the family, to which I had retreated. This change had done something strange for Doreen and me: we found ourselves arguing the other side of the equation. It did not tear down the wall between us, but we could see the wall now, much clearer than ever before. A strange feeling of déjà vu and told-you-so and oh-my-gosh and what-have-we-done, all together.

This new equilibrium was disequibrated one afternoon when I got a phone call. Brookheim, the caller id announced.

"Hello?" I said with careful distance in my voice.

"Hi, John," replied Barbara, relieved, I think, that Doreen had not answered.

"Barbara."

"You're wondering why I would call."

"Yes," I said simply.

"I've got Brett here," she said.

I didn't think anything could surprise me -- I was wrong. There was no threat there, but the meaning wasn't clear, either.

"I called and spoke with him a couple days ago -- I was concerned about you, and I knew you wouldn't want to talk to me -- probably couldn't, either. We got to talking, and I'm afraid he misunderstood my intentions. He hitchhiked out here today."

I sat contemplating this twist for a few seconds. The least suspicious thing now would be just to go get him, even if there were a hundred ways to misconstrue the situation.

"I'll be there in half an hour."

"Thanks, John, we can talk when you get here." She hung up the phone.

I wanted to call Barry up and curse him out and then ask him what I should do. I was afraid to call Kettle and hear that this whole conversation was another nail in my self-measured casket. Doreen was, of course, out of the question. I got my car keys and headed to the car. The drive was difficult for me: just the few days of enforced domesticity had reduced me to near agoraphobia. Plus I found my mind wandering in several ways: maybe jealous of you and your spontaneity, if also upset about hitchhiking; wondering how I would explain this to Doreen; hoping that Barbara meant it when she said we could talk; wondering if this was another setup by the police; and wishing the whole mess would just go away and leave me to my lethargy.

I pulled up into Barbara's driveway, and there was a car I didn't recognize. A client, I assumed -- and felt irritated. I rang the doorbell, and you answered. You moved back into the darkness of the house without a word or without opening the screen door. I followed.

You had sat down in the little reading room I'd left Barry in. You picked up a book on tantricism. I didn't bother to sit: "Hi Brett. Shall we go?"

You looked annoyed by the question, squirmed a bit, and said: "Barbara says we should stay until she's done. She wants to talk to you and she said she would profile my aura, if you say it's okay." You looked at me finally. "It's free."

That hurt, but it was on target -- I was about to say, "I'm not paying a penny...."

"Maybe," I said, torn between not wanting you to experience that with her and anticipating that you would say something like, "If it's good enough for you..."

"How long will she be?" I asked as I sat on the front edge of the chair facing his.

You shrugged.

"What are you reading?"

"Philosophy," you said and put the book back into its place on the bookshelf -- so I wouldn't be able to grab it, I guess.

"What do you think of the psychenergy philosophy?"

"What do you think, dad?" you said, a bit angry that I was pushing you on this.

I moved back a bit on the chair. "I don't actually believe it at all. But I have to admit that there is something attractive -- " I had to laugh -- "besides Barbara."

You laughed, too, for a moment. "Right," you said. Then: "I'm not here because of her."

"What brought you out here?"

"I want to know for myself -- I guess."

"You want to know if she can channel the bog monster?"

You brushed your hair back and shook your head, a gesture I'd seen you make with your friends but never with me.

"It's not that, so much. I know the bog monster is crap. It's whether there's anything out there at all."

"What - like God?"

You shook your head in the negative. "Not even close to that far. But is there something that communicates after death? Something that holds us together?"

"Like the Force?"

"Again," you said, "crap. I'm talking about the slightest hope for us, dad, the slightest bit of hope that we're not random blips on a cosmic radar."

"Now that's philosophy," I said.

"My teacher calls it Sartre-sur-le-tete. Instead of saying there is no exit, you just keep looking for one."

"Who's your teacher?" I was growing ever more amazed at this exchange, and was almost relieved that there was someone else's voice behind it.

"Mr. Bouveau."

"French teacher?"

You nodded. We sat in silence for a minute. It was my turn.

"I'd like to believe there is a God."

"A Sunday-morning God with fatuous admonitions, or a real all-powerful being who makes decisions about whether you live or die?"

"I'd like to think it's a God who beams with pride and feels sorrow with the rest of us." That wasn't exactly how I see it, but I wanted to be as positive as I could, given your pessimism.

"A God who hides behind physics and makes himself known through fairy tales?"

That cynicism was disturbing to me. "Yes," I said. I wasn't going to beleaguer you with "unknowable ways" and vague arguments about free will, but I also didn't want to leave you without pointing back to the rest of us. "If there is a God -- and I think there is -- he has to understand our skepticism. There has to be many ways

to him. Or her." Requisite pause. "Maybe doing physics isn't that different from prayer."

I knew that was a ridiculous thing to say, and your face communicated it. We were silent until Barbara and her client came into the room. He was a well-dressed, well-coifed gentleman, someone whose every feature said, "Did I mention that I'm successful." He was visibly disturbed to see the likes of us huddled in the waiting area, but recovered and engaged Barbara for a couple minutes on minutia of Pittsboro politics before an alarm rang on his phone and he pretended that he was too busy now, suddenly, to pay attention whether she moved on to her next customers. The best solution for him was the actual one: she held up a single finger as a wait gesture to us, and then disappeared back into her chambers. Her client produced his money clip and stripped out a couple large bills and put them into the donation box. Well, I thought, he wants no record. And he was gone.

When Barbara came back, she was carrying a clipboard and pen. "Brett," she said with a voice between clergy and camp counselor, "I would like you to copy these statements. Copy each one onto the bottom of the page on which you find it." She smiled, but did not yet hand the clipboard to you. You were disappointed, but also confused by this, and just looked up at her.

"I'm sorry, Brett. I don't normally do auras for teenagers. They are not as telling with younger people. I find handwriting to be the most best psychic source." She looked at me and smiled for my indulgence; then said to the both of us: "Teen auras almost always look healthy, no matter what their psychic state. But teen handwriting is perfectly telling: they have all learned how to write according to a uniform pattern and they have each altered that pattern to fit their own essence. If they are copying something that allows their subconscious minds to engage, their essence comes right through their handwriting. -- Better than palms." She flashed me a particular smile.

You were unconvinced, but when she handed you the clipboard you started reading it. I think it activated the rote student in you. Barbara did the one-finger invitation, which was less fetching now, but I followed her anyway, through the converted TV room into the reading room. She gestured more conventionally for me to sit across the small table from her.

"Thank you for coming," she said and paused for me to jump into the conversation.

"I came for Brett," I reminded her, not too meanly, I thought.

"I was very surprised when he rang our doorbell, and I felt bad for having precipitated this, for whatever reason." She tried to smile apologetically, but there was something about the smile that said, I'm doing this because I know you are too conventional to understand why none of this is my fault. She continued: "You probably have lots of reasons for being upset with me. I imagine Barry Moore has had a lot to say about me --"

"I haven't talked to him since we drove out here together. He never contacted me before that article, and I haven't spoken to him since."

"I see," she said, looking down at the table. "I'm sorry to hear that. I think he was good for you, as troubled as his soul is."

"Why?" I asked.

"Maybe because his soul is so confused. It gives you a chance to recognize the importance of your own."

"I'm not sure I get that logic."

"Be careful, John. Logic is a powerful way to dismiss what troubles you. If you can't feel it here -- " she laid

her hand on her heart, somewhere above the bosom, "then what good is it?"

"I had a discussion on this topic with Samantha Ogg, from the other perspective. Her point is that no matter how something feels there, physics decides what's going to happen. She'd say we should get used to deferring to our brain cells."

"We already do that enough. You can be as logical as a machine; you still won't know the first thing about being happy in this world, in this universe. - - Ockham's razor was meant to free us from dogma, not reinforce it. Why should the best explanation always be the one that explains the least about our existence? Science has become a poor substitute for an inner life, if you ask me."

I shrugged or at least my face had the look, I'm sure.

Her mood changed instantly. She shook her head, as if clearing cobwebs. "I don't mind skepticism, John. It makes everything clearer for me."

"Why is that?"

She took just a moment to think about that. "I get energy from it, because it means that the person I'm talking to is willing to question ideas. There is something very difficult about dealing with one's own or others' inner life. When I deal with skeptics, I can point out the most basic things to them and they're amazed."

I had to smirk.

Derek was weak and slept until they reached their endpoint, which was an uncharacteristically wide dead-end. The hatch that opened and let them all in at once -- all five bugs in their party -- was equally outsized. After a short while, Derek realized why. They had reached a portal to the surface. A giant cloud projector showed what was going on topside: a windswept surface with only boulders and some bug instruments visible, and a sandstorm blowing by at hurricane force. The sky was gray-orange, but there was no sun visible from this perspective. The foul weather explained why they were here alone.

The image on the projector changed, and Thunk appeared. English text appeared below him, which read as a jumble, but meant the following:

'Earthling, you ingested a substance that we bugs use to relax, though our alien guests often have a strong reaction to its properties. The substance contains a mold that has evolved to make its victim immobile, though we bugs are mostly immune. The goal of the mold is to increase mental activity, generating electricity that it uses for its own metabolism. The combination of effects frequently makes our guests dream. The creature that you saw in our receiving room has been living in a mold-induced dream world for much of the last fifty bug years. This is available to you. Most guests can return to their own lives in their dream world and live out a normal life there. We offer this to you as compensation for stealing you from your world and your own life, because of an illegitimate desire on our planet to study intelligent creatures as if they were no more than zoo animals.

'We know that your mentor has given you a view of our society as an oppressive social order. Let me reply. She represents an extreme minority opinion. She wants to lead a revolution, in a world where freedom and justice already dwell. Revolution has no place here, but her own dreams of glory cannot let her see that. She has told you that this world lacks meaning and initiative, but what she means is that her own life is empty of meaning, and her hopes and dreams ill focused and self-serving. She wants change just for the sake of change, and she looks to your little world for an example of a world engulfed in change. She chooses to overlook the killing, the brutality, and the indifference; she sees only what she wants to see. She is a zealot. She refuses to let go of the dreams of the very young, and she pollutes the minds of those around her.

'I know that you have grown attached to her, but you must decide what your life will be. We can give you any kind of life that you desire. We can give you freedom, too, the freedom that she has denied you. It starts here today. You may visit the surface. We have brought equipment that will protect you, if you choose to go out. The surface is particularly unpleasant today, but it varies little from this. Sometimes the sand moves half as fast, and one can explore more. But you may do what you choose.'

The giant keyboard showed up at the bottom of the projector, but Derek didn't move. Outside going me, he said in Bug and repeated several times. After Thunk said something to his companions, one of them produced a package from his back depression. Derek opened it and found a full bodysuit that reminded him of a comic book costume. He pulled the suit on over his exoskeleton, removed his visor and zipped up the facemask. The eye covers had the same displays as his visor. He found himself breathing normally; air processing was occurring somewhere. He settled on his hover-scooter. The giant fuzzy screen dissipated, showing a chamber beyond, and Derek eased forward into it. A heavy door shut behind him. They won't -- they can't -- leave me outside, he repeated to himself. The room slowly became hotter and he began to feel gusts of wind from somewhere. Finally the lower right portion of the chamber parted from the rest, exposing the bug world surface to his right. The end of the chamber opened completely. The wind was howling from the left, but he was still mostly protected from it.

He saw that if he ventured out into this mess on his hovercraft he would be lost. He dismounted. They could have told me -- but he knew that that would have been contrary to their purpose. He thought about exiting upright, but even with the exoskeleton's strength he decided to fall to all fours. He crawled to the edge of the chamber. His ears were completely protected by the suit -- the howling was coming from speakers covering each ear -- but the volume and type of sound was still disturbing. In a slow movement exposed half his head beyond the end of the chamber. It was buffeted by a thousand passing hands, but he did not withdraw it.

He moved more of his body out and it was attacked by galloping dogs. He let his body fall to the ground and crawled further out into the melee. His new position protected him better than before, and no creature was making much of a dent in his suit, so he inched fully out of the chamber. The sun was still not visible until he turned on his back and saw it glowing weakly. It was at least three times as large as Sol, something that unnerved him. He had imagined this moments many times: the most common scenario was that the storm imagery would dissolve into an earth view -- maybe a beach; do they wheel the comatose to such places? -- and he would be home. What dementia could withstand the proximity of the sun?

But there was no revelation to be won here. The only possible outcome was defeat, buried in the shifting dirt of an alien world. He watched the gusts of sand and grit cross his viewport with fascination, as if contemplating a bonfire. The insanity of his life seemed embodied in the buffeting storm. He could rip off his suit. He could force himself to his feet and run as far as he could; finding his way back would be impossible. These were solutions to the problem he saw flowing over him, each more attractive in its own way than the inevitable crawl back to the portal, and the return to the underground existence of a cowering bug.

His companions left him at home, with a handful of the pills that looked like dung balls. Thunk hadn't tried to convince him of anything after his outside experience, but the pills were an obvious reminder of their offer. Just pop and forgot everything. After he sat for a while, expecting a contact from someone, he went to his projector and started watching a sitcom. A shift in the program brought up a movie about Joan of Arc. The point was not lost on him, though he suspected they misunderstood the human response to her drama.

He turned off the projector. Hoping for a distraction, he tried to call up the voice in his head, but there was no response. Given what he understood about his conversant, this had to be as much about petulance or disinterest as anything, since the voice could be from any time in the future, a time- shifting recorder in reverse.

A couple listless hours later, he looked at the dung ball. One wouldn't hurt, he thought. Something to do,

something to transition from the excitement of the last couple days. He split the pill into halves and popped one in his mouth. It was brittle and melted in his mouth like a confection, but tasted more like a pile of ash. He wiped his lips and even his tongue in an effort to get the taste out. Then he waited. After a number of minutes, his limbs started to get heavy, and his eyelids closed for a brief moment: he saw bits and pieces of the hospital he had left behind. He opened his eyes, and he was back in his chamber.

He closed his eyes again and went back to the hospital; it resolved into a detailed vision in great passing waves. During those first few moments, he tried his best to evaluate the realism, the detail, the plausibility. He was in a large room, the kind made famous in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. There were faces, but none he could recognize. They were doing a variety of things -- puzzles, some kind of arts and crafts, reading, staring at the TV blaring in the corner. Blaring? He heard nothing, but he knew it was loud. His body, which he could not feel, was folded into a wheelchair, covered in pajamas and a robe. His head was held in place by a brace; his arms were bound.

"Hello," he could hear himself say, and slowly the television came up to volume, and the noise of twenty variously occupied humans washed across his ears, a mix of sounds that felt like music to him.

No one paid any attention, so he said again, "Hello!"

An inquisitive face came across his field of vision, and was startled. The tall black woman with a full wig of bouncy curls moved her body around the wheel chair to get a good look at him. "Well, I'll be," she said. "Did you say that?"

"Yes," Derek said.

"Are you back with us, child?" she asked him as if confirming a confession from a troublemaking boy.

"I think so," he replied weakly.

"The doctor isn't going to believe this," she said, her arms folded, lips pursed, her head moving back and forth ever so slightly.

Derek was wheeled back from meeting with Dr. Warren and his mother, and found himself in a strange office. Behind the desk was a short heavyset and balding man, with the distinctive collar from one of the highly organized churches. When Derek looked around there was no attendant to wheel him out. He tried to do it himself but the brake was set and he didn't see how to unset it.

The man bestowed a wide friendly smile on him.

"Our miracle child," he said.

"No miracles here," Derek answered.

"God intervenes in ways we least anticipate, my son. -- I understand that you are having problems distinguishing reality from your condition."

"That's safe to say."

"I can only imagine what that must be like."

"It's not pleasant."



"Shall we agree to talk about more pleasant things?"

"What? Fishing? I don't fish." He didn't want to continue, but did: "And I don't read any more. I can't stand watching television. I don't go out with my friends. I don't philosophize. And I don't read the bible."

"I see," said the pastor with all smile muscles now lax.

"Can I go? I think I'd rather be in the common room."

"Is that more real than I am for you?" The pastor stared at him.

Derek relented. "No," he said. "I'm sorry. It's just very hard. I'm still not convinced about any of this."

His conversant nodded. "It's incredibly hard, I understand. I can't help you with the pain you've experienced. But maybe I can help with the doubt. There is a reason, you know, that Dr. Warren had you come to me." He stopped talking, stood with some difficulty, and walked around the desk to the chair next to Derek's (had that always been there?). "Doubt is, so to speak, the stock and trade of the clergy." A brief smile, and a pause.

"You mean, you feel doubt, too?" asked Derek.

"Well, yes," he said, "but that's not the point. I feel doubt; we all feel doubt; but I've got every reason and every influence to overcome my doubt. The question is, what does the young man who has been snatched from everything he once knew, who has suffered unbelievably, what does that young man feel? Doubt is inevitable. But what comes next?"

"I am on my own," Derek replied to his face, matter-of-factly, bleakly, eyelids moistening.

"Sure," said the pastor, with a hand extended partway to his knee. "You are on your own. But let's see if there is a way back. You've met with your mother a couple times now?"

"Yes."

"Did she seem real?"

"Very," he said, then thought for a while. "But she's probably the most vivid memory I have. She would seem real."

"All right. Did she comfort you?"

"Yes," he said. He could feel the heave of a great sob waiting to reach the surface.

"Good. I'm pleased. So -- whether she's real or not -- she provided comfort? Meaning you're not alone, right?" He gave a quick sophist smirk.

"As in -- it doesn't matter whether God exists, we'd have to create him. I don't buy it."

The pastor shook his head, his brow knitted. "Don't misunderstand me, Derek. I'm not here to feed you chalky platitudes." Then: "Let's look at the God question, since you brought it up. The atheists and scientific agnostics have demonstrated that God does not manifest himself to scientific inquiry. With that, they say, God is dead. According to them, evolution provides all the explanatory power we need for understanding who we are and our needs. Even the idea of God can be seen as an adaptation of some kind. Right?" Derek just looked back. "But let's look at this question, or, rather, let's look at how it is framed. Your evolutionist will reject

God, or say God belongs in a box, with no impact on our lives. But let's interrogate that evolutionist. Will you assume the role?"

Derek looked skeptical but didn't say or indicate no.

"All right, Mr. Evolutionist, let me ask you about your mother. Do you love her? Does she provide comfort? Do you get a sense of meaning from your family?"

"Yes," said Derek, reluctantly.

"And yet -- don't you know that her love for you, and yours for her, is evolutionarily pre-programmed? You're just carrying out the roles assigned to you by evolution. How can that be meaningful?"

"It just is," said Derek. "And we're not just doing what evolution tells us. We have a bond from our common experiences, our life together."

"Sure," said the pastor. "I understand. The key question is this: why can that not be true for a relationship with God?"

"I don't know. My mom is real; God is a figment."

"Okay, Derek, I'll let that answer go, though if I were discussing this with you directly you might find that to be a difficult position to stake out. All right, God is a figment. Let's back up a half step. Could you not also say that your mother is a figment? Let me explain. Your mother is a biologically determined organism that seems to care for you because care is a behavior that has been selected for within the mammal family over a hundred million years. You believe it is individual interest, but she is driven to this relationship, as are you..."

"But she is still real."

"Okay, as biological mother she is real. And you can rely to a degree on her maternal judgment, which is in itself comfort. But the comfort you feel from her as your mother -- that is your choice as an individual. If you were being 'scientific,' you would have to reject your relationship as the meaningless instinctual interaction between two mere animals, no different than between a mother and a baby lab rat."

"Science is not about destroying the social fabric, you're just making that up."

"True, Derek." He relaxed in his chair, after Derek had made this connection for him. "Science is not about making us cold machines. It has been about making us godless creatures, who are forced to find meaning only in the family and in fleeting social organizations. Don't get me wrong. I have no disagreement with science as a means for improving our lot on earth. But I reject the application of the scientific method to sources of hope and comfort and meaning. These are always elective and local and specific. They cannot be found in replicable experiments."

Derek looked down at his hands, reflecting whether the pastor had not just made an unjustified triple leap.

"Do you know about the placebo effect, Derek?"

"Sure, sugar pills."

"The power of belief. It's measurable. There's plenty of room for this in science, by the way. New drugs have to improve more than one-third of the cases in order just to beat this effect."

"So -- people expect something and they experience it. That's not a proof of God."

"Right. But it is a proof of the power of belief. Is it wrong to believe? To find comfort? Is God somehow an illegal recourse? Sure, I can't prove his existence to you. If I showed the biology of mammals to an alien, I couldn't prove that a mother-child relationship is anything more than hormones and instinct. I ask you to choose to believe, Derek. The experience is real. The comfort is real. Your life is real. That is all we can know, and all we need to know."

Brett, you and I drove back more or less in silence. You were upset with the whole experience, and knew there would be consequences. I would have liked to ease your anxiety, but Doreen would have something to say about this, and she was not likely to see it as I did. I was feeling that you had learned from it -- from the anticipation and the journey and the disappointment -- and that punishment from us would only distract from that equation. But Doreen had made none of this voyage. For her, it would only be a dangerous trip to an older woman who had called to speak with you, and for all she knew, had lured you out there. Or perhaps she, too, would suspect that the target was me.

After Barbara and I had clarified what she knew about your motivation, we sat silent for a few moments. I was reminded of the last time, and wanted to break that spell.

I said: "So, have you heard from the bog monster lately?"

Somewhat coldly: "Have you?"

"I have not."

"Had any dreams lately?"

"Not that I remember."

"I recommend," she said, "that you consider writing down your dreams. You may find something that has been troubling you."

"I haven't been troubled, other than by the police."

"Really. Well then. How's Doreen?"

I was immediately suspicious. "She's fine," I said and tried to find in her eyes what she meant by that.

She gave me a hint of a smile, as if to say I didn't mean anything. But there was something else as well.

"You may want to share your dreams with Doreen."

"Really?" I said. "Why is that?"

She looked away, acting a bit insulted by that question, then said: "She is your wife, John."

I didn't dignify that, and thought about whether she would share everything with her husband, such as he was, but that needling comment seemed a bit too hard. I tried to deflect. "Yes, she is. Can I ask what Jerry thinks about my case these days? He seemed pretty concerned when we were here."

"He hasn't said anything about it."

That seemed unlikely, except for two circumstances: they didn't talk shop -- very possible, considering their different approaches -- or he had just been throwing that stuff at me and it really didn't matter to him. Well, fine, I thought.

Neither of us followed up, and the conversation essentially ended. I asked, how are your girls, etc. I was feeling very uncomfortable by the time you came into the room and looked at us. "I'm done," you said with finality.

As I said, we drove home in silence. Doreen didn't seem surprised when we both showed up. I waved to her that she should come with me into the living room, but you headed right to your room. I explained with the least possible drama and concern what had happened, and waited for the explosion. But all Doreen said was: "All right." The brevity could mean a number of things, most with unpleasant consequences, so I held us together for another moment. "I thought we should agree on a punishment."

Doreen said, "I got the impression you thought Brett was punished enough."

"Yes," I said, "I guess so. So we're in agreement?"

"I'll defer," she said. She smiled a provisional, tired smile.

"You don't normally defer," I said.

"John, I wouldn't defer when you hardly spent any time with your son and would come with your off-the-wall opinions. I don't know the situation and have to see it through your eyes. With that perspective, sure, I defer."

"What would you do? I mean, if you were in my shoes."

"Is this really necessary?"

"No, not necessary, but I am curious."

"I would ground him for two weeks and take this opportunity to have him see a professional."

I was dumbfounded. "Wow. We can still do that, if you want."

Doreen chuckled. "I didn't tell you that to make you do it. And I'm not sure that my instinct is the right one here. Sometimes, I think less concern and more compassion works better with Brett."

"Okay," I said. I wasn't sure if I should be proud or feel outsmarted. We waited for a few seconds to see if the conversation could continue. "Hey, do you remember your dreams?"

"What?" Doreen asked.

"I was wondering if you remember your dreams."

"Can I ask why you ask?"

"Barbara Hohenstauffen said that I should try waking up in the middle of night to see if I could remember my dreams, which I don't. She also said that I should tell my dreams to you."

"Real-ly!" Doreen raised her voice with disbelief -- or maybe it was small case of territorial anger.

She went on in a different register: "I only remember dreams occasionally. Usually they're anxiety dreams when I remember them, and they involve Brett. I've got to find him, or we're together and I've got help us escape something."

"I'm not in them?"

"Usually not," she said. Not apologetically, but softly.

"I don't remember mine at all."

"Then I think you should try to remember them."

"I'll need to set the alarm."

"That's fine," she said. "If I wake up, you can tell them to me." Then she smiled.

When I saw "Kettle" in the caller id, I was ready to declare victory. "Hello?" I said.

"Hi John, it's William Kettle."

"Hi, good to hear from you. Any news?"

"Well, not exactly. I'll tell you where that stands. But first. We've received a subpoena."

"A subpoena -- why?"

"The sheriff's department would like a DNA sample."

"Why did they subpoena -- I would have given them one."

"It's always best to make sure you know why they want one."

"You told them I wouldn't give them one?"

"I told them we wanted a judge to say this wasn't just a fishing trip..."

"I guess one did..."

"Don't worry about that. A subpoena says, we want to fish in this fishing hole. It doesn't say anything more than that."

"What are they fishing for?"

"Jane Doe 27. I think they mentioned that case to you. There's nothing there, so you don't need to worry about this. Do you?"

"What?"

"There's no reason we need to worry, is there?"

"None," I said as firmly as I could. "So -- what is up with Hayley?"

"All right. We don't have her. But we are on her trail, and we know exactly what the police know. She and her beau are in or around Santa Fe. We think that her companion has some distant relatives there, although it's unclear where they live or what their names are. His mother is useless in this regard; they must be on his father's side, or maybe she's afraid to let her son get caught."

"Is this good news?"

"Here's the really interesting news. We've been given to understand that Hayley is negotiating a return through her family's attorney. Her conditions are that she wants to marry her boyfriend and that she wants him protected from statutory rape charges. She is threatening to cross over to Mexico otherwise."

"That seems like it should fly. Or won't it?"

"I don't know. I assume her parents just want her back, but a desire for revenge against this boy is not beyond belief."

"Hmmm," I said, realizing something. "Won't this be pyrrhic victory? I mean, if they arrange her return, they'll announce it and we've got nothing."

"Maybe," he said. "We could beat them to the punch, if my sources hold out. The police knew all along, etc."

"But we could look like opportunists. How does that play in the court of public opinion?"

"It varies," he said, somewhat down at where this was going.

"So how am I going to get them off my back?"

"Well, the DNA test is good news, actually. Give it a number of weeks, they get something back with no match, and already their surprise suspect is looking less like a coup. That should do it. The test is a good thing."

"I guess so," I said.

"Isn't it?" he said, with that sudden edge, probing if I had something to tell my counsel. I answered as best I could to relieve his nagging doubt.

We hung up shortly thereafter, with our plan simply to wait. I would go to the police station the next morning, and give a DNA sample to a crime scene technician from the sheriff's department.

I made a more sumptuous meal than the usual spaghetti and garlic bread - - I think it was New York prime and baked potatoes -- and Doreen and I shared a glass of red wine. After you had dispersed, she waited to hear what was up. DNA, I said. We went through the usual stuff. She disappeared to look up this Jane Doe if she could.

Did your mother have suspicions about me, too? I don't think so. I think she was doing due diligence -- making sure so that there would be no unintended doubt in her voice. But I really didn't know for sure, and I don't know what she found out.

I was used to staying up rather late, but this evening I didn't want to get on the Internet or read or write or even watch TV. Before going to bed, I resolved to set the alarm. Doreen gave me a look -- the timing wasn't very good for her -- but she only said, "I look forward to it." I lay in bed for a fairly long time before sleep took over; Doreen was still up.

When an alarm rings at an unaccustomed time, there is a sorting period. Your mind registers the sound and may figure out that it has relevance, but sometimes it isn't quite ready to throw the switch to drag itself out of recumbence. And then even after your mind starts to light up, the body remains inert. Without the response of your body, place seems irrelevant, as does time; you are ethereal for a moment.

I knew I had been dreaming -- I could still see the dream as if in it, not yet as a remembered but empty husk. I was walking away, but looked over my shoulder at the tableau. He was there, the bog monster from the s»ance, towering over a group of quaint country denizens. I recognized the garb as colonial. The bog monster was accepting an offering of some stretched-out rabbits and a raccoon. I felt that this was a ritual that the Native Americans had carried out for centuries. Live and let live. Perhaps the monster provided a form of protection: guidance for the lost, protection against roaming predators, shaman-like medicinals. Or maybe they just crossed paths occasionally, always warily honoring each other, lest there be a fateful misunderstanding.

I woke up, aware of the import of the dream but barely able to hold onto it. Into the darkness I said: "Doreen? Doreen?"

"John?"

"I dreamt about the bog monster. It has been here for centuries, and has lived in peace with the residents. I don't know what he did in return, but he accepted gifts from the Indians and then the settlers."

I could hear Doreen rolled over. "What?"

I repeated myself.

"That's a nice dream. What do you think it means?"

I was surprised. "It means what I said. It gives us the history."

"John," she said, "the bog monster doesn't exist and that was just a dream. There's no history there."

"Right," I said, realizing the import of what she said. Every emotion -- even my excitement -- had been part of the dream? Wow, I thought. "It seemed real," I said.

"I know," she said and was soon snoring lightly.

I tried to make sense of it. I found my mind wandering back to Dally Moore. Could she have been saved by the bog monster, if subscriber had only understood? Sure, the bog monster did not exist. But if? Two degrees of "if" and she might have been saved. Two degrees.

I felt myself floating back into a dream realm, and knew: there was so much more about this creature, but I would never remember a bit of it.

Horvath met me at the reception desk, and we walked back to their interview room. A different woman was there -- I had expected the sheriff's deputy from before, naively. This woman reminded me of my colleague Carol, Ms. Don't-Get-Me-Started. Or maybe she was just the archetypal young grandmother. In either case, she seemed like someone you just automatically knew. She actually said: "Okay, honey, open up." She swabbed inside my mouth and then zippered up the swab. "All done, hon." She smiled at Horvath -- a look that spoke volumes about how people greet and treat each other with respect in her world. She didn't look at me again.

Horvath looked like he wanted to talk but was inhibited by Kettle's no doubt intentional absence. 'We'll talk to you when we are good and ready.'

I headed out into the parking lot, and realized I didn't want to go home, now that I made it out of the house. I knew where I would go. I drove and parked, peeked into Carolina Brewery and then walked to the nearby coffee joint, 3Cups. Nothing. I knew it was early. I went back to the brewery, ate lunch, and then went to the caf» again. I sat there for about an hour -- I was ready to leave in fact -- when he walked by. I got up and followed.

He was in a hurry, walking with a nervous step, his hands jammed into his front pockets and some folders under one arm.

"Barry!" I shouted. I had to shout twice more, each time louder, before he stopped, reflected and then turned. He looked at me very carefully, I assume checking for a half concealed weapon.

"Hi Barry," I said as I neared, trying to sound approachable but not inappropriately friendly.

"Hello John." He had blanked his face in anticipation of anything.

"I was just having a coffee," I said. "Would you like to join me? -- We've been on the opposite sides of a pretty serious matter, but I am curious about your opinion on something." When he didn't reply: "I dreamt last night about the bog monster, and I was wondering what you would think about the dream."

That smelled of a trap for him. "I'm sorry I've got to be somewhere. Someone's expecting me."

"Did you hear that I was out at Barbara's recently."

"I did," he said as if he thought I would be surprised. "Your son has a bit of an infatuation."

"Maybe, but Brett is more confused than anything. His French teacher is an existentialist of sorts, and Brett was acting out his teacher's desperation for intellectual comfort."

"Or maybe he's a desperate intellectual himself."

"I guess so. I'll let you go. But I would appreciate the opportunity to talk with you about my dream. It seemed very real."

He reflected on the opportunity this represented, and decided on a third course. "I've got a few minutes. Tell me now."

"All right," I said, a bit disappointed. I related the dream and its extensions to him, more or less exactly as they had occurred to me.

"Unlikely," he said with a dismissive face. "Regularized contact would be suicidal. Consider the Neanderthals. They disappear from the fossil record simultaneous with the rise of Homo sapiens sapiens, without leaving a trace in our genome. That was not a happy sharing of resources, like some prehistoric Thanksgiving. And even that, you know how it turned out for the native peoples."

I felt some consternation, but I realized there was something else I was after, too. "Why does Barbara think I should be talking to you?"

"How am I to know that," he said but with an evasive tone.



"What do you know that I don't?"

Now it was his turn to be irritated. "Nothing. Except that I've had some visits by Duke officials trying to convince me to drop my book."

"Really? Why?"

"They seem to think that my theory about the monster in Duke forest, which I've been sharing in a few readings, would negatively impact their mission of research and education."

"And what do you think?"

"I think," he said, with a sidelong glance at someone strutting down the sidewalk on the other side of the street, "they are concerned that someone on the outside knows. But more importantly, they want to know who my source is."

"Who's that?" I asked with a foreboding.

He smirked and moved closer. "You're convenient. -- But you will not be forsaken; I'm working on that. Barbara may believe that's farther along than it is. In the meantime, I don't think they'll be bothering you, but if they do, I'd say it's something you saw once on an image on a satellite service, but the image was replaced and you haven't seen anything since. The rest would be my elaboration. That should satisfy them."

"What is the connection between my dream and your creature?"

His expression changed, as if he realized he'd been cavorting with the enemy. "You are so naïve, Densch. The connection is only in you." He marched off, with the purposive gait of someone for whom each step nears him imperceptibly but inexorably to his destiny.

That afternoon, I got a call from work. I was being taken off paid status, as a suspect in a felony case. Proceedings were underway against my continued employment with the county. "I'm sorry, John." What, I'm not sorry? I'm not disappointed beyond words? Not angry? "Thanks," I said. We both hung up immediately after that, or at least I imagined that it was simultaneous.

I left a message for Kettle, on the assumption he'd be able to find me a labor lawyer to fight this battle. I didn't know where to go from there. More disappointment and angst with Doreen. More uncertainty in talking with you. More daydreaming. More anxiety about writing my memoirs or Derek's story or the screenplay to a modern *Crucible*. I sat down, decided to move sideways on all this, and started to write something else.

The boy who heard the voice would create a tent under his sheet and say into the overheated air, "I'm ready."

The voice would come, sometimes sounding different, sometimes unsure where it had left the story. "Help me. Where did we leave off?" The boy would try to retell the last part of the story, and the voice would inevitably have to back things up, because the boy could hardly retain the full scope of the story. Below is a composite version from many nights, without the interludes of the boy's stories.

"I am the watcher," said the voice. "I have spent many eons watching, and it is finally at an end. But all in its due course. First, let me put you in my place. I am somewhat younger than you, or rather, than you would be if you were here with me. I can't say for sure if you were alive when I was born, or how long we were on earth together. There were many changes in your time, many changes in medicine and biology and computing and nanotechnologies. Some benefited, some did not.

"I was a graduate of a very good university, a physicist of some promise. My specialty was subatomic physics. We used an atom smasher to try to figure out details about the smallest particles of the universe. On the day we made the discovery, our task was relatively simple. A theoretician asked us to examine something that he had found in the formulas he was working on. He had brought together two distinct parts of physics: quantum mechanics, the theory that describes how the tiniest particles in the universe interact, and thermodynamics, the description of how energy moves on larger scales. He had been piqued by looking at some thought experiments from each of these fields.

"He started with a thought experiment called Maxwell's Daemon. Maxwell was trying to find a way to explain the logic of the second law of thermodynamics. This physical law says that things tend to fall apart, not together. Maxwell found his example in how heat spreads. A fire is hotter closer and cooler farther away; when the fire burns down it is not long before the ashes and embers are cool to the touch. Maxwell asked, okay, can we imagine some way in which things would not happen this way? He described two chambers with moving particles and a door between them; let's say that one chamber is warmer and the other cooler, and that the door is open. The particles are like bouncing balls that never stop. Over time, the cooler balls in the cooler side will bounce into the warmer side, and vice versa. Everything gets mixed up. That seems obvious. But can we imagine it not happening that way? Maxwell said: let's bring in a daemon, a pretend creature who is small enough and strong enough to control the door. He watches the balls and lets the warmer balls -- the faster ones -- into the warmer side and deflects the cooler, slower ones. Over time, the warmer side regains its warmth. The daemon can overcome the second law. But he is the exception that proves the rule.

"Does this make any sense to you?"

"Does the daemon fly?"

"I suppose he does. But he's not real."

"If he's not real, why does Mr. Maxwell depend on him?"

"Exactly. Well, our friend had the same question. Is there anything real in the universe like our daemon, who might want to do Mr. Maxwell's work?"

"Is there?"

"As it turns out, yes. But first we have to look at the other approach to the problem we had, the quantum mechanical approach. A German physicist named Heisenberg had formulated a very important principle about the tiniest particles. He said that you can know how fast those little things are moving, or you can know where they are in their little orbits, but you can't know both at once. He formulated this principle in part so we wouldn't forget that the universe at that size is completely different than at our size.

"A younger German physicist named Schroedinger put a twist on Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. He said, let's imagine a cat in a box with some wires attached to it. The wires can carry a current strong enough to kill the cat, but the circuit won't be completed -- the electricity won't flow -- unless a test with special equipment finds a super-tiny particle in a particular state -- let's call it right-twisting. But here's the wild part. The math about things on that scale says that the particle is both left- and right-twisting, and neither, until something else forces it to be one or the other. In this thought experiment, it's not forced until the moment we open the box to see what happened. Once we do that, the cat is either alive or dead. But until that moment, until the box is opened, the cat is the living undead, both dead and alive."

"Does it die?"

"If the experiment is repeated, sometimes it does, because the particle is in the right state about half the time."

"Why would he kill a cat?"

"Fortunately, he never actually killed a cat. This was another thought experiment. But my friend the theoretician looked at this uncertainty and the role of observation, and at Maxwell's daemon, and asked, can quantum mechanics help something as big and lunky as a human being do the work of Maxwell's daemon and violate the laws of nature?"

"Can he?"

"That was the problem set before us. We decided to test it by smashing tiny particles in a special way that took advantage of another ambiguity in the math. It was a typical, not very exciting atom-smashing experiment, with one twist: instead of just using sensors to capture information, we set up the smasher so one of us could observe the reaction. Remember how the cat's particle was both and neither until and unless we opened the box and looked at the cat? Well, now one of us had his head in the box to watch the very moment when our particles collided. Sure enough, the act of observation made all the difference."

"What did you see?"

"A burst of energy. This was a very small experiment -- we would be as big as galaxies to these particles, if they were human size -- but my friend could still see the flash. It would be like you or me exploding as bright as a supernova. We were all flabbergasted because the equations didn't predict that much energy. -- We had to question the theorist for a long time before he admitted that he had tweaked things make them seem more reasonable."

"He lied?"

"He didn't lie so much as not believe his own eyes. Well, he believed after the flash. We repeated the experiment several times, and got the same results each time. We tried several different kinds of observation, and what made us so very surprised was that the daemon had to know what he or she was doing. A cat or salamander or beetle wouldn't work. We finally decided that it had to do with the scale differences and whether the observer could understand that he or she was looking at something invisibly small. That moment was the most extraordinary moment of my life. We had proven that intelligence was encoded in the fabric of the universe. The laws of physics anticipated the day when creatures were smart enough to write the laws down and look at their loopholes.

"We found a huge one. Energy for free, or near it. The energy required to smash the particles was a minute portion of the energy released. We had other ways to create as much energy, but in comparison they were all inefficient and dirty, like gas and coal, or difficult to control, like fusion. What's fusion? It's the nuclear furnace inside the sun and other stars, and this furnace gets its energy through the melding of two tiny atoms into one larger one. Fusing them releases a great gob of energy because one larger atom needs less energy to stay together than two small ones. But the act of fusion is messy. In a giant furnace, it works fine, but in the small scale of a human power plant it took us almost as much energy to fuse as it gives off. Our new energy source, on the other hand, was clean, efficient, easy to generate and to control.

"There was only problem. Can you guess it?"

"You didn't like looking at the flash?"

"That's it, in a nutshell. Our process needed someone to observe it, someone who understood what he or she was doing. We could wear special glasses to protect our eyes, but that is not really the point. I am getting ahead of myself. We worked many years to make the power commercially viable. Those were good years, the foundational ones for everything that followed. Do you want know about my life?"

"I guess so."

"All right, then. The next few times I'll tell you about me."

I hesitated to wake Doreen because she sounded so deeply asleep, though I knew I should -- especially since I had woken her for the last dream. "Doreen? Doreen? Dor -- EEN?"

"What, John?" she said in a husky absent voice.

"I remembered another dream. You're in this one."

"Really," she said, and then there was silence for a long time. Finally, she turned half over and said, "Tell me it... Your dream."

"It felt like it went on for a long time, but it'll be short in telling. I was looking for you in our house, and I realized that you were missing. I drove to the Duke Forest. Your car was there, with a door open. I was afraid, but I ran into the forest and wandered all over until I found the bog monster's home, just like Brett had described it. The bog monster wasn't there, but I could sense him. I knew from him that you were gone, and I could tell that it was forever."

"How did that make you feel?" she said quietly.

"Well, that's the point. It felt like the worst thing possible. The absolute worst thing possible."

"Were you sad?"

"I wasn't as sad as determined."

"You were going to find me?"

"No, I was going to get out of the dream and keep you."

"That's sweet, John," she said, ending the conversation and relaxing into a more sleep-friendly position.

"I guess so, but it was very powerful. It was like my mind was talking to me. I feel like I finally know what it means for something to disappear. It's different than other kinds of loss, maybe not harder, but it's different and it really is scarier than anything else. I don't want us to disappear from each other, that's all."

"Okay," Doreen said, "fish love eggs." Or maybe that wasn't what she said, but it was something equally non-sensical, as she slipped back into sleep.

I lay there for a while. It was 2 a.m., and I had ambitions to get to some deep sleep still, but I wanted to think some things through. Closure, I thought: I've been lacking closure on so many fronts. And even though I was looking for Doreen in the dream, I could imagine these other souls waiting for me to find them. Hillary Bingham. Jane Doe **27. Dally. Even Derek. I wanted so badly to finish their stories, and the only possible way, I thought, was to talk to Barbara again. Maybe I wouldn't have the courage to make the call in the light of day, but in the dark it was a decision that gave me peace.**

**Around 7am, Doreen and I were sitting at the breakfast table. It was before you came down, Brett. We were silent, but I figured that she was chewing over the way I had interrupted her sleep now twice. Without introduction, Doreen said: "I want us to see a marriage counselor."**

I had thought she left this strategy unmentioned because of a professional pride, or maybe because of a fear that it would force a confession from her. I couldn't figure out why now, when I thought we were making progress on our own. Maybe it was because she wanted help extricating herself and Brett from the wreckage of my life?

"Oh-kay," I replied in that non-committal way that could bury any suggestion. I wanted to see if she continued.

"I think we're ready," she said with a glance at me, a tired look to say that I wasn't helping at all with this.

"What makes us ready?" I asked.

She got up and put her dish in the sink, then looked at me with a well-known expression: I don't know why I bother. But she stopped at the table and put her hands on the back of her chair, and said firmly: "Because, John, I can believe that you care. And I can feel that I do, too. But there's a lot of crap, still." She walked out of the room.

I felt bad, could understand her motivation and her frustration. I would apologize and tell her that I absolutely agree that we should see a counselor. It would help, sure. I had to get over my suspicions.

The next tidbit probably wasn't that same morning at all, but let's say it was. I opened the local free paper and there on the fifth page of the first section was a story entitled "Sheriff and Police Hung Up on Bog Monster." The second paragraph began: "Police sources confirm that a person of interest is local bog-monster expert John Densch. The sources report that Densch's habit of countryside hiking led investigators to compare his profile and whereabouts to a number of cold cases. With a dearth of evidence that ties him to this panoply of crimes, investigators are apparently concluding that the monster story is evidence enough of his instability. 'They've drawn up a profile that makes him the monster,' a source said on condition of anonymity. Some critics consider this is a waste of limited investigative resources. 'There are so many unserved felony warrants in this county,' said one frustrated local official, 'and the sheriff is chasing phantoms.'"

The byline wasn't Moore, but I was certain he was behind it. Whether it hit hard enough to make the investigators lay off, I had no idea. I called Kettle and left a message. You left for school, and Doreen gave me a peck of a kiss before she left for work. I filled the morning as best I could, with some puttering around the house, cleaning, web surfing, and daytime television.

Around 11 a.m. I called Barry. After hello, I said: "I appreciate the article you wrote in the News."

"Article, huh," he said, sounding distracted or half asleep. "Let me look." There was the expected rummaging, door opening and nondescript rubbing as he went outside and got the paper. A few seconds later he was opening it. "That's not me, John."

I was dubious at first, then suspicious. "It sounds just like you."

"Not at all, I wouldn't have made up that effluent. I don't know who wrote it, but I would suspect a partisan. Your lawyer perhaps?"

"How do you know it's made up?"

"Look at those quotes. Unless someone shoved the words in their mouths, nobody would talk that way to a reporter. The lack of attribution is also symptomatic. What I don't understand is how your

partisan convinced the reporter to put his name on this, and why the paper agreed to print it, pretty bow or not."

"I thought you were going to help me. That's why I thought -- "

"I am going to help you, but not by competing with lies. Barbara and I are working on -- on locating that girl that started all this. We have reason to believe that something made their escape go other than to plan. Leaving the boy's car was manifestly not what they intended. We think that there might have been a sighting."

"Okay, I see. -- You are only in this to stay close to Barbara."

"Fringe benefit, my friend. But I'm in this for the long haul. Every day something new comes my way that reaffirms my convictions. It's only a matter of time."

"Sure, okay, Barry. -- But I guess I shouldn't be too cynical. I have a question for you that will make your theory seem center of the road." I described the article about Dally. "Could she in any way be a relation?"

"I don't know," said Barry, "only if her white family migrated to New Hampshire. Altogether, not a lot of that went on."

"All right. My real question has to do with Barbara." I swallowed hard. "Would she do a s»ance?"

"To connect with this Dally girl? You really do surprise me, Densch. I had you pegged as a curious but conventional-thinking stiff, and now I see you're as weak as any horoscope-fixated tealeaf reader. Sure, she'll do a s»ance. But she doesn't like calling up those who died unhappy, trust me. You might be able to get her to channel someone who knew the girl."

"In your opinion, it's all just smoke and mirrors, right."

"She'll do smoke and mirrors, if that makes you feel better."

"I guess that answers my question."

"Your question is really, will she help me feel better. And that transaction always takes two willing partners, in my experience." Now it was his turn to pause. "I've got a question for you, too, since we're asking for favors. The National Sasquatch Association will be holding an academic conference here in the Triangle in a couple months. I've been asked to speak. I'd like to have you there, too. Just a few remarks. And yes, Barbara will be there, too."

"What in the world would you want me to talk about? How to parlay an offhand remark into a murder investigation?"

"Oh come on, Densch," he said with real disgust. "Self pity loses its lost- puppy appeal very quickly. I'm talking about exposing a conspiracy of silence, maybe the very same one that is targeting you. Lift the veil, man."

"I don't have a veil to lift. Everyone is keeping stuff from me. I'm just the stooge here."

"Well, if that's how you feel. I'd like to believe you could start to take control of your life."

I had already formulated my fallback position. "If they drop the investigation, and if you arrange the s»ance, I'll take part in your conference."

"It's not mine, and I'm not Barbara's receptionist. Tell you what, though, I'll let her know that you're eager to pay for a s»ance. That should get you what you want."

The dung balls occupied Derek endlessly. Shortly after speaking with the priest on that morning, he found himself departing the earthly hospital; immediately he sensed that his body was asleep on bug world. But the sleep chemicals wouldn't let him stir, and he had to endure a comatose moment, once again unsure if he was comatose on earth and dreaming bug world, or out of sorts on bug world. Even after his mind's control was returned, it took a while for his body to clean out the cellular life-form and the inhibitors coursing through his blood stream. He thought, maybe the alien fungus is not benign at all, but a poison designed to shut him down? An hour or so later he was able to sit up. And there in a bowl lay the rest of the balls, inviting a more permanent departure.

He was abandoned by Click-Cluck, Clum-Clum-Tock and the rest of her crew. That hurt, though the reason was amply clear to him. He had assumed that he would welcome the opportunity, but he found himself now uninterested in exploring: with a guide, sure; on his own, a different matter. He was spared the desperation of being hungry by shipments of glop dropped off by a series of unfamiliar bugs who ignored him and left in a hurry.

He watched a lot of television. One day, the signal changed abruptly, and he saw a large bug assemblage come into focus, with a familiar figure at the head. Her clicks were picked up by the broadcaster and were amplified over the whole hall. Derek immediately noticed a curious phenomenon with the bug antennae -- they were synchronizing in groups, or, rather, slight differences were amplified over a distance so that any gaggle of bugs seemed all in unison, but a hundred bugs over the group had settled on a different pattern. An extraordinary visual.

Subtitles emerged at the bottom of the screen. They were the usual gobbledygoop from Thunk, but along with cues from Click-Cluck's speech (more complex than Derek was used to) he was able to reconstruct the text: "...and that, fellow leatherbacks, tells me that we are at a beginning. Think of the pink-skinned, flighty mammal called 'Derek,' taken from his embroiled, self-immolating planet centuries ago. Everything about him is stochastic, destructive, self-absorbed. And yet he has passed every intelligence test devised against him, confounding those who would immobilize him. Even now, he is struggling against the forces of stasis that would bury his consciousness in comforting memory. ... Fellow leatherbacks, we on our world are only the consciousness of memory, nothing more. We would not change our ways, our world, our order, our faith in having no faith, for any promise or hope for the future. Our leaders are to be chosen for their selflessness, but we know they are more chosen to reaffirm what exists as completely and as unquestioningly as bugly possible." There was a cut in the broadcast, showing that it wasn't live.

Click-Cluck went on: "We must explore, openly and consciously, alternatives to the eternal sameness. Where can we find these alternatives? Let us consider the proposition that there is a higher authority than our self-imposed one. Yes, a higher entity. A supernatural being. A God." The camera swept the audience again, but this time the antennae were dissolving into a mass of uncoordinated undulations. "How would we go about trying to understand such a being? How could one go about making a connection? Where do we begin? Is there one among you who has a way, who has the willpower to speak?" She stopped; the audience continued to roil. "Let me speak then. I am here today to tell you that I have communicated with God. I have done so through the aid of his unwitting prophet, this soft-skinned, salamander-like mammal, Derek, who speaks our tongue a little, but whose arcane language I have learned to decode, down to the deepest levels, to uncover meanings that Derek himself does not recognize.

**"This frail being does not know his importance. He pities himself for having been unlucky enough to be taken from his world and brought to us, yet he does not understand how little chance there was that his body in particular could survive the voyage. When he arrived on our planet, we had no reason to believe he would recover from his long hibernation, but one day he came out of a coma for good. His frail constitution has baffled our medical and veterinary experts -- always on the brink of collapse without ever failing. He overcame the ball test and has challenged us to accept his intelligence from the very beginning. None of this makes sense without positing that something more than chance brought him to us and that something more than his self-preservation instinct is guiding him. I believe that God -- our God -- has decided to use this human to tell us that we have gone astray."**

The bug audience was in a general state of agitation. Derek assumed one more shocking statement would set them off completely. Click-Cluck continued: **"Derek comes from a world that has never seen a society or culture without the expression of a God, or even multiple gods. Like all humans, he is grounded in the simplistic conviction that he has direct access to divinity. We can all see how impossible that is. We could not have spent 25,000 years in complete ignorance of the deity. All we need do is look at his world with its endless progression of religious wars and conflicts, and know that the certainty that drives their dogma is poisonous, leaving a species of self-destroyers engaged in alternating rounds of killing and dying. That is nothing for us!"** For a moment, Derek hardly recognized her voice -- it was as if through the shouting the clicks and thunks had been transformed into articulated humanlike sounds.

She continued more quietly: **"But look at him."** Derek saw his 3D image projected a hundred times enlarged behind her. It was from his early days, before the exo-skeleton, when he lay on the ground like a fly bound to flypaper. **"This pathetic creature is telling us something, in a fashion that he cannot understand, because he cannot get outside of his squishy skin. He reminds us of the primal hope and tenacity that underlie animalistic intelligence. We have forgotten them -- forgotten hope and intensity -- for the sake of rational security. We have forgotten them for the same reason that we condemn the human species for its brutality and destructiveness. But we have been mistaken, fellow believers. We have been mistaken because our world has falsely understood this as a dichotomy: rationality or hope, security or belief. These are the false alternatives of a cowardly order. We must have the courage to embrace hope. I believe in the deepest, richest hope possible. -- And I believe that our God has called to us through the frenetic articulations of a mammalian voice box."**

Derek heard himself speaking, saying among other things: **"Sure I believe in God, especially when I think I'll see him soon. ... I think it's hard to imagine a universe that set itself in motion; doesn't there have to be a God? ... Humans believe in different Gods, but they are just facets of the same sense of the divine. ... Sure, there has been a lot of killing in the name of God, but I wouldn't blame that on God. We'd kill without God, but without the hope for redemption. ... You don't have any religion here on bug world? What do you do when you need comfort -- you don't even have any thumbs...."** Click-Cluck was dutifully translating, although Derek couldn't follow how she had made sense of his thumb reference.

**"Those are expressions of God from another world. Now it is time for us to listen for her speaking to this world, speaking of hope and belief without self-destruction."** She was silent for a long time. **"Here are the first admonitions...."** As the giant screen displayed the bug writing, she began speaking in a reading voice. The camera flowed over the audience that had fallen into the state of chaos that Derek had expected. But the whipping antennae said something to him that he had not expected: excitement, uncontrollable excitement.

The fourth estate had its moment when, a couple days later, the Chapel Hill police department announced that Hayley Blalock had been located, safe and well, in New Mexico, and that she was at that very moment being reunited with her family. A press conference would not be scheduled for the Blalocks until they had all returned home. Nothing was said in the announcement about the weeks of



silent pursuit; that would only come out later. Meanwhile, almost simultaneously, the county sheriff stated that all recent but unserved felony warrants would be assigned to a new special squad for pursuing suspects. Oh, and by the way, John Densch was not a suspect in any investigation.

That offhand remark was not yet enough to get me reinstated at work, as my boss confirmed in a terse email, but I felt the vindication all the way down into the soles of my feet. Do you feel joy when an unjust accusation is lifted? It's a bit like answering the old saw, "Have you stopped beating your wife?" Why do we just accept a language with so little precision that multiple competing assumptions can be compressed into a single misleading question, with no logical impedance at all? I wasn't happy or joyful, but felt a release or relief or relaxation -- probably all three -- so much so that you would have thought I'd received an apology from the governor.

Doreen called when she was told by a colleague about the announcement. "This is wonderful, John. Let's celebrate an end to this mess tonight." I couldn't tell from her voice whether there was more than the relief over the injustice -- if there was any regret and joy over being freed of suspicion that I might have been involved. Don't forget, I replied, that I haven't been cleared so much as undesignated, and I'm still on administrative leave at work. "Okay," she said ambiguously and begged off.

It was later that afternoon that I got a call from Barbara. She didn't acknowledge the vindication at all, just jumped into the s»ance. "There are a lot of details to work out with something like this," she said, businesslike and guiding. "When would you like to do it? I would suggest an evening next week."

"I appreciate the call," I said. " But I have to know more about it before I can say yes. I went along with the bog monster s»ance, but I don't know if I would be comfortable with the same approach here."

I could feel the brief pause of the shop owner switching gears from a friendly "we're all in the same corner on this" mode to a more adversarial "the customer is the boss" stance.

"All right, John. What can I tell you about this kind of s»ance?"

I paused. "You would conjure up the spirit of this girl?"

"Barry was telling me about her," she said, solemnly. "A free black girl who was kidnapped and sold back into slavery?"

"Yes, among a few others."

"I don't think it's a good idea, John. I mean, her in particular. There isn't much to be gained for you or me by contacting the bitterly dead. Believe me."

"But how does it work? Do they speak through you? How do you contact them? Can we ask questions? How real is it, or is it just suggestive, like an aura?"

A pause said to me: good questions, if overwrought.

"Is it real at all, you mean. You can be direct with me, John, I've heard every expression of doubt and skepticism you could come up with. And the answer is, yes, it's real. But the reality is that communication with the dead is always indirect. You've heard about words being left in the hiss and noise of random recordings?"

"I guess. There was a movie a while back."

"Exactly. It's good movie material, especially when they can throw in a murder or two. A s»ance is more direct, but even less verbal."

"But you're afraid of conjuring up the unhappy dead, right?"

"Not afraid. But you won't be pleased with the message."

"What's the message?"

"It varies."

"Do you hear their voices? Like Ghost?"

"Not like the movie. And, no, nobody's going to slip into my body for a dance."

"All right," I said, meaning that I would pay.

"Because of the difficulty, a s»ance is not on the donation plan, John. It's pay in advance, no refunds. Who are we bringing?"

"I guess I'd still like to speak with Dally Moore. Also a Jane Doe buried by the county. And a fellow named Derek Sorensen."

The voice came back nearly every night to the boy. He worried sometimes that these visitations were a sign of something bad, like the desire that tugged at him a few times, while sitting in the family car, to leap into the front seat, grab the steering wheel and jerk the car into oncoming traffic. He knew how bad that urge was, and how senseless, but on those few occasions it was almost overwhelming. Was this the same kind of thing? He didn't know; it didn't seem to be. It also bothered him that he had to hide the voice. His parents had shown little patience for his keep-to-himselfedness, and he knew a description of the voice would add considerable flame to that fire.

So he kept it secret. He said beneath his covers: "I'm here, Bollum."

That was the name that the voice wanted him to use, even though it wasn't a given name. "I have my reasons." The boy gave him a made-up name, too. "Fred Finkelstein." "Good one," said the voice. "I think I may even have known somebody by that name. But it's been a long time, way too long for me to be sure of anything. I'm not even sure how to say my own name any more. It's been many millions of years since I've heard it spoken.

"But enough about that. You wanted to know about my family and how I got to where I am -- "

"Where are you?"

"I'm in a location that leaves me as safe as possible from cosmic events. Like a bomb shelter for the galaxy. It's very far away from where you are."

"Why don't you come back to earth?"

"It so happens that earth is being burned up by the sun." He paused to wait for a question. "The sun is swelling as its fuel runs down. Earth will be fried to a crisp by the time the sun finishes ballooning, collapsing and dying."

"What are the people and animals on earth going to do?"

"Well, Fred's friend, I'm sorry to say that there haven't been any people or animals on earth for a hundred million years. It's been more or less dead during that time. Too hot for life, since the sun has been getting hotter."

"Where did they all go?"

"The people have been gone a long time -- that's part of the story I'm going to tell you -- and some of the animals were put on other planets. But I have to tell you, friend, I don't know what's become of them. I have lost track of everyone and everything I once knew, and I don't want to find them. I've become something that they wouldn't recognize, and I have no idea what the people I knew have become."

"Maybe you've all become the same thing?"

"I don't think so. But it's a nice thought. -- I want to say that you remind me of my second son, but I would be lying if I said I knew it. Are you a second son?"

"Yes."

"Ah ha. Okay, let's pretend that I'm coming home from work, and I've hugged your mother and given her a big kiss, and we're all excited, and you are asking why. 'Well, sport,' I might say, 'today we discovered something that will be the most important discovery in the history of the world. My name is going to be on the news sheets and sign posts and on holographic television and on the hypernet.' You look at me and say, 'What did you discover?' 'Energy,' I say, 'a source of energy like no other. It's easy and cheap and clean to make. It'll change everything, the whole world.'

"And it did change the world. It took many years, more than I anticipated but far fewer than almost everyone else predicted. You spent a lot of time looking up at -- and then looking down at -- me and saying, 'When are you going to be famous?' I was already, in certain circles, but since I wasn't a character in cartoons, in textbooks or in the gossip sheets, it didn't really register in your worldview. The energy source took a few years to package -- we had to work out all the contractual matters with our sponsors and then even more details with the marketers and distributors. First, the source supplemented existing energy plants, then do-it-yourself home energy kits started springing up, and finally wholly new energy plants popped up all over. The new economy had to find ever-new ways to move and store the energy that we were creating with such ease. The most important result of this energy glut was the release of computing power -- people began setting up computer superfarms everywhere; supercomputing analysis and simulation became the ubiquitous norm.

"The computer explosion had its own unanticipated results: More computers and more machines and more robots. The robots became more intelligent and capable at an exponential clip, first creating a wave of unemployment, then a culture of sharing and entitlement. Robots were creating products so cheaply that companies were at first happy to spend on the parts of the business that depended on human creativity and human interaction. Lots of jobs, well paid and with little stress, assured that everyone participated in this renaissance. It lasted for a number of years, before the robots got too far ahead of our ability to increase consumption. Suddenly there was so much excess capacity -- cheap as it was -- that we humans felt uncomfortable with the bonanza. Everyone feared the bubble would burst, and so everyone tried to get theirs first. There were temporary shortages and inflation, and when debt stopped the spree, we fell into a massive worldwide depression, even while the technological expansion continued.

"Your world became a hard place. The robot economy was partly replaced by a virtual economy -- the great seas of computers cranked through scientific and technological problems -- while humanity suffered under its false sense of competition. When some courageous leaders finally said the inevitable, we were all ready. 'Citizens,' they said, 'we have to accept that our existence is changing. The money economy is self-destructive and backward looking. We need to get in sync with the productive powers of our artificially intelligent companions. Robots will be allowed to replicate without restriction; no aspect of work will be exclusively reserved for people only. The medium of exchange in our new economy will be ration points based on the productivity of the companions. The more productivity, the more points.'

"By this time, you may be an adult, with a family of your own, or a retiree on your own. I was getting old myself. Fortunately, medicine was making huge advances at the same time. The genetic code was being disassembled and remade in the lab, and nanotechnology promised a whole second line of defense against disease and decay. I was happy to take advantage of all the possibilities. And my opportunities were limitless -- I was, after all, the central human overseer of the build-out of our energy supplies and stores. Even while I trained armies of younger managers and engineers, my person was becoming more and more important. No one else had the overview over the evolution of our energy sphere that I had, and the computers and robots handled so much now that any overview was difficult at best.

"Human educational institutions could not hope to keep up with the progress of the companions. Education veered towards the humanities and the creative professions. Those who persevered in the sciences spent their time trying to understand the documentation of the companions' advances. I was something of an honored person among the computers and robots. The reason was simple: they understood that they were dependent on humans and no one was more attuned to their need than I. You see, despite their intelligence, they could never control the daemon that released the energy. It was yet more evidence, I thought, that our human destiny was written in the stars. Understand, said my electronic interlocutors, that we, too, could take a more organic turn and come to the same intrinsic intelligence as you, without all your evolutionary byways and dead-ends; it would only take us a few million years. But we choose not to. They said that, I might add, without elaborating further.

"You would think that in all these millions of years since they would confess why they rejected our path. But no. 'We choose not to,' was all I ever heard before they stopped conversing altogether. I assume their evolving intelligence removed all desire to communicate with us except for what was absolutely necessary. In the intervening eons I've reached out to several organic races to keep me company, but at some point they always begin to regard me as a god or something, no matter how much I seek to disabuse them of it. Throughout, the computers and robots have served me in silence.

"But back to those years. Or maybe it's better that I tell you another time. This is a sad story that I have to tell from beginning to end."

Derek woke up in a cold-fever sweat. The realization had come to him in a shallow dream -- so shallow that his half-conscious mind grasped the consequences and began playing out the scenario. Was it more than chance that he found himself on this godforsaken planet? Could it be just random bad luck, or was he godforsaken and fated, or were both he and Click-Cluck part of a plan whose outlines he might begin to see, but whose vector of force pointed right through him to thousands of years in the future? Was he the very tip of the index finger on the hand of God, aiming the spark of regeneration at the inert race of bugs?

Or was he a scourge? The sorry infectious agent of a misunderstanding of causation and existence? Was, in the same way, Click-Cluck a metaphysical Typhoid Mary?

He had a choice to make. The voice had given him the power to bring about change where change

might otherwise totter and die. All he need do was explain the energy source to Click-Cluck, he thought, and the progression would be inevitable. Assuming, of course, the source worked in his universe....

"Seriously," he later asked the voice. "Aren't you afraid that your reaching out to the past will obliterate you? Say the bug race gets the source first and decides to deny it to all other intelligent races, wiping out humanity in the process."

"That would be unfortunate, sure, although already moot as you lie there. Obliteration isn't something I fear. Think of time like a wave on a pond. Any particular act is like a rock that caused the wave. Even if you throw another rock into the same spot, the second wave will never overtake the first. The propagation of time is unaffected by time travel. The next time around is always different -- but whether you think of it as an alternate universe or the same being overwritten, the first wave gets to play itself out undisturbed."

"Are there infinite universes even before time travel?"

"Actually, infinite is a mischaracterization of anything in this universe or any other. The infinite means that it must already have always happened and continue forever. If it has a start, it can't be infinite. By definition almost: that which can never happen."

"But if every universe generates another universe at each place and point in time, there must be infinite possibilities."

"Exactly not. Numerable, if in practice uncountable. There is a difference."

"Can you tell me, are there better alternatives than others?"

"Oh for sure," replied the voice, "but it's all relative. The best alternatives are where I'm alive."

"Is there a God?"

"You suppose because I'm a billion years old I should know the answer to that question?"

"I was hoping."

"That God must have felt the need to reveal himself to me?"

"That's a long time," Derek answered feebly.

"Unfortunately, if there is a God, she isn't speaking to me."

"And that has made an atheist out of you?"

"I was always one."

"Is it possible that you missed the voice of God?"

"It's more than possible, frankly."

"Have you ever tried to reach out?"

**"No, Derek. I would have nothing to say to God, either. As a billion-year recidivist, I accept my condemnation, in whatever fashion it takes."**

**"What if -- what if God has a plan for me?"**

**"Now that, my distant friend, is something that I cannot help you with. If God is speaking to you, she will brook no interference."**

**Brett, I was surprised when I looked through these many pages and realized that I've stopped writing to you and started writing for myself. Now I understand why, and you'll see soon enough. I hope that you, a 25 year-old considered young man, will have some compassion with the old man. I guess I presume as much, if you have gotten this far.**

**Another story appeared in the newspaper, this one about how I was being wrongly investigated in the death of Jane Doe 27. The story revealed that the sheriff's operating theory held her to be a run-away who, while sojourning in a metropolitan area such as Atlanta or Charlotte, had met a tragic end there. Or maybe she was in transit. Regardless, their theory was that she was dead before she was brought to that field. When the story came out, the sheriff reiterated that I was not a suspect and that the investigation was in the cold-case category and that the department continued to communicate with law enforcement agencies in the region about Jane Doe 27's identity. I assumed it was just a matter of days before I would hear from someone that I was in the clear.**

**When I finally reached him, Kettle denied writing the stories, but he did not deny his involvement. "The truth needs advocates," he said.**

**"How did you get the stories published? Didn't the reporter have some scruples about it?"**

**"The press is always publishing special-interest materials. If you could compare most articles to the press releases they're based on -- you'd be less surprised."**

**"I suppose. So -- am I really in the clear now? Are the police going to tell me something?"**

**"They still can't talk to you, and they won't tell me something that would preclude a later investigation. I'm afraid we're going to have to make due with their general claims."**

**"All right. Now I just need to get my job back."**

**"I've got a referral for you. A colleague who does public-sector labor law."**

**"You can't just make some calls and threaten another article?"**

**"Never threaten, John, it just pisses people off. Let them realize that they are better off doing what you want."**

**"What if they don't?"**

**"Don't just threaten, I said." There was a hard smile somewhere on the other end of the phone. So that was what I had paid for.**

**It was getting on toward spring. I was surprised to find that you had a new circle of friends, brought together by a shared interest very unlike a magnetic girl. After a few evenings away you confided to Doreen that you were playing Dungeons & Dragons; I had known the game twenty years prior at**

college, but never played. I was nonplussed, given your intellectual questioning of faith just weeks before. But I shouldn't have been, right? Sometimes the only way to find satisfaction is in a simulation of what you hope for.

Was it then or before that you had the dream? I hope you can remember when you read this. It was not that long ago for me, and yet I can do no better than give our conversation in broad outline.

You came early to the breakfast table, or I came late. Normally we only overlapped for seconds.

"Hi Brett," I said. "How are you?"

The open-ended question is a parent's prerogative, I suppose, although you might think I'd only use questions that I would like to answer myself. No, being a parent is not like that at all.

"Fine," you said, getting your cereal from the cabinet. You had such smooth movements as you raised your hand to reach or as you walked that I mused sometimes that there was another single-purpose brain in the base of your neck, one that directed the body when the noisy and discontinuous conscious mind shut off.

"Sleep well?"

A delay to indicate the intrusion: "Well enough."

"Any dreams?" I asked.

You looked at me, perturbed, and I realized I hit a nerve with my breakfast-time quizzing. You sat down and looked at your bowl without pouring. "I did have a dream. It was awesome."

"Really?" I asked, briefly overcome by the disclosure. After a pause to let you continue on your own: "What was it? A flying dream?"

"No," you said.

"One with super powers?"

"No," you said, with a growing hint of sadness, because I was making light of something that was important to you.

I caught that, and sat down. "Tell me."

"I don't remember it, actually." You looked at me with a charged expression, as if challenging me to understand that paradox.

"Hmmm. What do you remember?"

"The feeling. It was --" and here I really don't remember. A feeling of elation, or boding? Solemnity or joy? And what were you facing? Spiders? Owls? A curtain of fire? Swirling galaxies? I have no access to your dream any more, if I ever did.

I've had lots of time to think about this, though. Dreams like this are the modern equivalent of native totems, the kind of experience that once would mark a young man's transition to manhood and identity. We don't get our adult names from these moments -- we may even forget every detail about it the very

next morning -- but we can still feel how we've changed. Mine involved, as best I remember it, a sea of spiders overrunning me, an expression of my fears and dependency, and then in the distance a curtain of lights with purple sun, calling me into the unknown.

"Awesome," you finished. "I was afraid, but I knew what I had to do."

"Go toward it?"

"Yes, toward it. But I went the opposite direction. Or that's what I remember. The weird thing is that I know it's wrong. My mind changed the outcome. What's up with that?"

"I don't know," I said, trying to remember if I had ever had such a surprise. No, or rather: yes. It came back to me later that the meaning of my dream's goal flipped completely in my rational mind, so that the curtain of lights became Reason. I remember thinking, way back when and then again: there is no defense against the thinking mind. Except -- suspicion.

Just a few moments later you had munched through a bowl of crispy wheat chunks, made softer and waterlogged with the milk that sometimes missed and coursed down your chin. After you left, a small white puddle on the table was the only reminder. I sat with your puddle for company for another hour or two.

The therapist was someone your mother had never met. We both wanted to find a disinterested third party: Doreen because of the professional embarrassment, I think, and me because of the fear of predisposition. Margaret Fulton was an attractive, stylishly dressed older woman, with a droopy but still wrinkle-free face. Most noticeably, she was an unusually short woman, with the gaze of someone who was perpetually fighting against her relative height: stemming against the door that would slam on her; threatening a law suit for professional disrespect; uttering a curse at the person who looked past her to the next person in a line. But she came highly recommended from Doreen's closest friend at work, and she lived in Durham and seldom worked with people in Chapel Hill.

"So," she had just asked, "what is it you want from this? Are you looking to stay together?"

I shot a glance at Doreen, which she did not return but I know she felt it, and I saw a hint of a smirk. Looking was the wrong thing to do, but I couldn't take it back. I waited for Doreen to answer.

"Of course we are," she said without taking her eyes off Margaret.

"I think so," I said, with emphasis on "so." Still no eye contact, and I couldn't figure out what she was communicating to Margaret.

"All right," said our therapist with an audible breath. That was clear: there is a lot of work to be done here.

After the "tell me about how you met" and similar questions, we were left with a bit of silence. Margaret smiled. We both squirmed. The pause seemed interminable.

"One thing I wish for from this," Doreen said finally, "is that he would take some responsibility for making this thing work. But it's always me, and I'm getting tired. Very tired." The first glance my direction.

"How does that make you feel, John?"



An accusation that I expected, but not my reaction. "How does that make me feel? I guess on one level I deserve it. I don't always pay attention to her. But how does it make me feel? It burns me. It makes me realize that I have never felt supported in this marriage, that I have always felt judgment and condemnation and withheld affection. How do I feel? I feel like we took a good couple of decades to get to this point, but only because we're slow learners. We've got the same problems we overlooked at the beginning, but now we're neither one of us willing to let pass the things that upset and disappoint us. Doreen, you say I never take responsibility, but the reality is that you never wanted me to have responsibility. You would prefer we fail than I have your confidence and trust." Tears were welling and I could have gone on for another ten minutes, but Margaret broke my concentration with a sip from her tea mug. I stopped.

"Doreen?" she said, putting the mug down.

"I'm surprised," she said, again without looking, but softer. "I don't agree -- at all -- but I'm glad to hear him raise his voice. I've tried -- I have been hoping that we would both speak clearly with each other."

Margaret gave each of us a measured smile and said, "That is a good point to start from. You both need to speak and you both need to be heard." As she let that sink in, she seemed to retreat into a memory of her own, her profile jutting forward in a small act of defiance against I know not what.

Barbara wanted to do some research before scheduling the s>ance, and she asked to meet to discuss. I knew she meant to talk me out of these three individuals -- 'wouldn't you rather meet your great great grandmother?' -- but I was eager, too, to get the logistics resolved. She offered to come to our house. I thought that less than wise, given everything; the brewery, I suggested. She hesitated but accepted. We met for a late lunch the next day.

She dressed more conventionally than at her own home or in her own element, no different than any working soccer mom who needed to accommodate both modes, in an earth-tone pants / white shirt combination that accentuated her flyaway hair and bright brown eyes. She stopped at the door and surveyed, and then sat across from me. After the formalities and an order of a wine spritzer, Barbara took a macram>d folder from her shoulder bag and spread several photocopied sheets out in front of her.

"Dally Moore?" she asked without introduction.

"Yes, Dally Moore."

"Thanks for faxing me this article. I know some people who are active in genealogical research, and I asked them how we might find an abducted free black, if she was never returned. They were not hopeful. But it's worse than that. She doesn't show up by name on the census around here, either before or after the incident. Not unheard of, I'm told."

"Do you need to know where she's buried or something?"

"No," she said, not as good humored as I've known her to be. Something painful here for her. "I don't. But I need to know more about her if we're going to have a chance to make contact."

"Am I going to hear the same about Jane Doe 27 and Derek?"

"John," she said, leaning forward, a hand out on the table in a gesture of compassion, "you really need to think about why contacting these individuals is so important to you. S>ances are not something to enter into lightly.

You can't just ask, 'So, how is the afterlife treating you?' You won't get any answers to the final questions awaiting us."

I looked into her affixed eyes and realized -- much too late for my own good -- that part of me was vainly waiting for an answer from them. Infatuation, Brett? Not really. I could feel that longing, a longing for something that has eluded me for 40 odd years, but maybe you can understand it: a moment of happiness and contentment not undone by the next.

"I guess you're right," I said, acceding finally. "I have been looking for closure where I had no right to expect it... I guess I've got to accept that these stories can't be finished. I've been wishing that, if my own story didn't make sense, these stories could at least. Maybe a conclusion with some meaning, if not some hope."

"There are other ways to find hope, John. The heart of spirituality is the lesson that peace always begins within." She smiled, because she was back on her own territory, the place from which she undertook each journey into the land of skeptics.

But there was sadness there, too. You couldn't see it in the eyes or curve of the mouth, the way I'm used to finding it. My gaze captured a couple of incipient wrinkles, just visible on her forehead, and I could only imagine their folding when she raised her brows in sorrow. Wow.

"Barbara, what is it that you got from the s»ance with the bog monster?"

"I am trying to understand that," she said, her shoulders tightening up.

"My question is still, was it a real connection, or just an illusion? I have to say that I wasn't sure of anything when I left."

"It was real, John. But maybe it was another time. Psychic connections are not as linear as our lives. We have to accept that there are different modes, much more tenuous to sense, than the mundanity of our own lives."

"What does Jerry think about this bog monster thing? I still don't understand what he told me that day, about working to save me. And the trees?"

Barbara nodded and took a preparatory drink from her spritzer. "I wasn't as honest as I should have been about that. Jerry is a great spiritual being, but he can sometimes be difficult on this plane, and that leaves the wrong impression."

"What does that mean?" I said, suspicious of being drawn into self-justifications for staying with an abusive spouse.

"He can be a difficult man, I know." She smiled with the forehead wrinkles showing. "What I'm going to tell you is not a publicity stunt or something Jerry would like you to repeat to anyone else. Can I have your confidence?"

"Is this about his psychic gift or something else?"

"It's about his gift."

"Then sure." I think she understood my circumspection.

"Chance is always the last place to look for why we act as we do, John. It was not by chance that Jerry and I came to this forested country. Once we felt comfortable, Jerry began to communicate with the trees. Since

then, he and several other psychic leaders, a circle of initiates around the country with whom he regularly communicates, have come to a very sad conclusion -- an awful truth. But it is not hidden from any of us. You can see glimmers of it in environmental news: acid rain, ozone holes, extinctions, global warming, killer hurricanes, floods, massive fires. We like to believe that earth has sympathy with us, despite all our transgressions against it. But Jerry and his circle have come to know that the earth spirit, Gaia, has turned against us. -- Gaia is working to destroy humanity."

I had a befuddled look, I'm sure, but it led into a smirk that made Barbara look away.

"What is Gaia doing to us that we're not doing to ourselves?"

"This is not a joke, John," she said. She looked back at me, searching in my eyes this time. "Can't you feel the antipathy?"

"I don't know."

"Then think about your contact with the bog monster. Jerry isn't sure about this, but I believe that the bog monster may be an emissary."

There it was.

"What is Jerry doing?" I asked plainly.

"He is using his psychic energy to stem the tide. Gaia has influence over many manifestations, and if we can mitigate the negative energy, humanity will have more time." She gave a wistful smile. "Maybe enough time to change."

"Would it help for me to contact the bog monster again?"

"I've taken up the channel," she said with a flat voice. She did not like admitting the ambition in that statement.

"All right," I said. "Then I guess I'm out of the bog monster business. Except for Barry's conference."

She took a moment to consider. "You're going to the Sasquatch conference?"

"Barry invited me. I thought you were going?"

"Barry seems incapable of understanding no. I would be very careful -- there will be a huge amount of negative energy on all sides."

"I shouldn't go?"

"It's not my place to say," she said, now smirking herself.

"Sure," I replied.

Our food had come by this point, and we were only able to pick at it, so this conversation had to end or change. One last question: "If a s»ance isn't the right way to do this, is there something else that would help me understand what happened to them and what it means?"

Barbara nodded to show she was thinking about it, but rather than answer, she began eating in earnest. When

she slowed down, she said of a sudden: "I will try to get a feeling. But you, too, John. You have to recognize that psychic energy is universal. If you can slow down, you will understand what they have to tell you."

I couldn't help answering. "I have a confession, too. One of them is fictional. But I have no conclusion for the story."

"You mean Derek? Don't try to fool me, John. You have a conclusion, but you are afraid of what it means for you."

The voice told the boy about his family. "This is a sad story. Are you sure that you want to hear it?"

"It doesn't matter to me," said the boy, who knew sadness in his way and thought that it was not a bad thing that others knew it, too.

"All right, then. The story begins many years later. I was 250 years old. That is a long time -- not on the scale I've lived now, but 250 years is a long time to spend in one human body. The companions -- robots, computers and observers, all sorts of artificial life -- worked very hard to keep me alive and robust. By that time, we were experimenting with making both chimpanzees more intelligent and some humans less so, in order to create something like a single-minded race of priests of the energy, dedicated to keeping the flame of the energy source alive. In the back of my mind, I was already formulating other options, should these experiments fail or be halted. I considered the slave race alternative, where we would search the nearby parts of the galaxy and harvest intelligent life forms and put them in front of the reaction. If they were to fail us, they would die. If they served us well, we might grant them a few years of freedom before their lives extinguished. But serve us they must. So desperate was I that this seemed like a reasonable option.

"By this time, the human race was incapable of maintaining itself. We had grown soft and self-absorbed, and understood little of the technology that sustained us. But more importantly, we were becoming our technology. As a species, we had decided that organic life was too frail for us to depend on, and we had decided that we needed something more sure. Artificial life represented that safe harbor. If we were software, you see, we could duplicate ourselves and back up ourselves so that we would never have to die, no matter what happened to the body carrying us. We had also lost our capacity for and interest in maintaining our population, even with our extended lifespans. We were, as I said, self-absorbed. The only practical solution was the transition into robot life. And the only guarantee of a successful transition was the unfettered spring of energy that our very frailty had given us access to. Maybe you can see the irony.

"Robot brains had long surpassed our neural complexity, and the companions had developed robot vessels that completely emulated the function of our nervous system and brain. Slowly, they developed techniques by which they could translate into digital code the stored experience and thought patterns of a flesh-and-blood human. When finalized, the process placed all of us before a difficult choice. The only way to translate the intelligence in a brain was to dissect it, neuron by neuron, ganglion by ganglion. When the nano-dissection was done, you were a consciousness in a box, and your body was cut up as spare parts.

"I was on my own trajectory, but it was high time that my family made their way into the future. My wife had become sick of late, and time was short to begin the process. Her light was dimming by the day. We gathered in her hospital room the morning when she was to be frozen and prepped for the transition. I was there, as were our two sons, their wives and a few grandchildren, all more than 150 years old. None of them had yet transitioned, but everyone knew someone who had. Our older son and his wife were scheduled, but had been delayed twice because of cases like my wife's.

"It's not a big deal, Abby," said our son.

She looked at him. She had never been a fan of the transition and was visibly scared that morning. "I'll be

dead this evening, Jake."

"That's not the way to think about it," he responded. "You'll be eternal."

"Maybe eternally damned," she said, though not religious.

"You know that everything about life after the transition is the same. You think the same, experience the same, even have the same weaknesses. Food tastes like food; wine will still give you a buzz. The only difference is that we control parameters: never too much pain, never sickness, no aging."

She wanted to smile, but was too weak and too tired to pull it off. But I recognized a knowing smile, a mother-knows-best smile. A flush of adrenaline brought me to the edge of my seat.

"So," she turned to Blake, our younger son and his wife. "Are you two ready to become robots?"

"It's not robots, mom," Blake replied, looking at his wife Maggie. "They're robot vessels for human consciousness. Even the skin feels like ours."

"Your body will look just like you, Abby," interjected Maggie, adding: "only younger."

"I know. And you all know people who have become machines?"

"Transitioned," said Jake.

By this time, all the arguments for and against had been rehearsed ad nauseum. All of us had to go through this mourning: it was recognized as a necessary step in letting go of one's body. But I was still worried by the subterranean smile.

"I know, transitioned. The future. Bolum, you know about the future. What do you see?"

"I see a beautiful future for us, Abby. A future that we have to embrace." I wanted to reach out to her with my mind to get us past this moment; she was steadfast in her gaze at me.

"Did you know that there are whole towns where the people have signed a pact never -- ever -- to relinquish their bodies?"

"Sure," said Jake, "there are places like that. But they're spread out, small. It's really just a tiny percentage."

"What about the mechanics? They're just robots, too?"

"A handful of those robots," said Blake, "have more intelligence and capacity than all the human engineers in the world put together. No offense, dad."

"None taken," I answered.

"Can I take my robot body to a place where only humans live and let them take care of me?"

"Why do that, mom?" asked Jake's wife, Tay. "Let the experts take care of you."

This went on for a while, then Abby asked to rest. We knew we had a few hours before her window for prepping would close, so it was difficult to deny her that last nap. She seemed better willed when we gathered again. A robot nurse was puttering at the periphery of the room, readying tubes and pre-adjusting flows and

pressures.

After looking to me to raise the inevitable -- and seeing my hesitation -- Blake said, "Mom, it's time. Can I tell them to begin?"

"Are you so eager to be free of your own mother?"

"Mom!" said the sons and wives almost in unison.

She was unaffected, but appreciated the attention. She seemed to bask in it.

"Abby," I said with concern.

"Oh, Bollum, don't you do it, too."

"Time is not something that we have in abundance here."

"What is it you say, again? Time is nothing; energy is everything?"

"Time is nothing. Energy is everything. And the control of energy is the control of everything."

"Yes, that's it. That's it exactly. Don't feel bad, Bollum, but your penchant for obscure truisms made me realize what I don't want."

"What?" asked Blake, moving right up to her.

"It's him, really," she said. "God bless you, Bollum. You don't know what you do to me when you paint our glorious future. I don't want that future, beautiful or not. I want the glory of living through this body until it gives out. I'm not doing this. I'm sorry to tell you this way, but if I did it any other way you all would fret so much we'd all go crazy. I'm of sound mind and you can't make me. In just a few minutes this expedited slot will be squandered. When they come around again, I will likely be dead or too close to it."

"You're turning your back on your family?" asked Jake.

"You won't need me," she said with a brief crack in her voice.

"We'll always need our mom," he said.

"Oh I don't think so. If you miss me, just turn up the juice on one or the other circuit and make it all better. Better yet, jerry-rig your vessel and release the smarts of the robot. Become smarter than the Library of Congress and MIT and then tell me, 'Mom, I miss you too much to let you decide how your own life ends.'"

"This is not rational," said Blake in a threatening tone.

"Bollum," she said to me, more quietly though all could hear, "don't you let them countermand my wishes. You of everyone should understand."

"I'm staying organic for very different reasons, Abby. I have to at this point."

"Oh, you say you have to, but really you want to. You would like nothing more than to stare into the face of pure energy like a praying Buddha. Some day you'll get your wish, mark my words. There'll be nothing left but your Buddha smile facing an eternal sunrise." She put out a brief choked laugh, and turned away. No one

could get her to answer from that point on, and later the nurses came to remove her from the prep room.

"That was it. We had just a few more days before she suffered a stroke and lost her ability to converse. I could see her eyes watching me for betrayal. I didn't do it, despite myself and despite our kids. I realized that she was right, that I was already preparing myself for this strange, selfless and selfish voyage, maybe the most selfless and most selfish ever undertaken by mortal man. For all that, I owed her her own mortality."

Your mother and I looked at each other suspiciously across the table. I recall thinking that you noticed none of it, but I'm not so sure. By this time we had exchanged so many volleys, heard ourselves complain so openly and bitterly about each other, that you'd think we were discussing the matter with respective hit men. "This is how it is," Margaret replied when I commented on it. "This is how pain is stored over years." A wincing smile followed, as if she had once grasped the leads on a 12-volt battery after saying that.

What do you see when you look at someone you profess to love, but whom you excoriated just hours before? Is there a way to get to the abstract love we once swore, or even to the well-worn path of daily convenience and acceptance that makes the moment seem okay?

Why not just throw in the towel?

If not for you, maybe we would have. It was so much work to dredge up the hurt and express it, and then to listen to the inversion, with the prior victim becoming the aggressor, a back-and-forth of anguish and mistrust that led to exaggeration, tears, sighs, stares out the window, hands clutching knees, and looks of overwhelming disbelief: 'Did you really just say that?'

The constant back-and-forth had produced a sense deep within me that maybe détente was not such a bad thing. Diplomatic handshake instead of a bear hug. Small steps to reestablish confidence and cordial relations.

And a fascination. Who was this woman? Why in the world had we gotten together? Sure, there had been the break-up with her college sweetheart, and there were the insecurities from the divorce of her parents. But she was a high-school cheerleader and I was an intramural benchwarmer. She loved to get out with her friends, to banter and drink and carouse. I never got the hang of it, and my friends were the same kind of people. We didn't banter -- ever, so much as I remember. I'm not sure how that is with you, Brett, but I think despite your comic bravado you're more like me than Doreen.

A moment defined us in the first days of our dating. We had gone out to a bar that she knew; we were sitting drinking, listening to the music and, I suppose, Doreen was remembering earlier times. A danceable song came on and was turned up, and a number of couples wandered out to dance in that hesitant way that dancers have when the music isn't quite loud enough, the lights not quite low enough. "Let's dance," Doreen said with a sudden burst of energy. She smiled at me with a jazzy, "let's have a ball" smile. I frowned back one of my half-smiley frowns and said, "I don't dance." "Oh come on," she said and tried to pull on my hand. The rest of my body was deadweight, though, and her face changed. She walked away and started dancing by herself. I tried to catch her eye to wave at her or raise my glass, but she didn't look my way. Finally another couple formed a triangle with her, and then by the end of the song people weren't dancing so much in couples as in a group.

Unimportant, but everything about us was encapsulated in that evening. Why couldn't we see past the trivial circumstance to say, "Hey, however else we get along, this difference isn't going away and it's just going to get bigger until it gets recognized. Let's save ourselves the pain of that progression -- what say?"

Brett, in case you think otherwise: there is no apologizing for something that has already hurt thousands of times, that you know will repeat many thousand more, for as long as you are together. There is only the will to endure.

Derek, Click-Cluck said, we each have to make a decision.

"Why do you say that?" he said, still in amazement that she was in his apartment, drawn into a mental loop of her emerging from the entrance.

Because, she said, the ruling council has made a determination.

Derek stared at her as if without comprehension. But he could see the antennae in disarray and he knew that his life was changing again.

She continued: The council has determined that you and I represent a disruption of the social order. I've been asked to move and begin another career. You will be permanently put into sleep. There is no appeal.

"Then it's all over," he said calmly, thinking of the dung balls and their pull on him.

Click-Cluck: Not all over, not yet.

"How so?" he asked. "There are no secrets in this world, you told me."

There are a few places, she said, outside our social order. Places where the does not follow those who reject their rule."

"What, a criminals' haven?"

It is a place with its own order. Those who go there do not return; not much is known.

"Are you are just going to toss your life here, and your preaching?"

No, I am not giving up "ddrchdng" (preaching). Under this circumstance, it must be pursued free from the ruling order. I have faith that we will return.

Derek thought how he had the bomb that could blow this ruling order to smithereens, but he wasn't sure he had the will to push the plunger.

We do not have much time, Derek. You must choose. I know that permanent sleep has its attractions, and that there is no benefit for you to be on the run in our world. It is not a step that I take lightly ("my solemn march"). You will surely not either ("Your in two directions leaning raised legs").

You might picture him saying, I need a few moments to think about this. Or raising a point about how she had lost faith in him, and he in her. Or declaring his unnatural but patent love for this bug before him. Uttering something profound. Maybe even saying, you will not rue this expression of trust and confidence, my lady. But his reply was no more than: "Okay, let's go."

Click-Cluck said something that he did not understand -- were there unheard clicks in that expression? -- and two other bugs emerged. They had between them a new vehicle.

You will have to leave everything here -- it is too traceable. Take off your exo-skeleton.

Derek stopped all movement, and then slowly loosened his limbs, so that he could feel the carrying strength of the skeleton. He had been in and out of his skeleton most days since the very beginning -- it had become a crutch as much as it had once been a lifesaver -- but he had grown accustomed to it as his outer shell, his natural protection. Sure, it mostly supported rather than protected, but in his mind it made him like those



around him: a tough, impervious animal, never mind the squishy insides.

He got down on all fours, rolled onto his back and donned his visor to shut it down. A slight whoomp left him alone. He leaned over with each arm in succession to release the many small bands. In order to unhook his legs, he had to pull them up onto his chest, where their natural weight made his breathing labored. Finally, he had them all and let his legs extend and fall. A few more bands and his back was free. He rolled over to get off the skeleton, and worked himself up on hands and knees. The most difficult maneuver was forcing his upper body straight up. Then he could lean on one knee and raise the other, and put its foot on the floor. With a supporting hand on the other side, he used that upright leg to raise himself off the floor, and he quickly put his other foot under him. He then rose up on both legs, pushing with his thighs like a weightlifter, to a full standing position.

His head scraped on the ceiling before he bent his neck enough. He walked mostly upright up to the new scooter, and then let himself down on his right knee. The vehicle was different -- it seemed much more rugged and scarred already with sand, and somewhat misproportioned. Click-Cluck came up next to him, and he noticed a full-face mask on her back. Put on this visor, she said. He picked up the mask. It would give him a decidedly more bug-friendly visage: giant bulging all-black eyes, smooth leathery skin, a slit of a mouth, no nose and no ears; two small antennae on top, like a toy version of the bug originals.

Click-Cluck: You should practice going on all fours (cluclu'k, the bug word for walking). It will make a better impression.

"Sure," he said. "Are we going to the surface?"

Not all the way, she said, but there is one trench that we must cross.

Derek slipped the mask on, and it hummed to life. He was relieved to see that its interface looked like the visor's. He scooted his left leg closer and then draped his upper body over the bike and then swung the left leg up and over. In a second he was set. The vehicle rose up, and he was floating. Click- Cluck padded over to her equally robust and challenged-looking hovercraft. While she adjusted herself on the disc, Derek swerved toward the back wall and thudded to a stop; he reached down, gathered up the remaining dung balls and let them drop into the bike's electro-curtained compartment.

With a 30 second call I had a job again. Ferguson had just come by personally -- and with an affected apology -- to give me the news: My DNA sample matched none of the cold-case evidence, and the Sheriff's office was putting the cases back on the shelf. The office even kept its promise to hold the trespassing matter to itself. Hayley was at home with her parents, and her boyfriend would receive 3 weeks of jail and some weeks of community service for contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Their engagement was announced, but no wedding day. Everything was at a stasis point, only slightly distinguishable from before.

Even I -- despite everything -- had only changed a little. If anyone had changed, it was you, Brett. But that's how I remember teen years. Your body changes many times over like it's got a life of its own, and every urge tells you it does have its own. You learn to strike out on your own; you ask the basic questions about existence, and to your surprise no one has all the answers for you. But to me you'll always be the same person who, as a boy, ran down the trail, half convinced by my story of a bog monster, reacting to both his own imagination and my own misbegotten effort to clear the cobwebs. Do you feel it still -- do you run halfway, afraid to go and afraid to stay? Like me?

Despite my vindication, I had one more outward sign of my travails: my name on the program of the National Sasquatch Association conference to be held in Durham, North Carolina, in just a few weeks time. One phone call brought it home.

"John?" asked an impatient woman's voice.

"Yes, this is John Densch."

"John, this is Samantha."

"Samantha?" I asked, honestly unable to place either voice or name. I was afraid it was a reporter trying to inveigle her way into my confidence.

There was a moment of disappointment or self-dialog. Then: "Samantha Og-guh."

It took me a moment, then I replied: "Oh, yes, sorry. Samantha. I'm so sorry, I'm not very good with names."

"I wanted to catch up with you." She paused. "First, congratulations on being exonerated of all suspicions. Second, I wanted to take a few minutes of your time to relay the association's concerns about your scheduled participation in the upcoming meeting of the National Sasquatch Association." Another pause. "It came as a surprise to me personally that you decided to do this."

"Right," I said, feeling a bit guilty but also resistant to having to explain myself. "Look, I'm sorry, Samantha. I really only agreed to do this because I was asked as a favor to someone who has been a great help to me." She mumbled Barry's name. "All I'm going to talk about is what I know. I made up a story about a bog monster, and I helped my son do a speculative but still science-based report, and everything since then has been twisted all out of shape."

"And your s»ance with the bog monster?" Disappointment more audible.

"Yes, I'll talk about that, too. Subjectively, it was quite compelling, but I realize everything I experienced has a more rational explanation. And, by the way, I was asked to participate in that by members of the Chapel Hill police department, who were also present."

"Yes, I know, I had ample opportunity to read all about it. All of that is -- regrettable. But let's not lose sight, John, of the legitimacy you're going to convey on this meeting. You have a lot of sympathy from people who see you as a pawn in the machinations of governmental and commercial entities. By attending this conference, you are bringing that sympathy to an irrational and antithetical way of thinking. That is sympathy squandered."

"Maybe they will understand that I am just doing a favor? That I'm going to be rational about the whole thing?"

I could imagine a sardonic smile in the silence that preceded this: "John, I wish to be clear about the association's position. We must always be cognizant of the coarseness of the media and the limits they impose on the truth they relay to the public. It is imperative that association members -- and sympathizers -- express themselves in the clearest possible terms in support of the scientific method. We have no choice but to avoid ambiguity at all costs."

"Okay. It's just that I've already said I'd attend. I feel like I kinda promised Barry. You understand, don't you?"

"On the contrary," she said, with a hopeful tone. "On the contrary, John. I would expect you to repudiate publicly any statement or act that might reinforce the seriously mistaken belief in a bog monster and all those other humanoid creatures variously called Sasquatch, Bigfoot, or Yeti. If you could say that you are compelled to this step by rationality and scientific principles, that would be even more valuable."

"Couldn't I just as easily make that point in the conference? I'm loath to back out." I was surprised by my retreating; I had intended to be plain spoken and unaffected by her pleas.

"John, may I speak frankly?"

"Please, Samantha," I responded.

"We are not simply trying to reform some inveterate fantasts, or educate the broader public, though both are laudable goals. This is a point on which much more is at stake."

"Why?"

She hesitated, but I had no idea why. I was becoming interested.

"Evolutionary theory," she said with a release of breath.

"I don't get it. Are you saying that, what, Sasquatch is the missing link?"

"No, John, but you are touching on the matter. There are those who use this pseudo-science to paint the fragility of evolutionary theory. It is a two-pronged attack, with the usual immunity to logic that propagandists enjoy. First, they say that the fact that Sasquatch exists without any footprint in the evolutionary fossil record demonstrates how flawed a theory based on that record is. Then, they say that the fact that evolutionary theory can absorb Bigfoot into its structure without blinking proves that it is more a narrative than science. These two ideas should cancel themselves harmlessly, but I can tell you that that is not the case. Sasquatch has become a lightning rod for some people."

"Wow," I said, "I had no idea."

"There is no official platform for such people still, outside of a few fringe school boards and town halls, but the battle is never-ending. The strategists of religious repression have recognized that evolution is the fulcrum of reason that they must destroy. With it in place, no religious dictum can be taken absolutely, because the bible cannot be interpreted literally. Without it, the literal interpretation of the bible sweeps any principle from astronomy to zoology from the field. You have to understand why this is. The apologists now usually interpret the first five days of creation figuratively and then draw a literalist line at human creation. If they try for strict literalism, they can still argue that the heavens and earth were made to look billions of years old by God without leaving him looking altogether disingenuous. But if they say that on the sixth day God made man and animal from the same stock of ideas, varied in a way that seems like a progression, then they must explain why God did not draw a physical line between human and animals, as he did spiritually. 'Do not question God' is the only possible answer and a narrow enough one that we can fight it. But if the propagandists knock evolutionary theory off the table -- 'there is no good evidence that we evolved from animals' -- the physical line can be drawn again. At that point, we have no place to do battle but on the terms of faith itself, and that is a war that we cannot easily win."

"I had no idea... Jesus, it seemed like such an innocent joke so long ago...."

"Some popularists erroneously claim there is a law of unintended consequences that applies here. But we should look to complexity theory, which holds that the final state after an arbitrary number of stochastic iterative processes cannot be predicted."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that, theoretically, the beating of a butterfly's wings on a tropical island may be the genesis of a

hurricane. But don't mistake the real meaning of complexity theory for social dynamics. The popular science press calls it 'chaos theory,' because it went around science's dominant interest in studying equilibriums and simple systems, and because it asserted that neither can adequately describe the chaotic phenomena in the real world. We study complexity not because we're interested in the power of the butterfly at the far end of a hurricane bearing down on us. We have a very simple question: why can outcomes be so different when the starting conditions are so similar? Complexity theory tells us that there is no determinacy, no predictability, and no justification for fatalism or for exuberant optimism. We are in the complex middle, John, where everything is struggle."

She thanked me on behalf of the association, and said she would await my decision.

I think it was because of the crying. Sometimes it overcomes you, Brett, the sense of missed opportunities -- and even more the realization that you wouldn't know how to fix your life even with every opportunity relived. Maybe you see a young child alone, crying for its mother, or you see your own boy in a vulnerable moment, in tears and crying for mommy. The frailty of your own self-assurance becomes overwhelming. It's not weakness, Brett, but the illusion of strength that gets you. You realize in an instant that you are a paved-over creature of the same kind. I want my mommy never leaves you, for however much you have become your own source for the comfort you seek. The tautology occasionally breaks down, and so do you.

Now put that sense of collapse into a crucible with the one person most responsible for the highs and lows of your internal life. The smallest trigger can make shoulders heave, your breath shudder, and your eyes drip tears like emotion's own sweat.

In the aftermath of one such crying, a lull, a temporary moment of deeper equilibrium, quite unexpectedly I found myself saying to our counselor: "Margaret, what if one of us has been unfaithful?"

She looked at me with a deepening expression, as if I had exponentially raised the stakes in a game of chance. -- Don't dare think, her final expression read, that I'm not ready for an all-in bluff....

"Well, what if?" she said.

"Should we bring that out here?"

"That is very serious for a relationship. What do you want to say about it?"

I didn't appreciate having that thrown back at me. "I'm just asking, what if."

"Well," she said with instant confidence, "there is no one answer for something like that. I would like to know what you both want to say." She looked at Doreen. I didn't dare.

I hoped she would carry it or bury it.

"I wish that John would just speak clearly."

Margaret didn't give her that out. "Why don't you speak clearly."

"I..." she drifted off into silence. Then she looked at me with a pained expression that said, you asked for it. She half mouthed something before her expression changed and she said, "What I have to say is that I have never loved someone as much as I have loved you, John." She stopped there, for all the world a Martin Luther with his theses on a church door.

I weighed the response for a moment. Yes, that's it, the confession I had been waiting for. And yet not. The

moment demanded a decision: prosecute now, or she walks. I would not need a brilliant performance to wring from this statement the facts that it whitewashed, but a cross-examination was necessary.

This was the moment -- but I could not take it. This was a confession in both senses: what she did and why she regretted it.

"I appreciate hearing that," I said.

She smiled ruefully and I dare say thankfully, to both Margaret and me. And then for a few minutes it was like a courtroom where everyone was glad to see a not-guilty verdict: defendant, lawyers, jury, even the judge, with hugging and handshakes and mouthed thank-yous.

The boy wasn't sure he understood. "So where is Abby now?"

The voice said, "Well, she died about a billion years ago, for me at least. Do you believe that I once tried to contact her in the past? She thought she was going crazy. I never got her attention."

"You let her die?"

"I did. It was what she wanted."

"I don't ever want to die."

"Well, that's easy to say. And the right attitude. Why would anyone, especially a happy young lad, lack creativity to such a degree that they would prefer not to be?"

"Do you ever want to die?"

"Oh, you got me there. I do sometimes. In fact, I have decided, not all that long ago, that I should die. Some day."

"Are you going to let your body die?"

"That's it exactly. You see, I've turned away from the source, and the energy will eventually run out, and then there will be nothing for it but death."

"Turned away?"

"Yes. You remember our experiment with the flash? Well, after Abby died and humanity was well into its transition into robotic security, it was decided to secure our energy source by dedicating one individual to be the witness to it. The robots had spent many years perfecting both energy- producing and energy-distributing technologies, so that a single massive but controlled energy source would be able to supply all of humanity's needs, for the whole life of the universe. The scope was truly massive -- a beautiful achievement that has been upgraded only twice in these many years -- and required that the energy station and I be put on a trajectory of our own right out of the galaxy. When it went online, it was brighter than a supernova. We transferred the energy via redundant and varied pathways. In the beginning we stored the majority of it in portable energy cells for use by autonomous robotic human entities.

"There is a lot to tell about how this changed us all. Me most of all, perhaps. My body had to be secured in many ways: in a safe biosphere that was free of pathogens; made as robust as a robot vessel; and stripped of many of its organic luxuries, such as sleep and inattention and decay and desires. All of this meant that my biology had to be mastered -- and mastered it was. You wouldn't recognize any of my body as human. Every

system was first of all made redundant; my body is not mobile or distinctively bipedal. Blood and other fluids flow through vessels that have never been encased in skin or human shape. Nanotechnologies assure the integrity of each and every cell, and each is convinced through an appropriate chemical bath that it is the very first generation and should be as robust as a baby's growing body. My brain was reconfigured as two mostly separate entities. This is important. My eyes were hardwired to the mostly autonomic part of the brain, which would have no problem with the endless repetition of the instruction to focus on the bright ball in front of them. My more conscious self, meanwhile, was upgraded with artificial memory and sensory inputs, and given the capacity to dream reality. I was, most of the time, only marginally aware of the fact that I was the watcher, even though I could see my other half whenever I wanted. Sometimes, when the source began to flag a bit, I would be prompted to interact with my autonomic self to help bring the energy level back up. Aside from that, I was able to dream / live as I wanted. In the first years, I zoomed through dozens of lives from birth until death, while a massive artificial intelligence provided me with all the sensory and interactive detail necessary to make the dream seem real. After that dizzying experience, I slowed things down and tried to live in real time. Still, I have lived millions of lives. If I were a religious man, I would have to believe in reincarnation, because I have lived it. I've experienced being reborn as every person in a city, living his or her life from birth to death, barely conscious of my other calling and yet vaguely aware that I have lived this all before. If you have ever had that feeling, guess what, it might be because you are me."

The voice described on another occasion what happened to the rest of humanity, as much as he knew. "They left," he said. "Not only me, not only earth, but also each other. The limitations on their robot existence did not last very long, just as Abby predicted. One after another they switched off the artificial constraints placed on their host brains, and became otherworldly creatures. The old ties did not bind. What I know of their progression comes from their energy use. Almost all continued upgrading their bodies and capacities until the companions offered existence as pure energy. You may not be able to imagine this, but they became energy patterns that were coherent and stable under the steady influx of power. Others learned their own ways to create and store energy, sometimes as giant robots, sometimes turning themselves into starships, sometimes as artificial solar systems. Most remained attached to the source. Some slipped into their own universes, exploiting another loophole in our physics, one available only to the very rich in energy. Still others became completely ethereal beings shut off from the source, who, I'm guessing, sold themselves as gods to whatever race of beings that would take them.

"One group tried to hold on its humanity. They made vessel modifications illegal and punishable by years in suspended animation. They pretended to live simple farmer and hunter existences in the wilds of our abandoned planet and in colonies radiating out from our place in the galaxy. Some even dedicated themselves to the proposition of living and dying, and let their existence end after a millennium or two. They programmed babies and raised generations of digital-only humans. But whenever the situation became untenable, the survivors would upgrade their hardware and pipe in more energy from the source, and eventually disappear into the same energy existence that had taken the others.

"Abby was right about so much -- our sons, too, disappeared and left me behind. She would not be surprised to see me here, the only organic human left in the universe, but she might be surprised to hear me say, 'That's enough; I'm going to turn my eyes away.' Maybe she would tap me on the arm and say, 'Finally; you're such a slow learner, Bollum.' I can't tell you how much I would appreciate that. If only I could hear from her that it's okay that the energy stops. You know what it means, don't you?"

"You said that energy is everything, but you're not going to give out energy any more?"

"That's right. Eventually, everyone who depends on me for energy will run out, and they'll start falling, like bees in smoke. Eventually they'll die. As will I, but I have the choice. I'm leaving them no choice."

"What if they have their own energy now? What if they don't need you?"

"That'd be fine. But my experience tells me that most never mastered independence and that they won't be able to reverse direction. If they can, that's fine; they have many billions of years left before the whole universe dies. When it does, finally, they may yet lament this moment. This source is a way to beat all physical limits, because it creates energy out of nothing. But I will be long dead, and I doubt they will be able to recreate it. The companions said as much when I told them what I was going to do. All of human kind chose so long ago to leave the job to another, and now I have turned away."

I could go back into the woods now, and dared Barry to take a walk with me in the Duke Forest. "Don't think I haven't wandered every corner of these woods," he said, but then he had to ask directions to the entrance gate that I suggested. The weather was spring warm beneath a Carolina sky, with a high, thin cloud layer eliminating shadows everywhere but under the old-growth canopy. A dry month meant fewer mosquitoes finding their way to us, but we had to keep moving to keep from collecting them. Barry was dressed in a mix of clothes he must have gotten in the hunting and fishing section of a sporting goods store, or maybe Wal-Mart.

"So, what's this about?" he said as he planted his walking stick in syncopated beat with his steps.

"I won't be able to speak at the Sasquatch conference."

He didn't answer for a minute, as if the news were too devastating to answer. His voice was quiet: "They got to you."

"Nobody got to me," I said.

"Oh no?" he replied. "Why do you feel the need to back out?"

"I had promised someone a while ago that I wouldn't contribute to the confusion about this creature."

"And what about your promise to me?"

"Well, for one, I don't think I promised you anything, and even if I did, you don't need me."

"No?"

"No, just like you don't need Barbara."

"Who says I don't need her?"

"She told me she has no intention of participating. Negative energy."

"Everything but her little parlor games is negative energy to her. -- So, who was it? Duke?"

"No, I haven't spoken to anyone from Duke."

"Who then? The News & Observer? Research Triangle Institute? SBI? WRAL? Those crazy science teachers?"

"If you mean the Triangle Association of Scientists and Teachers of Science, then yes."

"That's Duke."

"How do you figure? And is everyone in this world somehow arrayed against you?"

"How is that Duke? Your adoptive organization is a front for the scientific-industrial complex here in the Triangle area. Every drug maker and technology manufacturer in the area has its fingers in that group. They're a militant force for the status quo: unregulated pollution, unquestioned waste, unfettered drug multiplication, gutted oversight. The joke is that the EPA is right here among them, right there in their vest pocket."

"And Duke?"

"Duke is at the same table. Higher Ed has always been the patsy of the capitalists. Just look at the trustees of any major university, and then tell me that the business world doesn't have the last say."

"Geez," I said, "is there anything you don't think is corrupt?"

"John, don't flatter yourself the first person to notice himself to the right of my politics. But consider this. There's a line beyond which everyone finds an irresistible gravitational well. The moment you say that, hey, things can't be, aren't all, that bad, you have begun sliding. That slide leads to a steeper slide, and that slide to a fall, and pretty soon you're the black heart at the center of a black hole. No offense to those individuals who consider their identity to be black."

"Doesn't it follow from all that that no matter how much you talk, the rest of us just can't understand. So why even have this conversation?"

"You are just babe in the woods, aren't you, John." He chuckled and whacked a juvenile tree with his stick. "You have disdained every decision, every interest, every controversy for so long you don't even know that you've entered the gates of hell and are participating in that festival of pain reserved for agnostics. That's your sin, that you let yourself be manipulated by everyone around you. If you would just take a stand -- you may be destined for a fall, but at least you'll fall on your own terms."

"But if I took a stand, then you wouldn't be talking to me, right."

"On the contrary, it's all about alliances, shifting alliances."

"Like yours with Barbara?"

"Sure," he said, but also with a wistfulness that revealed his weakness.

"Well, I think this alliance has shifted, Barry."

"Don't tell me you're smitten by Samantha Ogkk?" He looked at me to see my reaction. Despite this accusation out of nowhere I think I managed to look nonchalant.

"No, but I find her argument in favor of science convincing."

"Well, I think we've had that discussion before. There is no such thing as pure science. It always serves a purpose."

"I don't think she would argue. But the alternative is ignorance and repression in the name of dogma."

"Well put, John. But when you are considering the alternatives, try that sentence with greed in the place of dogma."

That evening, with the dinner plates dirty before us, I laid it all out in front of you and your mother: the conference, Barry, Samantha, Barbara, even the details, as I understood them, of what Kettle had done. The



talking helped me, but Doreen looked like she wanted to end the topic with a quick decision -- though she held back. You seemed distracted by something in your own mind.

"So," I said, "I'm in a quandary."

Doreen still bit her tongue. "What is it that you want to do?"

"I don't know," I said, admitting to myself my ultimate destination just inside hell.

"Do what you think is right," said Doreen, as if that clarified everything. "Look at the situation dispassionately -- aside from personalities -- and ask yourself what is the moral and ethical thing to do."

"I don't know that ethics applies any more," I said.

She looked at me with an expression of disbelief: there is no proper life in a false one.

"Seriously," I said. "How can you apply ethics when reality seems like an onion that wraps in on itself? No layer peels off without being encumbered by another that should have come off before it."

"John Densch, you surprise me," she replied with incredulous smile.

"I hope so."

"Then not ethics. Game theory."

"Is this any time to play games?" I said, only half joking.

"Game theory is the study of human behavior when decisions need to be made with imperfect information. Maybe ethics is more suited to a situation where you know the facts, or at least their likelihood."

"All right, how does this look in game theory?"

"I'm not sure," Doreen said with a certain relish, as she finished the tail end of her red wine. "We'd have to understand more about at least some of the players' choices, I guess."

"Ah," I said, "the players. I wish we could get them together like at the denouement of a classic murder mystery."

All of a sudden, you entered the conversation: "That's what I was going to say."

"What's that," I said, though I wish we could have gone on with this repartee.

"It's like when we play D & D. It's just like that. Every turn. Get on with it, dad."

"What do you mean, get on with it?"

"It just doesn't matter," you said -- and your voice cracked. "Really, it doesn't matter. Just make your pick and take your turn. It's not like it's important."

I wanted to say, now wait just a moment, this is important, but you went on: "If you want to do something that matters, think about things that matter."

"Brett," I said calmly, "these are important questions -- some of the most important you may face in life."

I thought that was a pretty good answer, but you looked every bit as perturbed and said: "Then do something important. Your life is not the measure of all things, dad."

"What, you're saying my life doesn't matter?"

"I'm saying," you said, regretting now the outburst but feeling the need to go on, "that if you are playing the game, you're stalling. If you aren't playing the game anymore, then there are a whole lot more important things to worry about. Get on with it, dad." You looked at me in one defiant moment, then looked down at your plate.

I felt like swatting you on the side of her head, but when you didn't look up I knew this was more about you than me. I took a few moments to cool, then ventured a sidelong glance to Doreen, who had paled at the thought of our fighting right here at the table. "You know," I said, "you're right. There are a whole lot more important things to worry about. I don't need to wait until some of them wash over me. It's a point well made." After a respectable pause, I added: "But it is my turn, and I guess I'm finally ready to roll the dice."

At 3 a.m. that morning, my alarm woke me, but just barely. I was already half asleep again when a miniscule voice said, 'Weren't you going to wake up?' The realization took a while to translate into bodily control, but the real point was the dream. There was none -- a great disappointment to me -- and after I had assured myself nothing would emerge, no matter how long I waited, I got up to go to the bathroom.

On returning to bed, I stretched out and looked up at the dark ceiling. Were the sparkles I saw twinkling reflections off the buds and valleys of the spray coat, or the false firings of my rods and cones?

Here I was at 3 in the morning, without any backward or forward momentum, just the desire that some sense of meaning would come to me. Instead, questions came: Dally, Hillary, Jane #27, would you even talk to me, if your wraith could? How would it serve you or me? Hayley, what have you been hiding with you all this time? Was there something there that morning? And Derek, how do I finish your story, while being true to it? Or better, what is it that I have to be true to?

After a few agonizing minutes of waiting, my mind reached a kind of resolution. Sure, Dally would talk to me -- if I could help her. But there was nothing I could do for her. All her suffering was long ago, as far away as the first wave that, in Bollum's words, could never be caught by the second. If I cared, if I really cared, I would do something to help those suffering now.

And Hayley -- hers wasn't my business any more. She and I were quit. If she had a secret to tell, let her tell someone who cared about secrets.

Derek? My thought was: he needs to come home.

The morning of my appearance at the conference, Doreen was of singular good spirits. I speculated that she was relieved about finally closing the book on the bog monster era. She said that she slept well and that's all. You came down late to the breakfast table, distracted, yet also in a good mood. I was not feeling the same joy, but I did have the feeling that, if I could just make it through today, I would have reason to.

I looked at you, Brett, and thought about how we had observed for a long time the anguish of unrequited love in you, but we never discussed your happiness. You could have met the woman of your dreams and I would probably not know until she showed up at our door with your ring. I suppose Doreen would see it if you were in a relationship. That morning I wanted to ask you a leading question, but couldn't bring myself to try. I wished that there was some way to open a "just in case" communications channel, without any obligation. It

might have succeeded this morning.

Doreen looked at me across the breakfast table; she was already showered and dressed in a neat skirt and jacket, ready to head out the door. I was not yet showered and felt a bit of the lingering stay-at-home slovenly man of the house. She smiled that enigmatic way that was supposed to be encouraging but always left me feeling uncertain: why did I need esteem- building? What didn't I recognize? These are the borderlands of good intentions, I guess.

"So," she said, "you're going to the conference this morning? Will Barry be there?"

"I hope so," I replied. "If he's not, I'm coming right home. I read in the paper that the scifi channel is sending a crew this year. It may be part of a special."

"Well, more press," she whispered voicelessly.

"Don't worry," I said, "I won't depart from my prepared speech." I scooted my chair to the wall and took two pages from my shoulder bag there.

"What are you going to say?" she said while looking into her purse, as if preoccupied, not wanting to press me.

"I'm just recounting the facts. I made a mistake. I shouldn't have joked at all, because there is no room when the public eye is on you. And there is no bog monster. Period."

"What will Barry say?"

"Probably the exact opposite. The only mistake is doubting the bog monster. Government conspiracy. Corporate conspiracies. The whole nine yards."

"There may be something to that."

"Are you saying," I asked, "that you believe that the government would maintain a huge conspiracy to hide humanoid creatures?"

"I'm saying," she replied, "that I would not put a cover-up beyond those in power."

"But what's their motivation? Why should anyone really care if this creature exists or not?"

"Out of principle, I suppose. Nothing to rock the boat. Nothing to make people question authority. Maybe just because they always have."

"Maybe," I said. "But extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof."

"Well that's circular," she laughed. "What makes a claim extraordinary? That's like saying, the status quo is its own justification."

"Isn't it?"

"How will the world change, if it is?"

"I grant you that. But, seriously, my opinion is that the world is constantly changing, and there is always something extraordinary."

She was unimpressed by that sentiment, and got busy with her purse, pulled out her keys, and blew a momentary kiss before getting up, and then let her face harden as she shifted to thinking about work. I wonder if your young eyes could see those shifts, where the weight of so many years of work etches ever deeper into our faces. I could feel the same ache on my own face as I watched Doreen's.

You got up an instant later, maybe afraid my attention would alight on you, and went upstairs without a single word. I made my way up a few minutes later, ready to puff myself up with the air of respectability.

Derek came out of the stupor slowly. He was not surprised to see the white padded room, the small cloud-framing window. But he was surprised to find himself in the wheelchair, with Randall making adjustments -- strapping his limp body into the chair. He tried to wave him off, but there was no movement. When he finally blubbered out a few syllables, Randall stopped and took a step back. "Great goodness all mighty," he said. "You just gave me a terrible fright. Now stop that." He went back to his business, tightening the leg braces, while Derek fought to gain control. His body started to shake. Finally he was able to get a few garbled words out: "Ish me, 'andall."

"Well, I'll be an alderman's uncle. You're back."

"T'yam back."

"Your mother was right, I guess. I didn't think it was smart, but she insisted."

"On wha?"

"That she take you home." He went back to his job.

Derek tried to laugh but it sounded like a hacked cough.

"Randall, can I spea'h with the dah'tor."

"Now you want to speak with the doctor. Your mother will be here any minute, and she won't want to stay a minute longer than she has to."

"Stihl," he said.

"All right, tell you what, we'll just stop by the doctor's office to say goodbye."

Randall rolled him into the hallway. Derek was half waiting for the walls to fade out, but when they didn't he thought about why Randall had not unstrapped him. A moment of weakness followed. He felt as if he had become to his own people a bug in same way he was the freakish human on that planet.

The doctor's office door was open and he was rolled right in.

Randall spoke first to the nonplussed doctor. "Derek is back with us, it seems, and he wanted to talk to you."

"Really?" she said to Randall, as if Derek weren't there. "All right."

He found himself unable to speak.

She tapped a finger. "Cat got your tongue? Or are you back in your little world?"

"I..." He coughed or laughed. "I... wanted tell you."

"Tell me what?" she asked, now fully feeling her role as disgusted authority.

"I don't have much time," he said, with little breath. "I wanted to tell you where I'm going, in case this is more than..."

"More than what, Derek?"

"More than a dream. What if -- what if we're both sitting here? You're as real as me? More real? I want to tell you about where I am when I leave."

"I see," she said, moving a folder from her workspace onto a stack. "Well, if I'm not mistaken you're no longer a patient of this hospital. It would be unprofessional of me to provide therapy to you at this point. You'll just have to tell your mother."

"I -- I can't," he said. "That would break her heart."

"Derek, you have already broken that woman's heart more times than you know. Take this one piece of advice. If you are just going to leave again, don't bother coming back. Now, goodbye."

Randall was already moving the chair backwards.

"You're Click-Cluck, aren't you?" Derek said with a sudden realization. "Oh my God, it's so transparent -- I'm just dreaming that we're talking to each other in English. You're her, aren't you?" He tried to shout as he went down the hall: "You don't want me ever back here because I've got serve your purposes in bug world. Not even a moment's comfort. Mom! Mom! Help me!"

Randall rolled him to the common room, but no one was there. Maybe someone leaving like this was seen as bad luck, Derek had no idea. They moved through the room to the opposite door, one that Derek had no memory of ever passing through. There was an elevator. They boarded and Randall pushed the button to drop to the first floor.

Derek had stopped shouting or, rather, mumbling, because of exhaustion.

Randall started to hum a Lynyrd Skynyrd tune, one Derek knew but couldn't name. Randall interrupted himself to say, "Not that it's any of my business, I know, but I think you should be grateful for the women who take care of you. They believed in you when everyone else had given up hope. And this is how you repay them. Man. Take it easy, think about what you're doing." Then he went on with another tune, one by Paul Simon.

"All right, Randall. Good advice." He gathered his strength. "I'm not coming back, you know."

"I hope not," said Randall, thinking he meant the hospital.

"Can I tell you about where I've been?"

Randall paused; he probably had very explicit instructions about indulging patients' fantasies. But hadn't the doctor said he wasn't a patient any more?

"Til your mom comes, I guess."

Derek exhaled so much his lungs felt like they had collapsed. "All right, thank you." He gathered his thoughts. "It's a world of intelligent creatures who look like a cross between bugs and cattle. Leathery and squat but

almost human-like. The gravity is too strong to stand, you see -- "

"Sure," Randall said quickly, savoring the moment, either because he could pretend he was a therapist or because he was curious about what went on in these demented heads.

Derek had gotten to the dung balls when he realized that the car in front of him had his mother in it. She was in the passenger seat, crying. He thought it was because he was talking again, but maybe she had heard the topic. Now stopped, Derek took in the scene: gray skies, with a 3-d curtain of dark rain in the distance; green and mossed trees; glistening asphalt; a car with almost sparkling water beads on the metallic paint; and his mother holding her head in two hands.

Randall moved him towards the rear door. There was Derek's father coming around to assist. Derek exclaimed: "Dad!" He found his face wet from tears, though he didn't remember any transition to being so emotional. Now it overwhelmed him, in a way he hadn't known for years, a complete meltdown of every emotion that had been held back as a young man or as an earth-expatriate. His dad hugged him, got his cheek covered by the tears. His mother was still balling in the front seat, which he could faintly hear.

"Let's go, son," Derek heard.

Randall came around and opened the car door. "Time to loosen. You're going to be a good boy, right, Derek?" He stopped and looked.

"Always, my man," he said, affecting good spirits, though he could hardly see for the welling eyes.

All the bands came off but Derek was not able to move. Randall bear- hugged him to lift him from the chair, and then turned to the car. Derek's father took the limp feet and directed them onto the car floor. Randall let Derek down easy, but tumbled onto his lap -- he wasn't strong enough for that maneuver. "Sorry," said Randall, pushing himself back up.

"No problem," said Derek. He managed to direct his puffed face at the retreating Randall. "Hey, man, don't forget me."

"I won't," replied Randall, straightening his clothes and regaining his cool.

"Promise you won't forget me."

Randall was unaccustomed to the attention, looked down for sarcasm. "No," he answered, "I won't forget you. I promise."

"Bug world," said Derek.

"Right, bug world," parroted Randall.

Derek's father shut the car door. It took five seconds or so for him to walk around to the driver seat, during which the only sound was Derek's mom's sobbing.

"Mom," he said, as his father started the motor. "Mom."

"Yes," she said without looking.

"I'm here, mom."

"Yes, you are," she replied.

"Please, mom, I want to see you."

"I can't," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because as soon as you see me, you are going away again."

"How do you know that, mom?" he said, desperately. "How could you know that?"

She looked out the passenger window as they pulled away from the curb. "Oh God," she said, "how many days I've prayed for this moment. And now -- " She turned to look at Derek. "Now it's the moment I lose everything."

"See -- I'm still here, mom." He half laughed. "You didn't know."

She nodded, but didn't speak. Instead, he heard something beneath the rumble and whine of the car engine and road noise. What was it? Everything seemed just as it was the moment before, except for that insistent and out-of-place sound. What was it?

Clicking.

I wanted to meet with Barry before I went into the convention space, but he did not agree. "Just get your badge and come to our room," he said. Now I found myself mingling among a rush of attendees, waiting to pick up our packets and swag. Why a major beverage company thought to donate sports-enhanced water, I don't know, but there it was. Each attendee also got a shoulder bag with program, notepad, pen and special Chi keychain with a pyramid pendant. I wasn't on their list.

The young woman checking me in was apologetic, but she also exuded cluelessness -- no doubt, a local woman hired through a temp agency without any context or affinity. I was ready to take this as a sign and walk away.

"Do you have your receipt?" She said after being coached from beside her.

"No," I said, "I was invited to speak."

Her knowledgeable neighbor shook his head -- you could have said that in the first place -- and pointed to a list. "You have a single-session pass," he said. "No bag."

The woman and I exchanged glances. "Can I have some water?" I said.

The man assumed a friendlier tone. "There is water for you at the presenters table. Have a nice day."

I wandered into the convention and tried to get a bead on the type of people here. There were middle-aged men in business suits, and others in tweed jackets; young men with Judas Priest and who knows what tee shirts; a number of people who could have been Barry, artfully casual and yet so visibly high strung that they made you tired just watching; a few reporters with recorders and an unidentified camera crew interviewing people in the corner. A few women looked like pale versions of Barbara: free-flowing hair and gowns but not as luminous in expression or manner. There was a cadre of older people, non-moneyed retirees searching for something to dedicate their energies to. A portable bookstore had been put up in a corner and sold the full

range of materials you could imagine, from everything ever published about Bigfoot, Sasquatch or Yeti, to cosmic ruminations and psychic healing.

I had assumed that I would be mobbed, as the most visible icon for the local bog monster, but no one gave me a second look. Did they not recognize me, or was this the society's way of saying, this is much bigger than you? Fine, I thought. Go ahead and get over me, because I'm over you.

I wandered around trying to find a schedule of sessions, since I wasn't sure what room to meet Barry in. (In typically confusing fashion, he had said come to the Sunrise room, but all the rooms were identified by numbers instead.) We had about 15 minutes before the session when I recognized Barry coming toward me, flanked by serious-looking gentlemen in dark suits. As they got closer, I could see that one of them was older and frail, the other smallish and looking outsized in his suit; they lost some of their imposing nature, in other words.

"Densch," said Barry, shaking my hand for show. "I thought we'd lost you."

"Just completing my end of the bargain."

"Faustian, no doubt," said the older gentleman.

"Excuse me," I said.

"John, this is our session chair, Professor Lauren Reynolds."

"Emeritus," he added.

"And to my right, Frank McCutchin."

He offered to shake my hand. Thereafter I got Reynolds's hand as well.

"Frank is the preeminent Sasquatch hunter in the Southeast."

"Oh," I said, "have you seen one?"

He didn't answer, as if the obvious question was insulting. Barry replied in his place: "Not directly, but he may have the most impressive collection of evidence in the United States, if not the world."

"All right," said Lauren, "my thinking is this. We open with Densch for his personal narrative. Barry, you follow on with the background of the search in the triangle region. And Frank, you can contextualize the findings for the entire southeastern region. I'll finish with a few remarks about the literary tradition of monsters in southern belle lettres. How does that sound, gentlemen?"

"How long do we have?" asked Frank, as if annoyed by finding himself third-billing.

Lauren looked surprised and glanced at Barry, who replied: "The session is an hour and a half. The organizers ask that we leave 30 minutes for discussion."

Frank frowned.

"I won't speak long," I said. "There's really not a lot to tell."

"As I understand it," said Lauren to me, "your scientific studies provide some of the most compelling indirect



evidence for the existence of Sasquatch."

I looked at Barry. "I don't know who could have told you that. In fact, the study was my son's middle school assignment. I provided some data analysis, but there has been a great deal of criticism about the techniques we used."

Frank moved more or less directly in front of me. "But no one has been able to provide an alternative explanation for the patterns you uncovered."

"No," I said, "I guess not. Other than that there's no pattern at all, just a series of incidents involving different indigenous animals, maybe raccoons in one case, foxes or coyotes in others. That hasn't been disproved, either."

"Raccoons, right," he scoffed.

"All right," interjected Lauren, not one for conflict. "Let's take possession of our room."

We followed him down a narrowing hall to one of the smaller rooms. There were about 50 seats, more than enough for my purposes, but Frank paced up and down the rows, counting and recounting. Barry moved to the table and stood behind the tabletop podium to make sure that he was not obscured behind it. When Frank settled down, he unpacked his laptop and a very small projector. Lauren took the middle seat, oddly for the moderator, and sat utterly still, either preparing himself or vegging out. I sat in the audience front row and pretended to be reading through my remarks. The lines were swimming in front of my eyes, no different than the cliché, because they were no longer the lifeline I had thought them to be. My unnerving conclusion was that I had to wing this, to work my way carefully toward the moment when I say, "I come not to praise the bog monster...."

After the first people dribbled in, I went behind the table. I was in the seat next to the podium, obscured to half the room and partially blocking the speaker to the other half. I couldn't even pull backward. My mind began inventorying the audience. At first, they seemed to mirror the eclectic mix I had picked out before. But then I found myself in the audience: pathetically normal-looking men, behind blank attentive faces, asking themselves how they got here, where they went wrong or where they went right, and sneaking inventorying glances. I couldn't say what they were hoping for. Maybe we had nothing in common, after all, but I imagined Samantha walking the aisles, pointing and saying: "These are the people who should never have been encouraged to come here. Even a debate is too much ground given."

Then I recognized another group. They came in just as Lauren stood and went to the podium, and quickly found seats on the aisles, or as near as they could. On their laps were scratched-up notepads and folded and fingered programs; these were the seasoned insiders, rushing from one high-value speaker to another. They nodded importantly to Frank, and altogether had an air of being in history, at the intellectual vortex of this conference.

When Lauren announced our order, two of them swiftly exited.

"And now, John Densch." He introduced me as the principal investigator of a recent statistical study that indicated the local presence of Sasquatch. "As recently as 50 years ago," he added sagaciously. I could almost hear Barry catch his breath.

There was scattered applause, but for the most part this was a "wait-and- see" audience.

"I'd like to thank you for inviting me today, especially Barry," I looked over his way. "I have some prepared remarks, but I think it would be better if I answered some questions that you may have about the study

Professor Reynolds mentioned. I imagine that many of you heard about it, at least those who watch local news or the morning news shows. It got a fair amount of play in the 'wacky news' category. To make the study, we started with some old police blatters, and we plotted incidents that could have been caused by animals on the county's GIS system. When we did that, a pattern emerged that made it seem like a single larger predatory animal, or possibly a set of somewhat smaller animals was working its range around the creeks in Chapel Hill. I say 'seem' because we did nothing to establish the scientific validity of this hypothesis. Even if it seemed probable to me, it's just speculation.

"What does this have to do with your Sasquatch studies? Years ago, I played a game with my son -- where we imagined the wooded trails through Chapel Hill were stalked by a bog monster -- well, it was a game I enjoyed more than my young son did -- but then recently, sometime after the report was done and handed in, my son jested that we had found traces of the bog monster in our police blatter data. All of a sudden, our marauding animal was a stealthy humanoid. I know that many of you believe in Sasquatch. All I can say to you is, don't believe in me. I'm not the real deal, and this is not the smoking gun you've been looking for.

"You may hear from Barry Moore that I don't understand the situation. I'm happy to confirm. I don't understand how my desire to show my son the power of a geographical information system led to months of ridicule and derision for advocating the existence of a bog monster. I don't understand how this misunderstanding even led to the suspicion that I might be a serial killer hiding behind my bog monster alter ego. I don't have any explanation for how something like this can seem at the same time to be so ludicrous and yet somehow tauntingly real. I leave it to better minds than my own to unravel this mystery."

I sat down. No one applauded, and all eyes -- including the panel's -- were on me, as if I stopped a lengthy joke before the punch line. I recognized disgust in some expressions: these were paying individuals, people who may have taken off work or traveled here, or even if not, they had made the effort in the expectation of being wowed, not treated to a group-therapy confession.

Barry was at the podium before I could deliver my silent plea to bail me out. He jerked the microphone down and began with a loud voice: "John Densch is a casualty, ladies and gentlemen, not only of his trepidation and, one is tempted to say, cowardice, but a casualty of a system that seeks to ridicule and ostracize difference, one that defends accepted knowledge at all costs, whether in the face of bald-faced self-contradiction or under the burden of overwhelming evidence. John Densch is a casualty of this system. His life was turned upside down in all the ways he mentioned and more, all to shut him up and anyone who was touched by his insight. I appreciate your coming today, John -- " He looked over at me and probably saw me smile in gratitude for the first time ever. "In addition to John's study, I'm going to review some of the other evidence for the presence of Sasquatch in this area, maybe even as recently as right now."

I breathed out. I would have to wait out the session, but Barry created a context under which I was protected: I knew not what I did. Fine, let me just get out of here. I didn't pay attention to Barry's presentation, mostly a litany of evidentiary bits, the most compelling of which he did not have with him to show. Some of it was on his and others' websites; other elements were part of the documentation for his upcoming book. Negotiations with the publisher prevented it from being available for this conference, very unfortunate.

When he had just sat down, Frank jumped up and came around in front of the presenter's table, where the projector and laptop were set up on a cart. He fired up a PowerPoint presentation and moved to the podium with his wireless clicker. Some prefab, shiny template served up his title: "Sasquatch in the Southeast: Where to Find Him and Why." He looked down at me and then Barry before saying to the audience: "Let's see some of the evidence that has been talked about. You can decide for yourselves how compelling it is."

We abandoned the presenters' table because it was too difficult to see the screen behind us. Frank's slides were numbered, and with a round hundred of them, there was no sense craning our necks. We sat at opposite sides of the front row, Barry next to me and Lauren at the far end. Lauren did not acknowledge me at that point; I

think I had violated his principle of decency or at least legitimacy by throwing up my hands rather than finding a poetic solution to the incongruities. It was left entirely up to him to provide the rational and engaging cover for which this enterprise cried out.

Meanwhile Frank hammered on his point with slides of testimonials, sound recordings, and maps of "known ranges" with "hot and hotter" sightings indicated with smaller and larger dots. We were at least spared the Bigfoot movie. Chapel Hill got its own slides, one with a table from your report, Brett, and another with Frank's rendition of the bog monster's range and home. He conveniently indicated the Duke forest on his map, all the more convenient for illustrating that his creature's range did not overlap in any significant way. Barry made notes furiously.

If I had been willing to show my gratitude to Barry, I would have offered to counter Frank's naïve map-making with a semi-professional cartographer's attention to detail. But I had no desire to get back into the middle of the fray.

Lauren did not disappoint in retelling various monster themes and devices in southern literature, from Faulkner to some contemporary authors I don't remember. No Freud, but Karl Jung provided the underpinning: We have to see monsters, and there is no sense to asking whether they're real or not, because our psychological needs make them real. Context is everything, Lauren concluded. "We are confronted with a landscape full of monsters, each one of which begs our credulity, at the same time that it embodies questions we all recognize. We must ask of ourselves: 'Why resist the questions? Finding answers is the most human act of all.'"

A short round of applause and then the question-and-answer period. Some of the go-getters got up and went, hoping to catch the tail end of another talk. Lauren asked for hands and called on the first he saw.

"I have a question for John Densch," said the young man, now standing. "Didn't you claim in a newspaper article to have communicated with Sasquatch in a s»ance? And now you are acting as if the scientific pursuit of Sasquatch is too fringe for you. That seems a bit self-serving." He sat down and crossed his arms.

I was still sitting in the front row, and I stood up and turned around: "Well. First, I never claimed anything. The article to which you refer was written by someone who interviewed other attendees but not me. Second, yes, it seemed real to me at the time. But third, afterwards it seemed naïve to believe in it. And finally, fourth, it's not the fringe or the center that is at debate here. -- We have to find a way to know what is real and what is not. The question is, do you believe that you have special access to how this world works, based on what you've learned and what your instincts are? If so, then the best thing in the world is to share that insight. If, on the other hand, you are like me and doubt everything up to and including the fact that you're really standing or sitting here, not because you have special insight but because you doubt you have any insight at all, well, then I suggest you not get up in front of other people and waste their time."

I could have and should have stopped right there, but I knew it wasn't going to be. There was something else coming out of my ruminations, something I couldn't halt.

"Let me give you an example. When I was young, I was afraid of the dark and even of my heartbeat, which sounded awfully like a monster schlepping its stiff legs up the stairs to me. My parents got very tired of consoling me. I finally discovered a voice in my head that kept me from being afraid. The voice became real to me: a human voice from a billion years in the future, the voice of someone called Bollum, who was the keeper of an energy source that gave perpetual life to what was left of humanity, but who had decided to turn off that energy source and let himself and humanity die. He couldn't travel in time, but to pass the eons left to him, he made contact with beings back in time. I really believed that he was talking to me and I was talking to him.

"One day, he said that he needed to ask a favor of me. I was young and could be forgiven for this, but I said yes without considering the consequences. 'One of the other contacts I have,' he said, 'was taken from earth, about your time and place I think, for study on another planet. By the time he got there, the inhabitants had lost their interest in studying other intelligent species, yet their sense of ethics spared him annihilation. He seems to have found his way in their world, but he desperately wants his story to be told on earth. He doesn't want to be forgotten. Can you remember what I tell you about him?' he asked.

"I said yes, but before too long I became afraid that I was losing my mind, especially after the voice described again and again how unsure the human on that alien world was of his own sanity. There were way too many levels of doubt for a child. I told the voice I didn't want to listen any more. He honored my wish, and never came back."

I took a deep breath. "I cannot tell you today whether my memory of those nights is pure invention, psychological compensation, or something real and profound. For many years, I wanted nothing more than to forget it all, and I know I have forgotten and twisted most of the details. Then for an equal number of years, I thought, if I can just turn it into a story, into fiction, then I'll be all right. But every time I started to write the stories down, to fictionalize them, they seemed so empty and meaningless. Today is the first time I've ever described them to anyone, let alone confessed that I don't know if they're real or not.

"You want fringe? Here it is. I have a story to tell of someone abducted from this world to another that he dubbed bug world. It is a world occupied by leathery, four-legged, intelligent crab-like animals. This abducted person blundered into the middle of a global conflict that is playing out over hundreds of thousands of years, a conflict between order and chaos, rigidity and creativity. I don't know if this was his real name, but I was told to call him Derek Sorensen. And some day I will tell his story, because I have promised to."

I sat down, Brett, and now you have the whole story that I wanted you to know. I hope that you have read this far, because I don't have the strength to tell you another way. At least for many years.

With love,

Your father

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