Partial Recall

Confessions of a Time Mechanic

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For my Ida,
just because I like you*

(more than the stupid book)

(and hey, who knows, you might
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* So much so that I added this dedication page costing only $0.02 plus local taxes per book. That means if it's a best seller, *you* will be responsible for the destruction of the rain forests, global inflation, etc. And I still like you.

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1 Unseen Guest

Three men stood in the living room of the small house. On the wall, a dusty plaque abandoned by a previous tenant declared, Christ is the head of this home, the unseen guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation.

"Mr Smith, just one more thing," said the owner, fishing the house keys out of his pocket and handing them over. "I know you're running a business, but please remember that you're responsible for the upkeep of the garden. I don't like having to evict people who can't keep the place neat."

"No need to worry about that," replied the short man in the coat. "We'll be running a landscaping business. Selling artificial grass, and turf."

"It's a good cover," added the younger man. He had a few pimples, which suggested he was a teenager. He wore jeans and a T-shirt, unlike the other two who wore thick coats against the cold.

"I know, but particularly in summer, the grass tends to grow up to the gutters. Okay, so if there's anything you need, you speak to the letting agent, and if he can't sort you out, you speak to me."

"I'm sure it won't be a problem. Thank you very much," said Smith.

"All the best then," said the owner. He walked out of the door, down the path, crammed his large form into a small car, and drove off. Smith looked at his watch, and then looked up the street, as if expecting someone to come around the corner.

"Who are we waiting for?" asked the teenager.

Smith ignored him and closed the door. The two went into each of the rooms and Smith closed the curtains in each room.

Pausing in the kitchen, Smith frowned at the windows which had only frilly little decorations that could not be closed. “Well, certainly not here,” he said.

“What about the corridor?” asked the teenager.

“I think the corridor is the best place. We’ll just have to keep that door closed.” Smith closed the door between the corridor and the entrance hall. He went into one of the rooms and returned with a suitcase, which he opened. He tipped the contents – an axe, a geologist’s hammer, and a few trowels – onto the wooden floor. The hammer left an unsightly scratch.

“We may as well get started,” muttered Smith. “Those others won’t be here for a while.” Taking the axe he took aim at the floorboards. The varnished wood was no match for the sharp axe.

“This the easy bit. The job is going to take months,” remarked the youth.

Two hours later, half of the boards in the corridor had been ripped up, and were stacked neatly to the one side. Smith was chipping away at the foundation with the hammer. In the background, heavy metal music was playing. The doorbell chimed a brave rendition of “I see a little man standing in the wood.” Wiping the sweat from his brow, the man looked at his watch.

“They’re late, aren’t they?” asked the teenager, lounging against the wall.

“They’re early,” grumbled the man. Going around the long way to the entrance hall, he peeked through the peep-hole in the front door. A dark frown covered his face. He opened the door and smiled broadly.

“Welcome to Drake Street!” beamed the man and woman, in unison. The little baby in their arms stared longingly at the cake they had brought.

“Er, thanks,” said Smith. “You must be the neighbours.”

“Jim and Vera,” said the woman. “We baked this cake for you, just to get you over the moving-in munchies.”

“This is a nice neighbourhood. Just don’t park your car on the street,” added the man.

“Ah, crime is a problem everywhere,” commented the teenager sagely.

“Smith’s the name,” said Mr Smith. “Thanks very much for the cake. You must let me buy you a drink one day.”

“Sure,” answered the man, with some enthusiasm. His wife frowned at him.

A black van with darkened windows drove up the driveway and came to a halt. Three men got out, each bearing a suitcase. “Ah, let me introduce you to my colleagues. We’re starting a landscaping business.” The three men lugged their identical suitcases to the front door, and looked just a little uncomfortable with the welcoming party.

“This is Tom,” said Smith.

“Hi Tom, we’re Jim and Vera, and this is little Megan.”

“Uh, hi,” grunted Tom.

“And, er, Dick, whom I’ve worked with for many years,” added Smith. The surprised look on Dick’s face said, “Who me? You have?”

“Hello Dick,” said Jim.

“Hey,” said Dick flatly.

“And this is Harry,” said Smith. “He’s the brains of the business.”

Harry looked penetratingly at the neighbours. “Hi.” It was more of an emphatic statement that put an end to any further discussion on the matter than a greeting.

“And I’m Frank,” said the teenager. “But don’t worry, nobody pays much attention to me.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“Well, we’ll leave you to get on with it then,” said Vera cheerfully.

“Wave goodbye to the new neighbours, Megan,” added Jim. He waved his daughter’s hand. Harry smiled and waved back, and Megan hid her face as if she was going to cry. The neighbours beat a hasty retreat.

“Come on boys, let’s get settled in.” The five trooped into the house. Smith closed the door. They all sat down in the living room. Smith got a couple of cans of beer from the refrigerator in the kitchen. He tossed a beer to each of the three newcomers, and opened one for himself.

“I never get beer,” complained Frank.

“Okay, this is how it’s going to work,” began Smith. “We’re going to keep quiet, keep out of trouble, and keep our noses clean for three months. If we need any tools and supplies, we’re getting them at least twenty miles away.”

Harry spoke up. “If I may just say, I don’t think that calling us Tom, Dick and Harry was a very smart idea.” He took a swig of his drink.

“Well, those might not be the best names, but we didn’t plan on having such nosey neighbours,” complained Smith. “Still, no fighting, drinking or cursing on site. Remember, we’re being watched.”

Frank glanced up at the dusty plaque. Smith followed his gaze.

“We’ll have to do something about that, boss,” complained Tom.

“Whatever,” said Smith. “I’ve already got us started on the dig. I reckon you can have the next shift. This foundation is made of really good concrete.”

“I’ll go unload tools,” offered Dick. “Come along, er, Curly.”

“I think I’m Tom,” said Tom, as they left through the front door.

Frank followed Smith and Harry into the corridor.

“Where’s the GPS?” asked Harry.

“We don’t need it yet,” answered Smith. “It’s around three hundred meters whichever way you look at it.”

“It’s more like three hundred and ten,” said Frank.

“Anyhow, we’ve got to go down before we can go across. You can take over from me, while I get on with other stuff.” Smith reached into his pocket, took out his portable gaming console, and relaxed on the sofa.

Harry went to the corridor, and began to chip away at the foundation. The heavy metal music covered the noise.

After a week, the hole was over four metres deep, and one metre wide. A rope was rigged through a new hole in the ceiling to a pulley mounted on a roof truss, and a wheelbarrow half full of dirt stood nearby. Smith pulled up a scoop filled with dirt and emptied it into the wheelbarrow.

"How far are we?" called Harry, sweating at the bottom of the hole.

Frank said, "You're going to throw the slab now. The heat is killing me." He grinned mischievously. His clothes were quite clean, and he obviously hadn't been helping the digging a great deal.

Smith looked at the numbers on a laser rangefinder, which was dangling from the ceiling. The red beam it cast glittered faintly in the dust and disappeared down the hole. "We're at four point five metres. We can throw the slab now."

Tom emerged from one of the bedrooms, pushing a wheelbarrow full of wet concrete. The wheel left wet mark on the carpet. He stopped at the edge of the hole and was about to tip the concrete down the hole.

"Hey! Hold it!" shouted Harry, hurrying up the ladder. "Don't throw that on me, you moron."

Puffing and panting, Harry climbed up the ladder, and out onto the wrecked floor of the corridor. He glared at Tom, who tipped the wheelbarrow full of concrete into the hole. The concrete landed on the bottom of the hole with a wet thud.

Frank climbed up the ladder. "Close, but you missed," he said.

"Okay, time for a conference," said Smith. "Where's Dick?"

"He's on the john," said Tom. The sound of running waters came out of the bathroom, and, without the delay which would indicate that hands were being washed, Dick emerged.

“Conference,” said Frank. “You’re invited.”

The miners gathered in the living room and sat down. Smith opened up a laptop computer, and projected the screen on the wall next to the even dustier plaque.

“We are here,” he said, gesturing with the cursor at the a point on a map. “We’re going to use the new concrete slab as our reference point for the tunnel. Here’s where we’re heading to.” He indicated another point on the map. “It’s exactly three hundred and ten metres. Dick, air.”

“The compressor’s hooked up in the kitchen, and ready to go,” said Dick. “I’ve got extra ballast tanks like you said so we don’t have to run it continually. I’ve got five hundred meters of hose.”

“Good! Tom, lighting.”

“I’ve got enough lights for the first one hundred metres. I still need to get some more for after that. I don’t want to get it all at once though. I'm also going to bring in more wood.”

“Okay, we’ll break down the wall between the kitchen and the garage and you can bring the stuff in quietly,” said Smith. “We’ll need the hole for when we pack the van later. Harry, GPS.”

“I've checked it and double checked it. Only thing is where we're going to,” replied Harry. “I’d hate to dig all the way and end up in the wrong place.”

“We’ve got the GPS coordinates. You can check it every day with the range finder,” said Smith. “Assuming our information is correct, of course. It had better be, otherwise there will be hell to pay.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. That information is spot-on,” remarked Frank. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be here.”

Three months later in the same living room, everyone was sitting on the ends of their chairs.

“The weather report says we’re going to have five days of rain,” said Smith. “That should give us the cover we need against satellite tracking. The

fingerprints in the house have been cleaned up, the explosives are rigged in the tunnel, we've got the EMP thing ready in the tunnel. Is there anything else you guys can think of?"

"Just one thing," asked Dick, "what are we going to do with all the money?"

The men laughed.

"I'm going to buy that game farm in Livingstone," said Tom.

"What do you want to go to Zambia for?" asked Harry. "I thought you didn't like animals."

"On a game farm you get to shoot them," said Tom. "And you get to serve drinks to bigshots all day."

"I know where Dick and Harry are going with their money, but what are you doing with yours, Smith?" asked Frank.

"I don't think we need to tell each other what we will be doing once this is over. I think you'll find that your investment has been well worth the return you're getting. All I want to say, it has been a pleasure working with you gentlemen."

Frank, Tom, Dick and Harry sniggered at being called gentlemen.

Smith drilled through the concrete floor that formed the roof of the tunnel.

"We're through," he said. "Pass me the antenna."

Harry passed the antenna, and Frank watched with interest as Smith passed the thin wire through the hole into the vault above.

"What's that going to do?" asked Frank.

"Okay, let's fire it up," said Harry. He clicked a button on a black box attached to the antenna.

A brilliant flash erupted from the hole. For a moment, reality distorted. Everything twisted out of proportion, as if the antenna in the roof was sucking it in. After two seconds, the distortion stopped, and everything eased back into shape.

"Whoah!" said Frank. "They don't tell you that in the training manual."

“Did it do anything?” asked Smith.

“That should pretty much have fried the cameras,” said Harry. “Pretty much everything electronic. We can go in.”

“Hey Smith,” said Frank. “Why are you looking so sad?”

Smith was staring miserably at a portable gaming console that he had taken out of his pocket. “I totally forgot about my game. That thing really works. The game’s absolutely dead.”

“Who cares about that?” said Harry. “You can buy two hundred thousand consoles with the money we’re going to steal tonight. Pull the the antenna back for me, would you.”

“But how do I get my Galactic Warrior personality back?” complained Smith, pulling the antenna out of the hole. The dust trickled onto his face and he sneezed. “I’ve spent two years building up Sitting Duck31337, and now I have to start again?”

“You just give them your console serial number, and they install the personality to the your new console,” said Harry. “Didn’t you know that? Pass me the angle grinder. Let’s get to the money. You’re more of a miner than a computer genius, aren’t you?”

“Would you mind repeating that?” asked Frank, tapping his watch with his middle finger. Smith and Harry moved with a sudden jerk.

“But how do I get my Galactic Warrior personality back?” complained Smith, pulling the antenna out of the hole. The dust trickled onto his face and he sneezed. “I’ve spent two years building up Sitting Duck31337, and now I have to start again?”

“You just give them your console serial number, and they install the personality to the your new ...” began Harry, and froze, as Frank tapped his watch again. The dust stopped trickling from the ceiling and froze in mid-air.

“Thank you very much, gentlemen,” said Frank. “Sitting Duck31337, I do believe some people who

follow your work closely will be contacting you very soon – provided you keep working on your game.”

Smith and Harry remained frozen as Frank double-clicked a button on his watch. Everyone faded away, leaving Frank standing against a grey background.

“Now that wasn’t so hard,” said Frank.

2 Super Frank

Frank loved the machine. Despite a late night, he started early in cubicle 5-442, which meant he had enough time to investigate his cases with a little more flair. The last case for the day was a missing person. He opened up the file and browsed through the case documentation.

Jeremy Shaw, an Australian aged four, disappeared from the Durban beach in October 2117, while on holiday in South Africa. A smiling photo and a few newspaper articles were attached. He said he was going swimming with some boys. He was never seen again. An extensive search was made, and nothing was found. The request for the research was submitted by the Jeremy Shaw Foundation. That meant that someone connected to him had particularly deep pockets, or an excess of organisational ability.

Frank activated the search program on his terminal and keyed in “North beach, Durban” into the map program, as it was shown in the file. The terminal responded by offering him the town of North Beach, California at the top of the list, and Durban South Africa at place 16. Okay, he loved the machine, but the user interface could use some work. Fiddling briefly with the controls, he chose Durban South Africa, and scrolled across to the east side of the map where the coastline was, and found north beach.

He keyed in “2117” as the year, and “10” as the month, and pressed the “Accept” button.

“A number you have entered is not valid,” responded a recorded voice. A little box appeared on the monitor with the same message.

“It would be so simple to fix this silly interface,” grumbled Frank, to nobody in particular. “I could do it

myself if I had the code. What year is it again? 3 years ago is 2117. Why must I do the maths myself? a minus b equals c. Simple enough for a computer."

Squinting in an insulting way at the screen, Frank corrected the 2117 to read "3", meaning three years previously.

A little box on the screen counted back quickly through "2120", "2119", "2118" and then the display screen popped up a display of the beach. A hot sunny day – well, apparently – Frank didn't actually see the sun shining, only the hot shiny effect of it. It was two days too early. Frank adjusted the numbers, and the display changed.

The display screen showed the same beach, with slightly overcast weather, and fewer people. Frank scanned in the photo of the subject, and selected "Locate visual match". The boy was "the subject", because it wouldn't do to get attached to him. Clearly he had met a sticky end, otherwise he wouldn't be missing. A lot of trainees gave up and left the programme during the first and second years because of subject-related trauma. Frank had survived, somehow.

While the machine did its own scan, Frank panned through the picture of the beach. "Subject not found," came back a recorded voice, interrupting Frank's view of the varied forms that decorated the warm beach sand. A crab popped out of a hole in the sand then retreated again.

Frank double checked. Usually the machine could at least do a visual match. Was it the correct date? Had he scanned for the subject for the entire day? Did the newspapers report the date of the incident? Everything seemed to check out, but the subject was still not found. Frank quickly reviewed the "closest matches" found by the machine. A young boy, probably 12 years old, a girl who looked remarkably like the photograph of the subject except for a black skin, and a number of other faces that the computer considered to bear some

resemblance to the photograph, but which clearly did not.

Frank asked the machine to scan the previous week. While it did that, he put on his “superhero” goggles, and chose on the little girl from the list of closest matches, and entered the virtual reality of October 2117.

Frank stood on the beach, entirely ignored by the people who had actually been there. The girl was sitting with her family on the sand, and they were clearly not Australian. Perhaps Chinese. A man – maybe the girl’s father was reading a newspaper – the day before the edition that reported the subject’s disappearance.

Frank clicked pause. Everyone froze. The crab, which was just popping out of the hole froze too. Frank checked the man’s watch. It was 11 AM. The previous day, the newspaper would have been in a roll at the publisher’s office, but he wanted to be sure, and besides, it was more fun this way.

Frank walked over to the man and touched a page of the newspaper between two fingers. He clicked rewind. Everything began to happen in reverse. People walked backwards, a seagull regurgitated a choice morsel onto the beach and took off backwards, and a little boy fished some rubbish out of a bin. Frank set the system to rewind by an hour at a time.

The girl’s father was walking backwards towards a newspaper seller, swinging the newspaper in his hand. Holding on to the newspaper, with the same two fingers he had touched it with, was Frank. As the man carried the paper, Frank was swinging wildly behind it, grinning stupidly.

Frank was holding on to a pile of newspapers, standing next to a newspaper seller. People reversed past in their cars and handed the newspaper seller newspapers, which he paid them for.

Frank was still holding on to a pile of newspapers. The more he held on, the more the pile grew.

Frank and a pile of newspapers were being thrown into a newspaper delivery van, and being caught by a

strong man, who carefully stacked the newspapers and Frank on the top of his pile.

A pile of newspapers, and an attached Frank, was being unloaded from the newspaper delivery van and then stacked at the door of a warehouse.

Frank, holding on to a roll of newsprint, was being fed backwards through a newspaper press. The press was removing the ink from the paper. Now *this* was why he loved the machine. It made you a superhero and a cartoon hero in one day.

He was at the newspaper offices, and only one day early.

Frank let go of the newspaper, and clicked fast forward. People began to rush around at high speed and the machines worked faster than they possibly ever could have. The printing machines paused, and began with the next day's advertising, followed by the articles done by the day staff.

At around 4:30 am, the presses began printing pages 1 and 2. Frank clicked pause, and walked over to the pile. Sure enough, on page 2 was the article about the missing boy, sorry the subject. There were no clues in the article. It wasn't the article he had in the file, but the report was quite similar.

Frank walked out of the printing room, and into the editorial office. He clicked two hours back and found a journalist who had just finished typing a draft of the article he had just read. He touched the journalist, and rewound him. The man typed incredibly fast, and the article gradually disappeared from the screen.

He rewound another two minutes, and then hit play.

The phone rang. The journalist answered in a sleepy voice suitable for the night staff.

"The Mercury, hello." ... "Yes" ... "Did he drown?" ... It sounded like the correct call. Frank clicked pause, but then thought again, and let the call play out.

"Is that all you know?" ... "Thanks a lot, it's always good to hear from you John." He began to put down the phone, and paused in mid air. Frank rewound by 10 seconds, just to "Thanks a lot" and paused.

Ah, the intricacies of modern telephony, he thought. He touched the telephone, and clicked a button.

Super-Frank flew down the telephone cable and to the telephone switching box. He flew into a duct in the ground, and appeared on a pole outside the offices of the newspaper. He dashed down the telephone lines, arriving at the a switch box in the telephone exchange. In front of him was the end of the connection. He touched the line with a finger, and heard the journalist say “good to hear from you John”.

Now it was just a matter of finding where the call came from. He clicked rewind, listening to the entire call backwards until just before the telephone rang. Then he clicked play, and used his virtual Dictaphone to record the data transmitted before the call. This information contains the caller ID of the caller on many systems.

Back in the office, Frank took off his goggles, and typed in “decode caller-id alcatel” at a console. The novices would have trouble with this, he thought proudly to himself. Of course, if it had been an IP based network, anybody could decode it.

The console printed out “+27 31 555 1412”. He clicked on “Telephone lookup”, and entered the number. The machine knew the location of each telephone number (although he was not quite sure how it knew).

Frank selected “Go to source”. He stood in a mostly empty police station, where a frozen constable was frozen in mid sentence on a frozen telephone. Frank put his ear next to the receiver, hit play, and heard a voice say “good to hear from you John”.

Frank took hold of the policeman’s head, and clicked rewind. A grave looking man and a tearful woman walked in through the revolving door (backwards), and spoke to the policeman, who sucked up the ink from a form using a pen.

“I do think that’s the parents,” said Frank pressing pause. He read the form. The name said “Jeremy Shaw”, which was the name of the subject, and the

location said “North Beach Hotel”, and the other details were more or less as in the newspaper report. Two years of experience should have taught him that more or less was as much as one could ever expect from the media.

Frank took hold of the woman’s top, and rewound to 6AM the same day. Frank was holding on to a woman’s top hanging in a shop. That would mean that it was bought that day. He went back to the police station and chose the man’s shirt instead.

Frank was in a cupboard, holding on to a clean shirt in a pile of clothing. He stepped through the cupboard door, and was in a hotel room. Sleeping in a bed in the room were the man and the woman from the police station. On a mattress on the floor lay a little boy. He looked very much like the picture in Frank’s file.

“Subject located!” announced the machine triumphantly.

“Thanks a lot, genius”, replied Frank.

Frank was supposed to find out whether the subject had died or, if he was alive, as much information as he could about his current location. If the subject was alive, that meant carefully investigating his circumstances so that he could be located. In Frank’s case, this would mean working harder. He felt a vague twinge of guilt – it was easier for him if the boy was dead. No, it was better for him if the subject was alive. Or ... he might have to have another chat with the company counsellor.

Frank touched the subject’s nose, and clicked a button. The machine installed a virtual camera on the subject’s nose, and began to make an archival recording of exactly what happened that day, to be included in the report. If the subject died, the machine would continue to track the electrons Frank had selected, wherever they ended up – although this was seldom as exciting as one might hope. The biologists loved the machine because it allowed them to investigate things that they had only suspected. The motto of the relatively new biological research department on the 7th floor was

“the past is the key to the present.” The physicists continued to insist that the machine was impossible.

Frank set up the machine to show 10 second clips for each 15 minutes.

The subject was asleep at 7:15 and up at 7:30. He had a bath for more than 15 minutes, and had sausages and bacon for a high protein breakfast. At 8:45 his mother had left (presumably to buy the top that she was wearing at the police station) and he was in his swimming costume on the way down the corridor all alone at 9:00.

Frank hated this part. He knew what would happen next. The subject was swimming in the pool at 9:15. At 9:30 he was lying by the side of the pool with a few boys, who seemed to be doing their own thing. At 9:45, he was on a bus, sitting quietly next to a girl who was sitting next to her mother. At 10:00 he was sitting alone on the bus. At 10:15 he was at the bus station, crying. At 10:30, he was on another bus, next to another family. At 10:45 he was still on the bus. At 11:00 he was in the next town, crying again. At 11:15 he was in a private car with some people. At 11:30 he was sitting in a police station. The case book was full, and the space below the ruled lines on the last page had been filled in with extra writing. A policeman was writing the word “abandoned” on the back of a cigarette box.

“Okay,” admitted Frank, “that was not quite what I thought would happen next.”

Frank fast-forwarded the boy's nose by 2 months, which brought him more or less to the machine’s lower limit of two years into the past. He found the boy in Pretoria, in a house, with a man called Uncle Thabo, and a woman called Aunty Thembi, and a stack of foster children, with almost every ethnic origin represented. The boy (formerly the subject) seemed quite well. The machine completed its recording of the boy’s travels. If the recording passed security review, it would no-doubt satisfy the clients, and place the South African police and welfare authorities in an unenviable position.

Frank cleared up his books and papers and packed them neatly into his bag. Nobody else used his cubicle, but it was never pleasant to find that someone had been rifling through your stuff.

Frank removed the cartridge of the session from the terminal. The parents would be happy, even if the bill was impressive. It could only happen in Africa, of course.

Heist henchman held

Overlooked satellite archive leads to arrest of suspect

Federal police have made a major breakthrough in the stalled investigation into the Melbourne cash depot heist, the largest cash robbery ever in Australia.

Within two months after the robbery, five of the conspirators were arrested, and a substantial amount of money was recovered. However, almost half of the money was never traced, and the mastermind of the operation was never brought to trial.

As part of a routine evidence audit, police experts reviewed satellite imagery from the heist of three years ago, and discovered information that had been missed during the initial investigation. A man has been held for questioning, and police are confident that he will be able to help them with their investigations.

While no official statement has been made, it is understood that the man in question was arrested at an Internet café in St. Kitts, and will be extradited to Australia shortly. A substantial amount of money in number of bank accounts in various countries has been frozen.

Zambian police have confirmed that they are holding a man for questioning,

also in connection with the heist.

Announcing the breakthrough, Minister for Police, Ms Jenny Fitzwilliam, said that it was proof of the dedication and perseverance of the officers of the force. It was a sign of a well administered department, and a stamp of approval on her policy of centralisation.

It is expected that this success will boost her chances of re-election in next month's poll.

3 The Company

The doors slid open, and Frank crammed himself into the last open spot. The doors closed, and the lift smoothly accelerated upwards, and Frank groaned inwardly, as he watched the floor indicator increase from five to eight. Despite his years of experience, he had not yet perfected the technique of pressing the correct button when summoning a lift.

At the eighth floor, the three men dressed in smart casual clothes got out. Frank had a glimpse of the permanent staff terminal facilities. There were potted green plants all over, and the smell of freshly brewed coffee wafted into the lift before the doors closed again.

At the tenth floor, Frank could see into one of the permanent staff cubicles. A staff operator was sitting in his very comfortable, and adjustable, chair in front of his panoramic vision view screen. The screen showed that he was monitoring a meeting of people with suits. Probably an espionage job.

The men who had been in the lift with Frank had all left, leaving him alone with a smartly dressed woman, as the doors closed.

“Do you have a pass?” asked the woman. She had a particularly high pitched voice.

“Sorry,” said Frank. “I was actually going down.” He indicated apologetically to the ground floor button, which was still illuminated from when he had pressed it as he entered the lift.

The woman glared at Frank, clicked her tongue and, muttering under her breath, pressed the button for the fourteenth floor, and presented her ID card to the security scanner. The red light on the security scanner turned to green. The doors closed, and the lift moved upwards again.

At the fourteenth floor, the doors opened revealing a spacious reception area that Frank had not seen before. The floor and walls were covered with plush carpeting, and a few comfortable looking couches beckoned next to a table of alcoholic drinks. The sound of classical music could be heard faintly in the background.

Without so much as looking at Frank, the smartly dressed lady walked through the reception area, and disappeared along a carpeted corridor.

As Frank peered curiously out at the offices, a particularly large man wearing a suit and tie blocked his view. “This is a restricted area,” he said.

“Sorry, I'm actually going down,” explained Frank, “I just pressed the wrong button.”

“That may be so, but all intrusions to Mr Dewey's restricted area will be reported.” Clearly, he didn't consider debate to be an option.

The man took out a portable security scanner, and entered a code into it. The scanner bleeped merrily. He pointed the scanner at Frank's security pass, but the doors mercifully closed before the procedure was completed.

Frank breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't have too many demerits to spare.

As he went down, the lift filled up with students travelling in the correct direction. At the fifth floor he was joined by some of his third year colleagues whom he recognised, but did not know by name.

A lone first year student, lugging a heavy rucksack crammed with books came into the lift at the third floor. He looked as if he had not slept in a day or two, and apart from the green strip on his security card, which identified him as a first year student, he had that worried look that testified that he did not know how he was doing. Frank felt sorry for the poor guy. He had been in the same situation himself. The harried look always gave away a first year, and you could still catch them smiling occasionally, even when there was nobody around to impress.

The doors opened on the ground floor, and the lift emptied. Half of the people headed off to the canteen for afternoon tea, and Frank and the others headed towards the lecture theatres.

When Frank started at the company, there was talk of a covered walkway being built between the main campus and the company buildings, but nothing had ever come of it. Instead, special dividends were issued to shareholders, and the company spent the balance of its profits on advertising.

The sales and administration tower cast a long shadow in the setting sun, and provided a welcome shade for the sweating students heading back to the campus. Into the sales and administration building poured all manner of orders – from crime investigations, via quests to find lost dogs to advertising impact assessments (yuck). Governments were always interested in what their neighbours had been doing. Some governments were more interested in monitoring their own citizens than in knowing what their neighbours might be up to.

Industrial espionage was one of the big money spinners. There were also legitimate uses for such spying. For certain types of design, it was simpler to buy technical information from the company than to get it from published sources. In his second year, Frank had recorded a three dimensional model of the Chinawood plastic-wood synthesis plant in Shanghai. The Chinese had been genuinely surprised that the Germans were able to make use of the technology they had licensed them, and get it right the first time around.

The job of the sales and administration people was to transform endearing requests like “Where's my daddy?” to a less emotive form, consisting of name, last known place and time coordinates, and assigning the small fortune to be paid for the release of the information. The fact that the information was two years old was a bit of a problem, but the company's monopoly on time research ensured that the business was profitable.

As a monopoly, it attracted a constant stream of criticism from its customers. Those customers that were happy with the service they received were usually unhappy about the price they were forced to pay. The company's first advertising effort had grabbed the public's imagination, as planned, but then turned into a standing joke about their service. Despite a seven year campaign to eliminate the memory of it, office workers and insubordinate children all over the world would delay answering questions by repeating the advertising jingle, “Why don't you ask DC&H – they know!” Frank considered himself fortunate not to have to deal with the customers directly.

Just before the wide bridge over the congested highway that joined the old and new campus, squatted the brightly painted security building. Visiting mothers with children were always mistaking this yellow and baby blue building for the kindergarten, and being turned away from its dark interior by its humourless inhabitants.

All material leaving the company was checked by the security department. If they didn't like what they saw, they made a plan, which generally involved editing, delays and a good dose of falsehoods. If a client bought the rights to the skeletons in his closet, nobody else would be allowed access to the closet, unless an appropriate amount of money was paid.

Frank popped the memory cartridge into the chute outside the security building. You didn't talk to company security. They talked to you. The cartridge disappeared with a brief rush of air, and a recorded voice said “thank you for your submission”. This same voice was used for the company’s automated audio enquiry desk. It sounded as if it had been recorded by a female wrestler with a bad throat infection.

As Frank walked over the bridge, he observed that the expressway was congested, as usual. The automatic traffic lanes were, as one might expect, running at a crawl, probably due to some accident on the other side of town. The commuters in their automatic navigation

cars trundled along, some patiently reading and playing games, others impatiently tapping their dashboards, but all blissfully unaware of a fundamental instability in the software that their cars ran. NavSafe Company of Mumbai had bought the historical rights to the incriminating evidence of the spectacular crashes their devices could produce, and thereby saved itself the cost of a recall and expensive litigation. Safety in the manual lanes was worse, of course, but not due to any technical failures. The primary cause of this was that the government had taken responsibility to pay compensation for all traffic related injuries and damage.

Frank lugged his bag full of books past the lecture buildings which were part of the original university campus. Although it was possible to arrange all of the information in the books into a small corner of a pocket terabyte storage device, this was just not practical. You could store the data, but getting a licence to read it more than once was always problematic. You were as likely as not to find that the publisher recalled the book, because they deemed that a newer and inferior edition had been published, for which you should pay. Paper books are a lot harder to recall. The police's copyright squad seldom bothered people with publications on good old tree-based storage.

Frank wandered over the lawns towards his college residence. He pulled a few leaves off a tree in passing, and idly pulled them to shreds as he walked. Oh well.

Frank’s residence was one of the original buildings of the university campus, and retained its original Victorian façade. Frank ran up the stairs to the second floor, walked along the halls to his room, and opened the door with his access card.

As a third year student, he had a room to himself. On a shelf was his Coke can collection. A few cans dated back to 2079, still in the original red and white, before Coca Cola lost the intellectual property rights to the colours to the Japanese Intellectual Property Agency.

He took a textbook out of his bag, and tossed the bag onto the bed. Sitting down on the bed he opened the text book, found chapter seventeen, and turned on the microwave to warm up his supper.

4 Happy Beginnings

The next morning, Frank sat down for his lecture on one of the three hundred and twelve chairs in the quickly filling lecture hall.

As usual, he sat next to Gerald, who was looking a little depressed. Perhaps he had been failing tests again. Gerald seemed to struggle through each subject and yet managed to scrape an overall pass for each one at the end of the term.

“I had a happy ending yesterday,” gloated Frank, just to see Gerald’s reaction. That's what friends are for.

“Hey everybody,” shouted Gerald, suddenly not nearly as depressed as he had appeared, “Frank had a happy ending!” There's nothing as reckless as shouting “happy” in a crowded anthropology lecture theatre.

“You should have married her, you pervert Frank!” shouted a voice from the back.

A group of students began humming the theme tune of Barney the Dinosaur (on account of his unwavering purple happiness). Frank sank into his seat in the vain hope that not too many of his classmates knew his name.

“Hey, happy ending Frank!” shouted another classmate, “Can I swop your next assignment for my psychopathic serial fraud and larceny?”

There would have been other comments but the lecturer arrived. The class became silent, many students thinking about what had happened to “Demerit” Daniel the previous year.

“I trust you have all done the pre-reading for today,” began Mr Jones, taking his place behind the lectern. “Otherwise I expect you will be quite lost, even you, Mr Stafford.”

A polite laugh at Mr Stafford’s expense rippled through the lecture hall. “I will begin on page 431 of Wilkinson,” droned Jones, peering over the top of his glasses. Although corrective surgery was quick and painless, the twelfth century artefact on his face was an accurate reflection of his anachronistic thinking. Why did the company force them to go to these stupid theoretical classes?

There was the sound of many heavy books being opened, while Gerald grinned broadly at Frank and handed him a scribbled note. The picture showed a little stick man under a wild swirl of lines with two sharp teeth. The caption was scrawled almost illegibly, “Cave man meet happy ending with sabre-tooth tiger.”

Frank scribbled back, “You should have been a doctor” on the note, and passed it back to Gerald, who began to reconsider his career immediately.

“Adaptation must be understood from an historical point of view. In order for an organism to fit into an ecosystem, it must have the potential to adjust to or become part of it.”

Boring. That's what it was. Boring. Like Mr Jones' voice and subject matter, Frank's life was boring. Frank had applied for the company programme when the realisation of his insignificance had finally struck him. The chance to be an occasional superhero made up for at least some of the boring bits that the programme included. Like the lecturers, which reminded him that he was actually still boring old Frank.

“Many primitive cultures survive to this day,” began Mr Jones, “which teach us about the life of primitive man, and how we have adapted over the years.”

Frank thought about how he came from a primitive culture. His parents had not been too enthusiastic about him joining the company. “Those people are not our people,” his mother had objected. From what he had learned in Mr Jones’s class, this was quite true, and the reason was that his parents were simply out of date. Frank had been brought up in church and Sunday

school, but he had left it behind at the first opportunity. His parents were simply old fashioned. They had not noticed that the world had moved on and left them behind.

“The earliest people did not farm crops but lived off the land - foraging for food and struggling for survival,” droned Mr Jones.

Frank thought how his parents were the ones struggling for survival. They were wonderful people, but they really took God far too seriously. What primitive people wrote over two thousand years ago is hardly relevant to modern man now, living at the peak of scientific achievement.

“We know that this was a human culture, because they buried their dead.”

Margaret’s husband buried the dead. Of Frank’s brothers and sisters, only Margaret took her parents’ ideas seriously. A large part of the reason for this was that she had married a pastor. To ensure that they would never have any money, they shunned the successful religious franchises. Instead they spent their time making soup and buns for bums, and organising missionary trips to insanely dangerous parts of the world – to bother people who didn’t want to hear what they had to say.

“Because of the pain and mystery of death, man has made gods for himself and worshipped them.”

If the machine went back to twenty thousand years, Frank would have made an evidence tape and sent it off to his sister and her holier-than-thou husband, despite the company regulations about keeping historical material secret.

“By about one hundred thousand years ago the human brain had reached its modern size.”

And with a few modern-sized brains, and a small research grant from the National Science Federation, the company had got off the ground. They had focused on developing a technique to analyse the unfortunately named histrionic sub-particle to trace the big bang. The big bang was never analysed, but the technology they

developed was spectacular enough. The machine that came out of the research could call up any image from any place in the last two to five years.

The two year minimum was due to the diffusion rate of histrionics. In order to reconstruct the past, it was necessary to have histrionics from the entire globe, even if you were only interested in the view out of the window. The five year maximum was because the histrionics suddenly decay after five years.

“Since then, culture has continuously evolved and changed down to the present time.”

The company discovered that knowing everything about the past was a quick ticket to riches. There was no end to the investigations and intrigue that they were called upon to shed light on. No investigation, court case or political appointment was complete without a company report.

With unrivalled profits, the company proceeded to recruit history and engineering graduates to operate their machine. Their students were the brightest and the best, chosen for their brains and occasionally their good looks, simply because the company had the money to afford that kind of student.

Over time, someone in the company realised that the better operators were those with understanding of a wide variety of languages, cultures and technology. After two years, they simply bought a university, and remodelled the campus to prepare an army of well-educated and well-balanced history operators. In Gerald's case, they were settling for *somewhat* well-balanced.

Operator training included language studies, so that they could operate over large parts of the world; anthropology, so that they could understand how people think; computer science, so that they could understand how the machine and computers work; physics, so that they could understand how matter works; and evolutionary biology, so that they could understand that the company would select only the fittest students, and

that students were below the company on the food chain.

“Sir,” interrupted a voice from the very last row in the lecture theatre.

Mr Jones raised an eyelid and peered towards Arnold Hendricks, voted most likely to flunk out in first year – two years previously. He had come close, but had made the cut each time.

“Sir, is it true that the Japanese are building their own machine?” asked Arnold, with a look of genuine interest on his face.

“No, I very much doubt that,” answered Mr Jones, “although you may not be interested to hear, there’s an interesting story behind the rumour, and I don’t mind sharing with you.” (Somehow he managed to make this sound boring too.)

Gotcha! No more boring lecture. The fourth year students had been right! Ask the anthropology lecturer about the machine, and he would talk for hours.

“When I joined the company, a young man, who was also surnamed Jones worked with me. After two years of training, he disappeared. It turns out that the Japanese government had hired him to spy on the machine so that they could build their own. If you go to the city of Kobe today, you can have a look at their uncompleted work. It's a big reactor built on some reclaimed land at the harbour. That installation cost them billions to put together, but the best output it ever gave was the same as the view out of the window. They're still trying to sell it.”

“But even better than that was what the Indians did. The government of India secretly built their own machine, based on the company’s patent filings, with a bit of help from the Japanese. They also spent a few billion on it. They diverted the output of a nuclear power station to run it. And if you go to the village of Vashtupal today, you will see what they achieved. The crater is still there – some two kilometres wide, and 200m deep – but the town is not.” For some reason, Mr Jones almost smiled at this point.

“And that is why the company now has agreements with all of the major governments and corporations. You’ve all seen the “restricted area” notification? Yes, of course you have, it’s in the first year operating manual. That’s what they did to solve the problem – anybody, for a price, can buy exclusive access to the histrionics of a particular place. So the US government has bought up the rights to their intelligence buildings, and Microsoft Corporation bought up the rights to their own headquarters, for reasons you will no doubt appreciate, etc, etc. That’s why you have to clear recordings with the security department before we release them.”

“Sir,” asked Gerald, “what happens if two governments buy the same exclusive access?” (Let’s keep him going – he’s on a roll.)

“Ah! Now that’s how the company makes its money – they sell it to the highest bidder. And sometimes, if neither bid is high enough, they sell it to both bidders.”

“You have a question?” asked Mr Jones, motioning towards James, who looked as if he should be studying boxing rather than history.

“Is that the reason for the five year limitation on the machine?” asked James.

“No, the reason for the five years is actually the physics of the histrionic sub-particle. Didn’t you cover this in first year physics? Anyway, if you get hold of the histrionic particle for a proton or an electron, and tweak it for the time you want, it gives you a vector to its position at that time.” He drew an arrow on the board, and pointed to it, helpfully.

“But it also gives you a matrix of second order vectors which you can use to find its neighbours, and so on. If you start with one particle and follow the vectors for enough iterations, you construct a complete three dimensional scene.” The board was now full of arrows, and didn't make sense anymore. “Or that’s what they say. If you ask me, nobody has a foggy clue about how it works, so we are simply happy that it works for the last five years, even if it doesn’t show anything beyond

that. People wouldn't pay as much for information beyond five years back anyhow, so this limitation happens to coincide nicely with the company business model.”

“Sir,” squeaked the class nerd, Jeremy van Turken, “I don’t understand how this relates to today’s lecture. Are you saying that the machine is the next step in our cultural evolution?” (He was really quite bright, but had no social understanding.)

“Erm ... no,” responded Mr Jones, recovering his boring composure, “I was merely explaining the, er, anthropological context in which we are operating. However, this class must read from page 431 of Wilkinson to the end, paying particular attention to the means and mechanisms of social evolution, which we would have covered in more detail in this class. We won’t be going over this again.”

A groan rose from the class. The experiment had been interesting, but missing the important part of a lecture always made the exams more difficult.

“Class dismissed.”

5 Let There Be Joe

Frank walked across the lawn in front of the college library, heading back to his room – lost in thought – but not any thought in particular. Actually more lost than thoughtful. He was followed by Joe, whom he did not notice until Joe surprised him with, “Hello Frank”.

“Oh hi Joe,” replied Frank, almost waking up. Joe Steyn, nice guy and a total religious nutter – all rolled into an unimposing package that didn’t understand the word “no”. Joe thought that everyone who didn't hold to his doctrines was in need of enlightenment. “How’s the work treating you Joe?”

“Not too badly,” said Joe, with the air of someone who is doing more important things than mere work. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about,” he continued. No doubt he was concerned about Frank’s lost state.

“Oh yes, and what’s that?” asked Frank. Perhaps a continuation of the Spanish Inquisition or the Crusades?

“Well Frank, I’ve heard you come from a Christian family, and I was wondering why we never see you in church or chapel or anything like that.”

Frank's cheeks went unseasonally red, but he had a good answer ready. “Well, I used to go to church and all that stuff, but it’s really not for me,” he responded, in a well-rehearsed tone of voice. “My family, well, they’re traditional kind of people, but I’m not like that anymore. I like to think for myself and decide for myself what is true.” They disturbed a flock of semi-tame pigeons as they walked across the lawn.

“Well, that’s more or less what I expected as an answer,” said Joe. “So, Frank, what do believe is true?”

“Well, you know – mathematics, physics, biology and at least some history – but not more than the last five

years where the machine can sort it out for us," he grinned.

Joe persisted. "That's pretty broad Frank. You know what I mean. Do you have answers to more serious questions? Like what happens when you die? Do you believe in life after death? Why is it better to do good than evil?" They walked down the steps towards the college residences. Instead of turning off to his own residence, Joe walked along with Frank towards his.

Frank began to realise that he was the target of Joe's friendly evangelism exercise. Joe was a nice enough guy, but debates about philosophy were really pointless. He was also stretching the law to the limit. No doubt his church was giving medals to the most enthusiastic Bible basher of the week. How did guys like this manage to get through the campus screening programme?

"Look Joe, I know you need to score brownie points by preaching to every pagan and semi-pagan that you can lay your hands on. You want to know how I feel about Jesus and the Bible and all that? To be quite straight with you – I don't really care for that stuff any more. It was good for people when we were still running around in animal skins, but it doesn't wash any more. The world has moved on, and you are all living in the past."

Joe was not about to let go. "You don't really believe that the world has moved on, do you? If things are so much better, then why do we still have death? You've done the machine assignments – why is there still so much murder and cheating?"

Frank didn't really want to talk, but someone had to get through to Joe. He would pester everyone in the whole world if he wasn't sorted out. He stopped and put his bag down on the brick paving. It wasn't going to be pretty, but it had to be done.

"Joe, I don't mean that the world has moved on by sorting out problems or anything like that. What I mean is that we now know that the stuff you believe is simply not true. Your Bible says that God made the world in

seven days. Science has proved that it's billions of years old. So, if it starts with an error like that at the beginning, how can I trust it to get anything right? Everyone has realised this, except for you. You guys need to take science just a little bit more seriously."

Joe was a little taken aback. "Hey, Frank, give me a chance here – we Christians do take science seriously. Hey, I also believe that the universe is billions of years old." At this point, Joe whipped out a well thumbed Bible from his student bag and opened it to the first page.

Joe read, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters."

He paused dramatically, and added, "and here is where you can have as much time as you need to have for any amount of big bang, star formation, planetary evolution and fossils, because the text continues like this …"

He read on, "Then God said, Let there be light."

Frank looked at Joe. Joe really was a nice guy in some ways. It was a pity he believed this kind of nonsense. "Joe, I've been to Sunday school. Then I went to high school. And you've got a huge logical fallacy in your explanation. Not with the bit you just read to me. Pass that Bible here and let me read you the last verse to you."

Frank took the Bible and read, "And God saw all that he had made, and behold it was very good."

"You see," interrupted Joe, without giving Frank a chance to state his case. "It says God created order out of the chaos left by evolution."

"Okay," said Frank, "you're wide open there – if that's the case, then what was the big deal about Adam eating the apple? Why did God threaten him with death? It's stupid. If things had been evolving and dying for millions of years until then, then Adam was going to die anyway, and it was no big deal."

“But,” began Joe before he had given any thought to what Frank had said.

“Um,” he added, as Frank’s words sank in.

Joe began thinking aloud. “You’ve got a bit of a point there. The Bible does say that death entered the world through one man, so it doesn’t really make sense to have death before... that....” his voice trailed off. “You know, I’ve never really thought about that before.”

“Joe, you’re a nice guy, but what you believe is simply not true,” insisted Frank, repeating himself, and rubbing in his victory – not that the little victory made him feel any better. He felt like a jerk. Poor Joe. He had to deal with the sudden realisation that he what he believed was not true.

“I think you’ve got a point there Frank,” said Joe. “About death before sin. I’m going to have a chat with my cell group about this, because you’ve really got a good point there. I mean, if death was in the world before Adam sinned, then was his sin really such a big thing? You know ... I started out asking you about life after death, but I suppose the question is what about life before death. You know, was there ever life without death.”

Frank was starting to wonder whether he should have caused a crisis for innocent Joe. He tried to compensate. “Hey, Joe – I’m sure it’s not as bad as all that. Maybe someday they will fix the machine to go back a few million of years – and maybe you’ll be right after all.”

“Yeah, sure,” responded Joe. His book bag was suddenly very heavy, and he shifted it around on his shoulder. After a brief pause, his face brightened a little. “On the other hand, if the Bible and scientists contradict each other, maybe it’s the scientists that are wrong after all? There's a thought! Hey, I’ll see you around, Frank.” Joe shifted his bag back to where it had been and walked off.

“You know, I couldn’t help overhearing you,” said a slightly foreign voice, “talking to Joe.” It was Mohammed Faizal, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. “You

know, it's amazing – you tell him exactly what his problem is, and he is quite happy to go on the way he was."

"Hi Mo," said Frank, "I didn't see you sneak up on us."

"I was just passing by. You know, these missionary Christians," said Mohammed shaking his head, "I'm glad I'm a Muslim and not one of them. You know, much as I dislike conflict, they deserve to be put in their place. They are always so unreasonable. Just the other day Joe was trying to tell me that there are contradictions in the Quran."

"I thought you guys also had a problem with evolution," said Frank. "Aren't you in the same boat as Joe as far as that one goes?"

"No Frankie, my boy, I'm not going anywhere in a boat with that man. Let me tell you. My mullah back in Pakistan was a scientist with two doctorates, and he had been to Mecca. He taught me the Quran is a very scientific revelation. In fact, there are things in the Quran that scientists are only starting to discover now. Like the histrionics. The Quran says that there are two angels that write down every thing that you do. That all was revealed fourteen centuries ago, and science is only now beginning to catch up the glorious Quran now."

"So do Muslims believe in evolution, then?" asked Frank.

"No, of course not," said Mohammed, "Evolution is your western religious idea. It's part of your Christianity, and not part of Islam. The Quran says we are all created, so that's the way it is."

"I always thought you were a rather secular Muslim," said Frank. "I mean, you wear jeans, you play Galactic Warrior. At least you don't seem to make a big deal about your religion, well, not until now. At least not like the way Joe tries to shove his version of Christianity down everyone's throat."

"You see," explained Mohammed, "that's the difference between us and missionary Christians. We go to mosque once a week when we can, but we don't

have to get involved in arguments. It's not a matter of what you believe in, but whether you do what Allah wills. We don't have to argue, because we've got everything we need to know in the Quran. You should read it for yourself."

"Well, for me it's not a matter of what people wrote years ago, but what we can see feel and touch today. I think that eventually you chaps will come around to the scientific method for everything. And somehow, I don't think any amount of science is going to convince the likes of Joe that they are off the track," said Frank.

"Well, I have been hearing that Sergio Howe and the physics teams are taking extra atom samples around Mecca," said Mohammed. He smiled, "Maybe they will have some particular improvements to offer us one day. In the end, of course, we will all have to be Muslims. You'll see."

Frank sighed. "Okay, whatever you say, but I reckon I can only argue with one fanatic on any given day." He smiled apologetically, took up his heavy bag and headed towards his residence. "Cheers Mohammed."

"Salaam!"

Riotous Richard Restrained

Unwanted religious harassment causes violent response

Mr Richard van Rensburg appeared in the Smithfield Magistrate's Court yesterday on charges of religious harassment and violating the public order act. The charge stems from an incident on Thursday last week during which Mr van Rensburg sustained serious injuries after being assaulted with a brick. Mr van Rensburg is charged with violating the freedom of religion act.

A spokesman for the victim of the harassment confirmed that the victim had sustained no physical injuries, but had suffered painful distress of mind and was receiving counselling. The spokesman would not comment further as the case is *sub judice*.

The case was postponed for further investigation. The accused was not asked to plead, and was released on warning into the custody of the Smithfield hospital.

Police spokesperson, Vanesh Patel

said that the police will not hesitate to act against anyone who disturbs the peace and causes public violence to break out.

Van Rensburg will appear in court again in 30 days.

6 I Spy With My Little Eye

SITTING in his cubicle in the terminal building, Frank opened up the task file. The cover sheet was stamped with red letters, saying "STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL". That meant it was internal company business. He had had one of these as a second year exercise. The exercise then was to spy on what the first years had been up to two years previously. The point wasn't so much to find anything bad, as to be reminded that the company was watching the students very carefully.

"Let's see," said Frank. "Task: Identify any individuals monitoring Alex Dewey for the two-year horizon week. Determine what information they are seeking, and what information they have acquired. Make notes on the techniques, whether successful or not ... blah using standard operating procedures yada yada ..."

"What deweya know!" whispered Frank. It's not every day you get an assignment to check who's checking the resident computer system genius. So the spooks were spying on Dewey. What were they after? Of course, it was always possible that the company was being its usual paranoid self and suspecting everyone of corporate treason.

The starting coordinates provided Frank with a rare view of Alex Dewey's less-than-humble abode. At quarter past midnight on Monday morning, Dewey was in the entertainment room of his 16-room mansion, playing a virtual reality game. Expensive-looking high definition screens all around the room showed his progress from various camera angles. With all the movement and shooting, and it was hard to tell if he was winning or losing. His face showed grim

determination and intense concentration, although it wasn't clear whether or not he was having fun.

Of course, Frank's job was not to watch Dewey, but the people spying on him – if there were any. He clicked "pause", and Dewey's virtual character froze half way through a death-defying leap into the void.

From the virtual menu Frank found the "Identify persons" function, and began to check who started the week with Dewey.

The first was a woman, probably Dewey's girlfriend at the time, sleeping in the main bedroom. Frank wondered why it was that a man with so much money had a preference for ugly women. In his report he simply wrote "girlfriend". The system seemed to know who she was, because it added "(Joelene Smythe)". That meant that she was on the company files, probably because security had thoroughly investigated her previously.

Frank clicked "next" and the screen showed Dewey's butler sleeping in front of the late-night show ("Talk Trash with Nate McNiell"). The cook was asleep in bed. The cleaning lady was also asleep in bed, and the gardener's wife was sitting in a rocking chair, groggily breastfeeding a baby.

The machine also found a cat cautiously examining a rather nervous frog. Clearly a cat is a special kind of person.

Frank checked around the garden, and had a look outside the walls. He sailed along the quiet street, looking for any sign of activity. There was nobody present, except for the cat, which somehow managed to be in two places at the same time. The only suspicious item at the start of the week was an unmarked black van with darkened windows, parked under a street light just in sight of Dewey's main gate.

Frank had a look inside the van. There would, of course, be the obligatory monitors and electronic equipment. He was a little bit taken aback to discover that it was empty, apart from some piping, bits of electrical cable, and a collection of worn wrenches. It

looked as if it was used by a plumber, rather than any kind of spy agency.

Clicking “Exit”, he made a note for his report. It wouldn't do to leave out the fact that a neighbourhood plumber had parked his van outside. Security was always interested in details like this, and would dutifully tag the car, in case it turned up somewhere else.

Back in the TV room Dewey’s character remained in suspended animation. In the absence of people manning listening posts in dark vans around the house, he would have to check the people that Dewey had contact with during the week. He touched Dewey with his left pinkie, which had the strange effect of making him flash in alternating blue and green. From the virtual menu, he chose “list direct contacts” and entered “1 day” as the duration. The machine began to build a list of all the people that Dewey had touched.

The first contact was the cat, which for reasons entirely unclear, still qualified as a person. As Dewey stumbled out of his entertainment room at twenty past three in the morning, he opened the linen cupboard, as if it was the door to his room. While he paused to work out the difference, the cat rubbed against his leg.

The following contact was the butler, who, at ten o’clock in the morning lightly touched Dewey on the shoulder, and then opened the curtains to allow light to flood into the main bedroom. After playing games all night, Dewey appeared to have some kind of hangover. The butler presented him with a bowl of pills and a glass of water. He gulped down the medication with a token sip of the water.

Frank chose the next entry on the list – the cook at eleven. In the kitchen, Dewey was peering over her shoulder like a naughty child as she was preparing a tray of choc-chip muffins. The look on her face showed she didn’t enjoy the attention, and would have gladly done something rash if her job description didn’t include being nice to the boss.

The list didn’t have many people on it. After the cook, there was a newspaper boy, who hand-delivered a

newspaper to Dewey. On receiving the newspaper, Dewey glanced at the headline, “Search for Life Moves to Pluto!” and passed it to his butler. Dewey didn’t meet anyone else until 4 o’clock in the evening, when a crowd of people began to arrive for a party. Even then, it was an hour before he welcomed the guests. He was quite reticent in shaking hands, so Frank’s list of physical contacts was relatively short.

“Hold on just a minute,” said Frank. “Where’s the girlfriend?”

Frank scanned over his list. “Joelene, where are you...” At three minutes past eight in the evening, during some rather noisy dancing, Joelene brushed past Dewey, almost ignoring him completely. Not much of a personal contact. So she was there at the party. What had she been doing all day?

Frank selected Joelene brushing past Dewey at eight o’clock. He turned the clock back to 5:00AM, and had a look what the lady had been up to.

At 5:00AM, Joelene was asleep in bed with Dewey. Not really “with” – he was sprawled on one side of the bed and she was almost falling off the other. She stirred slightly.

At 5:30AM, Joelene had got up, and had just finished pulling on a tracksuit. She rinsed her face, and examined it closely in the mirror. Maybe she wasn't irredeemably ugly.

At 6:00AM, she was driving down the driveway of the Alex Dewey mansion in a small red car. She had chosen a different tracksuit in the interim. As her little red car entered the road outside the property, she narrowly avoided a serious accident with a black van with darkened windows, which was driving past at high speed, just over the middle line of the road.

At 6:30AM, Joelene was running on the spot with a group of sweating women. The instructor shouted “Two three four! Lift those legs.” Joelene wiped her forehead with a towel.

At 7:00AM, Jolene was in a locker room, and had just finished butonning up her blouse. As she stood up to

go, Frank's hand hovered above rewind briefly. "Bad Frank!" he scolded. He didn't rewind.

At 7:30AM, Joelene's little red car was parked in a stream of cars on a three-lane highway. The cars occasionally inched forward in low gear. She was relaxed, and peering curiously out of the window at the driver of an expensive blue car in the next lane. He seemed to believe that by driving within half a meter of the car in front of him he would get to his destination faster.

At 8:00AM, Joelene was still in traffic. She had reached the scene of an accident, and was stretching her neck to see what had happened. The driver of an expensive blue car appeared to have driven into the back of a black van with darkened windows. The blue car was in a pretty poor shape. The van looked fine. The driver of the blue car was exchanging uncivil words with the driver of the van.

At 8:30AM, Joelene was sitting in a corporate waiting room, flipping through a magazine. A headline in the magazine promised, "Microsoft™ Accounting™ Promises Linux Performance BOOST."

At 9:00AM, Joelene was sitting in a chair in front of a corporate desk. The young man at the desk was listening to her say, "...don't like him at all. He's really into his games though. You should be able to get to Dewey if you ..."

At 9:30AM, Joelene was having an intimate cup of tea with another man. "...must be one of the worst I've ever had to do," she was saying. "The guy is so absolutely boring and arrogant, even if he is stinking rich. I can't possibly stay for the longer term – I'd really like to leave this assignment if I can hand over to Allen ..."

Frank stopped the tape. Clearly there was something fishy about this "girlfriend" which the company security had failed to find out. Who was the "Allen" though? Frank rewound to 8:57AM, and pressed play.

Frank and Joelene walked into the office.

"Hello John," said Joelene.

“Hello John,” said Frank (because it is rude to ignore even a virtual person.)

“Hello Joelene,” said John. “I’m sorry you had to wait, but I had to cancel a couple of things first…”

“No, thank you for agreeing to review my case,” said Joelene.

“I understand you’re not happy with your assignment,” said John.

Joelene gave a wry smile. “Not happy is a mild way of putting it,” she said. “I just hope I’ll be able to hand over to you. You know I can’t simply walk away from an assignment.”

“Isn’t Dewey quite bright?” asked John?

“Well, for all I know he could be, but I have yet to see any sign of this brightness. He’s on too many strange drugs. He's just ... yuck. I don’t like him at all. He’s really into his games though. You should be able to get to Dewey if you can get him to come and try some of the new stuff you have.”

At this point, the machine suddenly made some connection and hung a virtual banner above John’s head that said (in capital letters, because it was important, or something):

“JOHN ALLEN, VICE PRESIDENT FOR INTERACTIVE GAMING, MICROSOFT CORPORATION”

“That’s nice to know,” said Frank, wondering why Microsoft was spying on Dewey.

“I’ve made a list of the hardware and software he uses,” said Joelene, passing a sheaf of paper to John. “I’ve given estimates for the number of hours he spends on each system so that you can see what he considers important.”

John Allen examined the papers carefully. “You’ve really been quite thorough here. I have to apologise that I always underestimated you.”

Joelene smiled. It was quite a sweet smile. Frank decided he liked her. Equally quickly he decided she was probably not his type of girl.

“How do we meet?” asked Allen.

“There’s a party tonight. Our other inside man Peter will take you along as a friend,” said Joelene. “He’ll call you at twelve hundred. You’ll need to get some casual clothes.”

“Who’s Peter?” asked Allen.

“Someone for my report,” commented Frank.

“He’s bringing the drinks. It’s a long story. Suffice it to say, if you look a little tipsy, you’ll get on great with Dewey.”

“Okay, I’ll take over this evening,” said Allen, standing up. “You don’t have to worry about anything. You’re a real asset, and we don’t want to put you under undue stress.”

“Just remember,” said Joelene, also standing up, “they might pick this up in two years time, so you’ll have to move relatively quickly.”

“Indeed we might,” agreed Frank.

“We always move quickly,” said Allen. “That’s our competitive advantage.”

They laughed as Allen held open the door for her. Frank didn’t know whether to stay or to leave with Joelene, so he pressed “Stop”.

Frank scanned through his list of Alex Dewey’s contacts. At 7:52PM, he had contacted John Allen. Also at 8:41PM, 8:55PM and ... 11:51PM. It probably went on the next day.

He clicked on the contact at 11:51PM. Allen and Dewey jostled each other as their virtual yachts made a tight turn around a buoy. They both struggled frantically with the controls. Allen's yacht seemed to have sprung a leak and sank magnificently out of sight. Dewey seemed truly happy.

“You know, Alex,” said Allen, “if you sink my real yacht, I’ll throw you overboard to the crocodiles.”

“I’d just have to frag you with my BFG,” replied Dewey to his new friend. He seemed to be truly happy – possibly for the first time in his life, even though it failed to improve the quality of his dialogue.

Frank compiled a gripping report.

7 From Russia With Love

FRANK sat on a bench in the large lecture hall with the rest of his class. Miss Voleikov was already there, writing letters in the Cyrillic alphabet on the board. The class was sitting quietly waiting for the lecture to start, with the men staring at her as politely as the dreaded demerits and her turned back would allow.

At exactly ten seconds past the hour, Miss Voleikov turned around, "Dobrijen," she greeted the class, getting a chorus of indistinct accented Russian in return.

"Today," she began in Russian, "we will be looking at idiomatic comparisons and their meaning. As cold as ..."

"Vladivostok," offered a helpful voice from the back.

Miss Voleikov's smile lit up the lecture hall. Russian was quite hard for the students. For most of them it was their third or fourth language. For Frank it was his fifth, but he would quite happily have taken it from Miss Voleikov if it was his tenth. He wondered what her first name was....

Miss Voleikov wasn't a wonderful Russian teacher, but it didn't matter, because the students loved her. Frank was fascinated by his Russian investigations, just because of the vague association with her. Russian held a charm not shared by the Turkic languages (Rajaf Mohain) or French (Pierre de la Whatshisname).

Towards the end of Frank's Russian daydream, which others experienced as a lecture, the door opened. Miss Voleikov's sweet voice stopped in mid sentence, and the entire class rose to their feet.

"Mr Cheatham," said Miss Voleikov, in her slightly stilted English, "welcome to Russian 201."

“Yes, yes,” said Mr Cheatham as Miss Voleikov vacated the lectern to make space for his grumpy frame. Mr Cheatham walked up to the lectern to address the class. He was dressed in a suit, and accompanied by three bodyguards and five other people who looked official but had no clear reason for being with him – probably his required sycophants.

“As you all know, we are entering our 17th year of operation,” he began sternly. “You are our 12th third year class, and we are expecting great things from you.” The class listened attentively. As chief executive officer of the company, he was their employer, a fact which tended to make up for what was lacking in his stage presence.

“When we started this company,” he continued, “we had nothing but a small research grant and a big idea.” The class knew the story, but were mindful of the steely eyed stare of Mr Cheatham’s bodyguards, who had been known to eject students from the campus and into hospital for rolling their eyes. The class listened politely.

“We worked day and night to build the machine you are all using now. I remember when Al Dewey wrote the last line of code. In the beginning, we left those old computers processing histrionics for hours before we got that first fuzzy photograph from the Gulf War. After we finished improving it, we could see the results as they happened. Those were the good days.”

He paused. The class continued to listen politely, waiting for the next exciting part of that well-worn story. Perhaps he would tell the same joke too?

“Compared to what we did back then, you guys have it easy. Ever since Alex Dewey built that three dimensional real time virtual interface it’s all been so easy. So, that’s what I’m saying. I really want you to understand this. It’s important that you remember what a great contribution we made to the company. Just remember that the machine is all about celebrating history. You are very fortunate that you were chosen to operate it.”

Mr Cheatham adopted that serious look that he had learned in his previous life as a lawyer. “We are going to be exploring some new markets in the near future. You all need to sign the revised restraint of trade and secrecy agreements which Miss Coovadia will hand out. We are fortunate to have at our disposal an incredibly powerful machine. And since you have such a powerful resource at your fingertips, it is important that your first loyalty is to the company, not to any notion of right or wrong or even fair play. We want you to be even-handed operators who bear the company’s future in mind firstly and foremostly. And the company’s future is brighter than our past.” He almost smiled.

The class applauded, politely. Frank glanced over at Gerald, who was glancing in his direction. Gerald, very discreetly, passed a note to him, bearing an unenthusiastic “Yipee”.

“That’s all.” Without a goodbye, Mr Cheatham and his retinue, excluding the bearer of legal documents, left the lecture theatre.

Miss Coovadia began to hand out the revised documents – each one of them a small booklet, the product of an over-active legal mind.

Someone raised a hand, “Ma’am, can you please explain, what is different about the new contract?”

Miss Coovadia placed a beautifully manicured hand on her hip and pulled a rather unpleasant face. “The contract has been changed to make it possible for the company to pursue new fields of work,” she explained, repeating the bland explanation offered by Mr Cheatham. “The agreement you signed was drawn up fifteen years ago. We can’t live in the past like that. We need to accommodate new conditions and customers.”

“Yes ma’am,” said the same student, “but what has actually changed in the contract?”

“I don’t know.” In the most annoying voice one could imagine, she whined, “Quite honestly, I don’t care what you do with it. If you don’t like the new agreement, you

can always resign. You need the company more than the company needs you.”

Frank was thinking again. He skimmed through the masses of legal jargon to which he was about to sign his life away. Domicilium et citandi, termination, penalties, non-revocation. He didn’t like being pushed around. Maybe his mother was right after all.

8

Lost On The Bosphorous

THE COMPANY aimed to train machine operators to be able to handle difficult enquiries efficiently. Students had to work through a batch of classical queries and find the answers.

During study time students were given free reign to work with the machine as they saw fit. During work time, conditions were tightly controlled, and deadlines had to be met.

The first year assignments were easy – insurance reports, legal findings of fact. All that had to be done was to find the event, and produce a viewable tape.

In the second year, the circumstances became harder. Assignments involved finding missing persons, finding out whodunnit in mysterious circumstances. Usually the trick was to find some relevant detail hidden in a stack of irrelevant information. If a person died of poisoning, the student would have to find out how the poison was administered, and when. This turned out to be especially difficult in the case of a slow-acting agent. One of Frank's failed missions was to find who had put the lump of uranium in the bed of the late head of the League of Concerned Nations. By the time it was discovered, the damage had been done, and the five year window had passed.

In the third year, Frank's projects involved finding out why things happened. Usually this was government work – spying on other governments, and (more often) on their own citizens and opposition parties. What really caused the Lima Riots? Why did William Kennedy resign?

The lecturers thought it was funny to provide their students with impossible and open-ended assignments.

Frank's assignment was to search for the actual author of the Knooza worm which had finally blasted the surviving Microsoft Windows computers off the Internet.

Although the machine was quite good at showing human interactions, knowing what a computer was doing at any given time was quite a feat. What you read on the screen at any given time was about as much as you could do. You could try to monitor network traffic, but analysing it was fraught with difficulties. The really good hackers who never got found out made sure that their computers did the dirty work while they themselves were tucked up in their beds and fast asleep. There was usually a way though – finding the right computer to investigate, or the age-old trick of following the money.

Frank had been working on the assignment for three hours already. It wasn't easy. Six months after the demise of the unfortunate computers, a twenty three year old Turkish student, Mahmut Circyk was imprisoned for the crime. He died under mysterious circumstances in jail within three months, and the case never went to trial.

Frank had started with Mahmut Circyk's time in prison in Istanbul – on a hunch that the police investigation would not tell him what he needed to know (otherwise, why would the lecturers choose this case?). He had discovered what killed him – the conditions in the Turkish prison were not exactly healthy. He died along with a number of other inmates, in an outbreak of pneumonia caused by systematic exposure and malnutrition.

In the two hours Frank had spent reviewing Mr Circyk's unpleasant prison experience, he had only managed to discover that his own grasp of the Turkish language was passable, but by no means excellent. His only visitor was a Russian government agent, who spent a complete five minutes establishing that Mr Circyk did not speak Russian or broken English, and then left. Frank made a note to trace him.

Mr Circyk had not been poisoned. He had not suffered unusual trauma. There was no apparent instruction for his special neglect. It was a case of common neglect. Frank had also learned that prison life is mind-numbingly dull. The one useful fact that Frank had learned, which he had dutifully jotted down for his report, was that Circyk would not talk to anyone who asked him about anything technical. It wasn't even clear that he was ever in possession of a computer. This probably meant that he was protecting someone, and an excellent reason for the lecturers to choose the case.

In the virtual machine, Frank stood next to the dying Mr Circyk in the prison infirmary. He realised that there wasn't really much to learn from Circyk's time in prison, and he should look at what he did that got him into prison. This meant going back three months, more or less to the limit of the machine.

Frank selected "Exit", and was sitting at the terminal in his cubicle again. He would go three months back, same location, and find where Circyk was imprisoned, and then work back from there. The date of his death was 5 February 2117 – the year Frank had joined the company.

To choose the day of imprisonment, he had to work out how many days that was from today and type that in. Frank knew enough about computer science to know that computers can add and subtract perfectly well. Why should he do the arithmetic himself? Perhaps he could type in a sum for the date he wanted, rather than the date itself? Frank typed '5 February 17 -3 months' where he should have entered the years, and hit "Go".

An error box appeared, proclaiming "Bad format".

"Blasted interface," said Frank, "you can't just do what I tell you to do, can you?" He swung his chair around and stood up to try and get some air into his embattled brain. The Knooza virus had reformatted the ill-fated Microsoft Windows computers with SCO Unix

as a parting joke. Frank was pretty close to doing the same to his own terminal.

"I'm sorry, I'll read that again," said Frank, imitating the metaphorical newsreader. "Entschuldingen sie bitte, wir haben ein technishe problem," he scolded the terminal and himself in German.

Frank sat down again, and looked back at the terminal. Although it had showed an error message, it had done something in response to his instructions. The view screen was entitled "Istanbul, Turkey". Strangely, the prison was missing, as was the subject. On the screen was a rather busy concourse, filled with actors performing some kind of scene from a movie. Was Mr Circyk just an actor, playing a part to his death?

Frank selected "Enter" to see what the suddenly elusive Mr Circyk was up to.

Frank stood on the medieval cobblestone concourse. Around him walked people dressed in eastern robes. A wagon stacked with empty clay pots, drawn by two horses trundled towards him. Two peasant looking characters walked past him, and Frank caught some phrases of an incomprehensible dialect of Italian.

"Where's the director?" asked Frank, half expecting to find a film crew standing behind him.

The wagon had stopped next to a man sitting at a table, guarded by two men dressed as soldiers. A clerk inspected some document that was handed to him, and indicated something to one of the soldiers. The wagon driver produced a coin, and threw it on the table. Frank walked over and had a look at the crude looking coin that the wagon driver had handed to the clerk. The face on the coin was not familiar, but the inscription rang a bell.

The inscription read "AVGVSTVS" – Augustus. Who was that again? As the second soldier reached out a hand and hit the wagon driver threateningly on his head, Frank drew in a long breath and hit pause, stifling the wagon driver in mid yelp.

“Whoa,” said Frank. He glanced at, and then looked at his virtual watch. It read “05/11/0018, 09:32am, Istanbul, Turkey”.

It wasn’t possible. 2118 was okay, but 0018 was impossible. The machine could not show scenes beyond five years back. In first year he was taught that there was a fundamental physics issue that caused accuracy beyond five years to become entirely non-existent. There was no way to see what he was seeing ... unless ... unless ...

Frank hit “Exit”.

What was going on? Frank looked at the date he had entered - it was “05 February 17 -3 months”. The front end machine must have thought he meant five days ago, but the part of the machine that did the work had its own idea of what the date was - 17AD - seventeen with two zeros in front. It had showed him a clear picture of over two thousand years back.

Frank suddenly felt guilty, like a little child who has stolen cookies. He whipped out a storage file, and copied the last session onto it for ... well, he wasn’t quite sure of the reason. He erased the session off the system and turned the terminal off.

Frank almost collapsed on the ground when he heard a voice behind him.

“Hi Frank,” said the voice.

Flustered, Frank turned around, going slightly red.

“What’s up Frank?” asked Joe. “You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Er, yes, no, nothing,” said Frank, convincing as ever.

“Tough assignment, I see. I’ve finished my assignments for the afternoon – would you be interested in joining me at the library?” asked the ever friendly Joe, strangely recovered from being metaphorically beaten up by Frank. He probably still wanted to save Frank’s lost soul.

“Er, I’m not quite finished yet,” replied Frank.

“Okay, I just thought I’d ask, since I saw you have turned your terminal off,” said Joe.

Had he seen?

"I'm ... just taking a bit of a break," lied Frank, badly.

"Okay, whatever – I'll see you around then," said Joe. He walked towards the exit without any signs of suspicion.

Frank didn't know what to do. He felt like a child with a new toy. The only problem was that the new toy seemed to be some kind of explosive device. He sat for a minute or two, pondering. He got up to leave, took one step away, and then sat down. He got up again, and sat down again. He looked at the terminal thoughtfully, and then turned it on.

Frank smiled like a child that has just figured out how to turn a light on, and took out a blank media device. On the label he wrote, "History of the World" – a rather pretentious title maybe. He paused, then added the words "Cup Soccer", just for safety.

"Let's start at the very beginning," he said. "That's very good place to start." In the location field he quickly entered some coordinates. He adjusted the date. The machine complained "format error". Ignoring the error, he clicked "enter".

Frank stood in a hospital room next to a woman who was in labour. She was having a rather painful contraction. Next to Frank stood ... Frank. Frank had a look at his worried looking mirror image, and wondered briefly if the machine had malfunctioned. "You know dad, I never realised I looked so much like you," he said.

Frank's dad tried to massage his mother's back. "Lower!" shouted Frank's mother. Thankfully the contraction passed.

"I can't take it," she cried. Frank's dad looked worried. He seemed to be struggling a little himself.

A midwife came and examined a graph that a monitoring computer was printing. She tore it off and went and showed it to the other midwife. "Yes," said the second one, "that's foetal distress. You don't want to take any risks."

“Does it help if I press here?” said Frank’s father, and it clearly didn’t because his mother let out a great cry of pain.

“We’ll have to do a caesarian,” said the midwife to Frank’s father. “It’s not ideal, but it’s best for the baby. We’ll operate at 10:30.” Frank’s father gave the blank look of a person who has been awake for a full day.

Frank clicked fast forward to 10:30.

At 10:30 Frank’s father was holding the hand of his remarkably relaxed mother. “Have they started yet?” she asked.

Frank had a look, and suddenly felt rather squeamish. The nurses were mopping up copious amounts of blood. The doctor reached into the hole she had cut, and wrestled with the monster inside. The outside of the stomach swayed dangerously to the side as the great battle between the doctor and the baby progressed. The doctor was bigger, and won fairly quickly. She pulled out the head of a particularly ugly infant. In an instant she had the rest of the baby and the placenta out, and had cut the cord.

“It’s a boy!” said the doctor, putting the child on his mother's breast.

“You're beautiful!” said the mother.

“Congratulations on terminating your pregnancy,” said Frank’s father. The doctor looked shocked, but Frank’s mother caught the joke and smiled weakly. She was more excited about the baby than the joke. She was so excited she went to sleep. The anaesthetist examined his patient and then Frank’s father, trying to sum him up. The paediatrician took the baby from his sleeping mother and weighed him, and then put him on a heated bed. A midwife expertly zapped a disposable nappy onto him.

Frank looked at the baby. “You’re an ugly kid,” he said.

Frank’s father, deciding that a sleeping wife was not a long term problem, walked over to the baby, and said, “Hello Frank.” At that stage young Frank was not in the mood for conversation, and he squirmed and went to

sleep. Frank's dad hovered around the heated bed where the paediatrician had put Frank down, unsure what he should do.

"Here you go," said the midwife, picking up the baby and passing him to the father. The baby began to cry. "He's fine, you can hold him."

"Hello Frank," said his father. "I'll be your daddy today." The baby stopped crying as his father rocked him. "You're a fine young man little Frank." He smiled. "We're going to teach you to follow Jesus we are. And I think you're going to change the world." The baby appeared to be as happy with this idea as any other.

Frank, standing next to his father and himself, was a little unsure about whether he shared his father's enthusiasm for his being born.

"Oh well," sighed Frank, choosing "Save and Exit" from the virtual menu. He copied the session to his "History of the World" media device, and then erased it from the terminal.

"Okay, I've looked out for number one. What great mystery shall I solve next?" mused Frank. "Kennedy," he replied to himself.

When he was a teenager, Frank went through a brief stage of absorbing every reliable and unreliable source of information about the assassination of JF Kennedy. He had seen the movies (all five of them), and vacillated between six different opinions about what actually happened, until finally Sarah disrupted his thinking for six months. When he came to his senses and realised that she was a fruitcake he forgot Kennedy and got interested in fireworks instead, much to his family and the fire department's collective distress.

In the location field of the front end, he entered, "Dallas, Texas, Kennedy". He clicked "Search" and, without a noticeable delay, the machine returned the customary list of incorrect responses, "Dallas (city of), Texas (state of), Kennedy International Airport" and the entry he was looking for, "Kennedy Memorial, Dallas, Texas". Frank clicked enter.

Frank stood in the middle of a tarred street. Opposite him was a building labelled “Texas Schoolbook Depository”. The buildings had an old style look about them. Something was not quite right. Frank checked his virtual watch. The virtual watch said the year was 2115, even though the scene was clearly from the 1960’s. Was this another problem with the machine’s code?

As Frank was pondering the question, he was knocked down by a a 2115 Toyota Prius VII. Frank stood up and dusted himself off, in a virtual kind of way. This is why he loved the machine. Playing chicken against virtual cars was a lot of fun, and not a health risk.

Frank walked over to the Texas Schoolbook Depository, and spotted a sign on the door that said, “Kennedy Memorial Museum”. Perhaps he was in the right place and time after all. Without paying the entrance fee, Frank went in, and read a plaque that said, “By order of the city fathers, no alterations have been made to this building and its precincts since the assassination of President John F Kennedy on 22 November 1963, 12:30am, CST.”

Frank went back outside. He called up a virtual keyboard and adjusted the virtual date. “Format error,” complained a computerised voice – but the date changed anyway.

A bush planted next to the road on a grassy knoll moved by two metres, and a crowd of people appeared by the side of the road, patiently waiting for someone to come along, waving flags.

Frank got knocked over by an old style police motorcycle. He got up. He was a little early for the show. He flew up the road, between the crowds, and found the black open top car containing Mr and Mrs Kennedy and two uptight-looking security men. Careful to avoid being run over again, he jumped on, and sat on the back of the car looking at the receding crowd.

“Lee Harvey Oswald, where are you?” said Frank, as the car slowly wound its way through the crowd. The

crowds waved. Frank waved back, and clicked fast forward. The car sped up, and reached the Texas Schoolbook Depository in a very short time. Frank clicked play, and the car slowed down to a more sedate pace.

A shot rang out, and the car jerked to a halt. The driver looked around to see what had happened. Kennedy had slumped forward unnaturally. There was another shot, which struck Kennedy in the head. It was messy.

Frank rewound by 1 second and paused the machine. He looked up at the building which was to become the museum. On the fourth floor was a man taking aim with a rifle. Frank selected "save current position" from the menu so that he could return to this point.

Frank floated gently towards and then through the window, and pressed play. Lee Harvey Oswald fired five more shots, and then dropped the rifle. He ran for the door. Frank followed him out.

Oswald walked quickly down the stairs. He was on his way down from the second floor landing when a policeman ran into him.

"Not so fast!" said the policeman, grabbing him around his chest and wrestling him to the floor.

Behind the policeman followed a man in a suit. The man in the suit told the policeman, "No, that's Lee Oswald – he works here." The policeman let him go, and both he and the man in the suit raced up the stairs to find the assassin.

Oswald continued down the stairs, a little more slowly, with Frank following.

Oswald reached the ground floor and bought a can of cool drink from a vending machine. Taking a sip, he headed out of the door, spilling a little of the drink on the floor as he went.

"Okay," said Frank, "you did it. Now let's see if you did it alone."

From the virtual menu, Frank chose, "Restore saved location", and in an instant he sat again on the back of the Kennedy's car. While the rest of the scene froze,

Frank climbed off the car and walked over the grassy knoll. It was rumoured that a second person took pot shots from here.

Frank saw a man with a complex device, that he surmised must be a 16mm movie camera, recording the famous amateur shot of what happened. He had a very good point of view. Most of the crowd was concentrated around the road. Here and there a few people had shown up to see a real live president – although in this particular case, the experience was unprecedentedly short lived.

There was no sign of anyone brandishing any kind of weapon. Frank clicked play. As shots rang out, the crowd initially stood as if watching fireworks. After the third shot, people began to scream and run. Frank looked carefully for the rumoured second shooter. Nothing happened on the grassy knoll except that people ran away. Nobody seemed to have any presence of mind except the camera man, and he probably didn't realise what was going on.

Frank supermanned up to the window from which Lee Harvey Oswald was shooting. Oswald finished shooting, dropped the rifle, and ran for the door. Frank tagged him and clicked fast forward. Things began to happen very fast.

Oswald ran down the stairs, briefly being caught by the policeman, bought a drink, spilled it, headed out the door, banged rapidly on the door of a trolley bus, bought a ticket, sat down, got off the bus, was approached by a policeman, whom he shot a number of times, headed into a theatre, sat down, and was cornered by a policeman who disarmed him, stuffed him into a squad car, took him to the police cells and locked him up. A crowd of people flitted into and out of his cell, probing at high speed for information, he was taken into a court building, and back to the cells. A man with a TV camera appeared, someone shot him, his body was carried and put down, covered with a blanket... Frank clicked pause, and rewind.

As Oswald sprang back to life, he selected the man who shot him – Jack Ruby. The one question which had bothered investigators was that Ruby appeared to be lying when he said that he had never met Oswald until he shot him dead.

Using the virtual menu, Frank constructed a complex query. The machine was to plot a graph (on a logarithmic scale) of how close Lee Harvey Oswald had been to Jack Ruby.

The machine began to plot its graph. Frank sat back and watched. What if the two did know each other, but had only exchanged letters, and telephone calls? Oh well, it wasn't that serious. Frank was actually only mildly interested. He hadn't thought about the Kennedy assassination since he was a teenager.

When Ruby shot Oswald, he had approached within one metre. Before this, Oswald and Ruby had never approached within ... three kilometres of each other. It was a little surprising – Frank had really expected some kind of conspiracy there.

As the graph went further back in time, the distance between Ruby and Oswald grew to ten thousand kilometres. Frank paused the calculation, and positioned the cross-hair cursor over part of the graph. The pop-up information said that Ruby was in South Dakota, while Oswald was in St Petersburg, Russia (of course, it had been Leningrad back then, but the machine only knew the 2118 state of the world).

For curiosity, Frank selected Oswald in Russia. He clicked enter.

Frank stood next to Oswald in a drab and sparsely furnished apartment. Oswald was sitting on a wooden chair and staring in a blank and unfocussed manner at an empty bottle of Vodka. He looked utterly miserable. Not even the thought of Miss Voleikov could add cheer to the sad picture.

"You poor sod," remarked Frank, remembering that he had read about the time Oswald spent in the USSR, before getting up to mischief in the USA. He married

twice, and although he took his second wife back to the USA with him, he didn't bother to take care of her.

Frank clicked, "Save Session" and "Exit". "No conspiracy," he declared, "case closed."

Frank rocked back in his chair. Where to next?

"Galileo," he said. "Let's see if he really did do that experiment of dropping cannon balls from the tower of Pisa in front of the whole university." If the machine could do 17AD by mistake, it could probably do the sixteenth century without breaking a sweat.

Frank directed the machine to the modern city of Pisa. He opened up the street map, and selected the ruins of the leaning tower. He clicked enter.

Frank stood on a heap of rubble, the once impressive leaning tower of Pisa. The virtual date was 2118. He walked down to a sign, which said, in Italian, English and a good few other languages,

"The Leaning Tower of Pisa, 1174 - 2116. Construction on the original tower of Pisa was begun in 1174. When the tower started to lean during construction, the top three floors were added at an angle to compensate. Galileo (1564-1642) is said to have demonstrated his theory of gravitational acceleration from this tower while a student at the University of Pisa. The tower fell in 2116, along with billionaire Georges de Blau, who paid for the privilege of looking over the edge in more than one way."

The sign was illustrated with a picture of the tower in its former glory, and the faces of Galielo and the ill-fated billionaire tourist. Frank zoomed in on the picture of Galileo and chose "select sample".

Frank fiddled with the date entry, and the machine complained "Format error", and then obligingly showed the tower at 12h00 on 15 June 1614, when Galileo was around forty years old. Milling around the base of the tower, quite oblivious to the clear danger of it falling on them, were people selling vegetables and flowers.

Frank selected "Locate visual match" from the virtual menu. If Galileo was in town, and if the picture

on the sign was any good, the machine would find him (sooner or later).

While the machine searched for Mr Galileo, Frank did the Superman trick and flew to the top of the tower. He marked off a good area for dropping cannon balls using his virtual marker pen. After marking off the area, Frank began to idly inscribe his name in virtual graffiti on the parapet wall of the tower.

“Subject located!” announced the machine, whipping Frank away from his work with the virtual marker.

In a large room, resembling a dining room, Galileo was standing behind a podium, preaching an impassioned Italian sermon to a group of eleven younger men (his disciples, no doubt). The subject of the sermon was not clear, but the text appeared to be a collection of scribbled notes, rather than the Bible. Each man listened carefully, and scrawled his own notes with impeccable care. Frank wondered at how standards of handwriting had changed over the years. It was just as well Gutenberg had invented the press, otherwise we wouldn’t have known anything at all about the past.

Frank clicked pause, and selected Galileo, interrupting him as he was turning a page.

From the virtual menu, Frank selected a sub-sub menu of an almost-hidden menu option. The machine responded, “Searching for intersection of selection item and virtual marker set.”

As the machine was searching, it flashed random scenes from Galileo’s life. The man appeared to be spectacularly boring. He read lots of books. He slept. He got up early and prayed. He wrote a lot. He appeared to walk to get to wherever he was going. But he did not visit the tower. In particular, he did not visit Frank’s marked area. The machine reached and passed 1642, leaving Frank looking at Galileo’s grave with the seasons flashing by.

“Wait a bit,” said Frank, largely to himself, “we’re going the wrong way.”. From the virtual menu he selected, “Repeat last search; reverse”. Galileo rose

from the dead and looked increasingly healthy, if a little backward. In no time, he grew younger and younger. On reaching June 1590 the machine announced, “Set intersection found,” and paused.

It was five o’clock in the morning. Galileo was standing at the top of the leaning tower of Pisa. At the bottom of the tower stood Frank and two men, who were examining two canon balls. The men were carefully comparing their weights and shaking their heads. Frank clicked “record”.

The men put the cannon balls back down on the ground and walked away from them backwards. They looked at them in astonishment, as both balls simultaneously lifted off the ground and flew precisely to the top of the tower parapet, where a slightly younger Galileo was dropping them from.

“Great!” said Frank. “He did it – well, at least once, and the University of Pisa student body wasn’t there for the last time. That’s good enough for the tape.”

Frank clicked exit, and saved his work. He looked around the terminal hall. It seemed unusually quiet. Frank stretched, and then thought of how incredibly clever he was to outwit the silly check in the machine. As he relaxed, he happened to glance at his watch.

“Oh blast!” Turning off his terminal with a deft stab at the switch he grabbed his bag and ran for his computer science lecture.

* * * * *

Rather than taking notes, Frank was drawing abstract figures on his notepad.

“In the twentieth century,” Mr Stewart was saying, as if it was interesting, “there was something of a debate in computer science circles between two schools of thought. The question was what a responsible person should do if they come across a security problem in a computer system.”

Frank looked up from his doodle, and looked at his classmates seated in the lecture hall. They would be so jealous if they just knew what he knew.

"In the twentieth century, when you discovered a security problem with your systems, you reported it to your software distributor, who would promise to fix it. However, in the next release, the problem would still be there."

The best thing would be to let the company bosses know that he had found a problem. Cheatham would give him an award for being the most valuable third year student. Dewey would invite him for dinner, and Howe would ask him to comment on the physics of two thousand year old histrionics. Yeah right. Everyone loves a wise guy.

"As a result of this approach by the vendors, customers started to publish their findings, rather than reporting them privately to the vendor. The idea of this approach, known as full disclosure, is that the vendor is embarrassed into fixing the problems."

Perhaps the right thing to do would be to tell everyone. Tell the students, the lecturers, mom, dad and the pet cat, Cindy. Frank would be famous. He would be interviewed on TV, and invited to be an expert guest on talk shows. And Cheatham would have his head on a plate for breach of contract.

"There was a small abortive attempt at a compromise solution, called responsible disclosure. The idea was that someone who discovered a security problem would give the vendor 30 days to fix it, and then publish the details. The vendor thus had time to develop the patch, while the customer could be assured that the problem would be addressed."

Maybe it would be better to forget about the whole thing. Someone else would sort it out. By fiddling with the machine he would get himself into deep trouble. If the security people picked up what he was up to, he would be out on his ear.

"Since the passing of the security disclosure liability laws, it has become quite uncommon for vendors to

receive security information from their customers. The vendors say that the lower reporting is a sign that the modern software is more secure than older systems were. Critics of this policy say that this means that there are simply more security problems being suppressed."

It would be better not to tell anyone. He would just get into trouble. Of course, that didn't mean he had to forget about it. He just had to be careful.

9 Idiot Proof

While Frank's unfinished assignments languished on his to-do list, he sat at his terminal, carefully examining green text. The language was Java, an ancient computer language that had been devised at the turn of the twenty-first century for making coffee or something. A decompiler had helpfully turned the program his terminal was running into code which he could edit. After deciphering at the code for a good half an hour, Frank found the code he had suspected was there.

"Hey little range check," said Frank, in the friendly tone of voice used for speaking to puppies and little children. "What are you doing here?" He had found a paragraph in the code which read:

```
if (year > 5 || year < 2) {
gui.error("A number you have entered is not valid.") ;
}
```

A few deft keystrokes later and the check was a comment. It read:

```
// Naah ...
// if (year > 5 || year < 2) {
//   gui.error("A number you have entered is not valid.");
//}
```

This meant that the program would not check what the range of the year was. Frank compiled the program again, and the familiar terminal interface popped up. In the year field he entered "17". Without a complaint, the machine set the year to 2103, and showed the date and time display at the Greenwich observatory. A couple of tourists milled past. No need to mess around with those format errors any more.

Frank smiled that smile which is reserved for people who have acquired a new and useful skill, like learning to tie their own laces.

Contrary to his parents later expectations of him, Frank was going to be famous. “Great moments in history,” pontificated Frank, “should include important battles.” He reached for his History of the World (Cup Soccer) media device.

In the search bar he typed “Marathon, Greece”. The battle of Marathon had seen an epic stand-off between the Greeks and the Persians, with the mighty Persian empire losing for the first time of many times to come. There wasn’t any controversy about it, but it would be quite a spectacle, and well worth getting on the record.

The machine presented a particularly long list of matches for “Marathon”, including “London to Brighton Marathon”, which was hardly a place. On the second page of options was the exact match, “Marathon, Greece”. Of course, it would be too simple for the machine to put it on the first page.

It was 2118 again. Frank stood in the village of Marathon on the plain of Marathon. The first task was to find out where and when the battle had occurred. One way would be to find an English or Russian speaking Greek and ask him. However, since people in the past had already finished saying all the words they were going to say, the best way was to find a museum. Frank flew up the street, dodging Citroens and Peugeots, and found a sign saying “Marathon Museum.” That was probably for the English tourists. There was an equivalent Greek sign, but Frank didn’t read Greek.

Instead of using the door, for a change Frank flew through the wall of the museum. The virtual reality engine of the machine gave him a slight knock, but let him do it anyhow. Inside the museum was a display of how the athletic Athenians defeated the pompous Persians. A picture on the wall showed the famous first marathon runner. In a corner, postcards and marathon footwear were for sale.

A display board summarised the battle of Marathon, “On 2 August 414BC, the forces of Greece met the forces of Persia here on the plain of Marathon. This museum is situated on the site of the ancient battlefield.”

Frank did a calculation. “Hmm.. 2120 plus 414 ... that’s 2534 years ago.” He typed the number in the date field. The machine began counting back from 2120, all the way to the year zero, and on to the year -414, where it stopped.

Frank stood in the middle of the battlefield. The year showed as -414. It was more a field than anything else. There was no sign of any kind of battle. The summer grass waved gently in the wind. Frank looked all around. No sign of any activity.

“Oh, wait a bit,” said Frank. “There was never a year zero, but the machine thinks there was. I guess I’m actually in 415BC.”

He clicked “forward 12 months” and the year showed as “-413”. From nowhere thousands of men in ancient battle dress appeared. The grass was littered with bodies and stained with blood. Deadly arrows raced through the air. Men lunged at each other with spears and swords. The shouts of men charging were almost drowned out by the screams of the injured.

Frank flew off to the top of a hill which appeared to be a good vantage point.

The Persians seemed to be beating the Greeks in the centre of the battlefield.

Frank went forward by an hour. The Greeks had almost completely surrounded the Persians, despite being outnumbered. What had been the main battle was fast becoming irrelevant, with the Greeks making inroads into the Persian flanks.

Frank went fast forward by an hour. The Persians were in headlong retreat. The Greeks, now on the winning side, pursued them with savage determination, and cut them down from behind.

One particularly brave Persian stopped in his flight, turned around, and put up an incredible fight. He

wounded two Greek soldiers, but realised too late that his regiment had left him behind. An arrow painfully grazed his arm, and his wild reaction narrowly saved his head from being chopped off. Momentarily distracted, he did not notice a Greek approach from behind. He collapsed in a heap as the Greek thrust a spear through him.

"Ouch!" said Frank, "that must have hurt."

As fast as the six thousand could retreat, the one thousand Greeks were pressing the attack. Thousands lay dead and dying on the battlefield.

After recording the entire battle (which took only a minute), Frank saved his work and transferred it to his media device. He was really impressed with himself for such a major achievement.

"Hey, here's a thought," said Frank. "While we're going back, let's see if the world was ruled by Neandertals or Homo Erectus". He would have a look at exactly who was evolving into modern man.

From the virtual menu he choose "Repeat reverse by ..." and entered "36500 days" as the parameter. Frank did some mental arithmetic and corrected the number to account for leap years - 36525 days. That would go back by a hundred years at a time, and eventually dump him in prehistory, with either the huge Neanderthals or the midget Homo Erectus running the show in 10000 BC.

The pop-up box appeared, "Searching ..." it said, briefly, as the year advanced to "-513".

Frank saw a ten-second view of the plain of Marathon. The trees moved.

The year advanced to "-613". In Frank's ten second view a man happened to be walking across the plain carrying a leather bag over his shoulder.

Frank watched as the trees and shrubs moved around every ten seconds. For a few centuries the trees just moved around. Frank had been watching the trees move around for the best part of two minutes, and was about to speed things up when something interesting began to happen.

At “-1813” it was snowing, even though the season was summer. The ground was covered with a light layer of snow. Strange weather for summer.

In “-1913” it was still snowing, but harder.

In “-2013” the plain looked like the arctic. Frank checked his virtual GPS. He was (apparently) still on the plain of Marathon.

In “-2213” Frank was below ground initially, and the machine automatically adjusted and lifted him above ground. The plain was covered by a glacier. Frank began to wonder where the machine got its dates from. It appeared to have slipped into the ice-age of one hundred thousand years ago, even though the date shown was only four thousand years previously. Maybe he was stressing it too much?

The year “-2313” was even stranger. The ice that Frank had been looking at was gone, and the scene was tropical and summery. A herd of ... of ... what were those animals? A herd of brontosaurus was grazing on the grass of the plain. A large bird flew overhead. It appeared to be a ... pterodactyl. Frank didn’t know what to think, but only had ten seconds to do that before he was transported to -2413.

For the “year” -2413 Frank was standing on the shore of a lake surrounded by low hills. The virtual GPS still showed “Marathon”. The tropical vegetation was thick and healthy. The sound of birds could be heard. Frank didn’t see any animals.

Maybe the machine started skipping years if you went back too far. But skipping one hundred million years? That seemed rather difficult to understand.

The year -2513 was just as strange. The vegetation was rearranged, but was just as lush. Two children, one black and the other white, were swimming in the lake. Frank heard a woman call to them, and saw, standing in the doorway of a hut, a tall Brazilian looking woman with curly brown hair.

As the years flashed by, the lake remained more or less constant, and the vegetation remained just as lush. In the tropical forest Frank caught glimpses of Zebra,

Lion, a woolly Elephant and Tyrannosaurus Rex. He wondered what had happened between 2414BC and 2413BC to rearrange the scene so much. What were those dinosaurs about? Didn't the dinosaurs die out millions of years ago? And where did all the snow come from?

At the year -3813, things changed a little. The lake was there, but the tropical vegetation was missing. Here and there was a tree. There were no noticeable features. There were just shrubs and some grass.

At the year -3913, things changed even more. There was some grass, a few shrubs, but nothing else.

The counter window popped up as usual and headed towards -4013. At "-4003/10/23" the counter stopped. It was a little strange. The grass disappeared. The ground around the lake looked like a freshly ploughed field. Instead of the fifteen second delay that Frank had programmed, half a minute passed. Frank began to wonder if something was amiss. The counter grudgingly jumped to "-4003/10/22", and water in the lake disappeared.

"You rotten piece of junk!" shouted a voice from the cubicle right next to Frank. Frank jumped out of virtual reality, and nearly out of his blue socks.

"What's this!? My terminal's locked up!" shouted a voice from the far side of the room.

"Mine too! – hey – what's up with the machine?"

A chorus of very distressed voices rose from all over the building, replacing the quiet that had filled the air until them. The terminals of 240 students doing assignments had all simultaneously locked up.

Frank's terminal was frozen showing the date "-4003/10/21" (it had changed by one day while Frank wasn't paying attention). Frank stared at the incriminating evidence on his display as people started to stand up and discuss the computer driven disaster that had destroyed all their unsaved work.

Frank began to look around franticly for something to hide the evidence with. Thankfully the screen went blank.

“Am I the only one having trouble here? My screen’s gone blank!” shouted yet another voice. It sounded like Jeremy van Turken. If it was him, he deserved it.

After two agonising minutes, some text, which Frank had not seen before popped up on the screen:

DCH Systems Model 4004 (C) 2099 D.C.H.
All rights reserved. Patent pending.
Loading ..... ok
Opening socket to GUEST backend ... no response ... waiting ... waiting ... ok
Starting interface ..... ok

The familiar interface screen popped up, much to Frank’s relief. Little groups of students began to gather to discuss the strange phenomenon of the system restarting.

Without saying a word to anyone, Frank stopped recording, ejected his media device, stood up and left.

* * * * *

Frank sat alone at a table in the cafeteria, idly rearranging the bubbles on the top of a cup of coffee. Occasionally he took a sip. Thankfully Joe was nowhere to be seen – no doubt he was off somewhere spreading good cheer and fear of hell-fire.

“Hey Frank,” said Gerald, sitting down next to Frank in the cafeteria, hot dog in hand. “I thought you didn’t drink coffee! What’s on your mind?”

Frank clearly had something on his mind, and continued to do ponder it.

“Did you lose your work?” persisted Gerald. “I heard this one first year guy lost about two days worth. He was quite surprised when they told him you can save your work before you finish the assignment. The bloke says the system’s not stable because the backend is running on Windows.” He grinned. “And, come to think of it, that would explain why you can never run queries at three AM in the morning…”

Frank looked at Gerald as if he had been awakened from a deep sleep. “Oh, hi Gerald. I’ve just been

thinking in circles. Haven't you ever wondered about that five year limit?"

"Do you mean the length of party promises or the limit on the machine?" asked Gerald. "Party promises only last four years anyhow. Or less. It's part of the constitutional mandate."

"Just suppose," said Frank, "suppose that there was no five year limit on the machine. What do you think we would see that we can't see now?"

"Let's think," said Gerald, taking a bite out of his hot dog. He continued to speak while chewing. "We'd see pretty much everything. I've always wondered where my mom kept the cookies, and I'd be quite interested to find out what that ex-girlfriend of yours was doing while you were so in love with her."

Frank blushed, and Gerald noticed.

"Even if the physicists managed to fix it up to be a thousand times better, I don't think they would be able to go back to the big bang." He grinned mischievously.

"The real question, if you're wondering about the five year limit," continued Gerald, "is not what you would see now, but what you would have seen when the machine was first built. Without the limit, you could see anything, and that's always bad for politics. Like whether that referendum was rigged, or what became of the chancellor's daughter that was kidnapped."

"Oh yes, I remember that," said Frank. "I wasn't allowed to play in the street for most of summer on account of that. I heard they paid a ransom – but I also heard they didn't pay."

"Maybe," whispered Gerald conspiratorially, "maybe what happened is that DC and H built the machine using the ransom money from the girl."

Frank looked at Gerald – maybe he was right.

"Then, after spending all the ransom money, they sent her back in time, and kidnapped her again, so that they could get the money again," explained Gerald. "And then, after the sixth time, they sent her so far back that she was her own mother, and so she never existed."

Frank was still staring at Gerald.

“I’m just kidding you Frank,” said Gerald. “It won’t be that – the physics of the histrionics particle is what makes the five years. They just don’t have the string length to store the vectors for longer than that.”

“I suppose,” said Frank, wondering.

“Gerald! Frank!” said the familiar voice of the infinitely persistent Joe. “Can I join you guys?” If Joe had actually waited for an answer, Frank might have gathered his wits enough to say no, but Joe had already sat down.

“Hey Joe,” said Gerald. “See if you can do something for Mr Depression here. I think he was secretly in love with the chancellor’s daughter, and he is now feeling somewhat glum in her memory. He wants to go back in time to his childhood and get her back. I’m off to the library.” He left a greasy paper with a touch of tomato sauce on the table and walked off.

“Frank,” said Joe, “what’s up?”

“No, nothing,” said Frank. “Gerald was just ripping me off again.”

“Why would you want to see back to the chancellor’s daughter? Didn’t they find her dead?” asked Joe.

“No, it’s not that,” said Frank. “You know we were talking about ... that stuff the other day. Do you happen to know anything about, you know, like how old the world is supposed to be and stuff like that?”

Joe looked at Frank strangely, “I don’t get it. What’s the question?”

“I’m just curious,” said Frank. “You know, like wondering about your point of view, on how old things actually are.”

For Joe, being asked about his point of view was something rather new. Usually people were begging him not to give it. It was something of a shock. “Well,” he began, “I did talk with some of the folks at our study about what we discussed. The consensus is that you can’t really know when things began, but some people say between five and one hundred thousand years ago, and some say a few billion. It’s not actually that

important – the point is that God did make the world, and most people agree on that.”

“But when exactly did that happen?” asked Frank. “What about 4000 BC?”

“Well, if you're in that ballpark, then Bishop Ussher said 4004 BC,” offered Joe.

“You don’t mean 4003?” asked Frank.

“No, I think it was 4004” said Joe. “I think he said the 23rd of October 4004 BC to be exact, but nobody believes in that any more. It’s a little bit silly to try and be so exact. Why are you suddenly interested? Frank? What’s up?”

“Oh,” said Frank, “I was just thinking….”

10 Here Kitty Kitty! Look At This Nice Bag!

Frank entered the terminal building, heading for his terminal on the fifth floor, as usual. He didn't have time for doing personal work that day, since he had neglected his work while he was working on his personal history compilation. There were more people than usual waiting for the lift (although the three Americans among them were waiting for the elevator). Frank decided to take the stairs, and ran up.

As Frank reached the fourth floor, he realised that he was not as physically fit as he had once been, and he paused on the step to take a breath. Actually, he had never been particularly fit, he remembered. He was always third last to be picked for any given team. Not last at least.

Above Frank, two pimply faced students, probably first years, whom Frank didn't recognise, came out of the fourth floor door and started down the stairs.

"Kevin, how did you find out?" asked one of the students.

The second student cleared his throat discreetly and nodded his head slightly towards Frank.

"Oh come on Kev! How long have you known?" asked the first student insistently, and with less caution. He hadn't noticed Frank catching his breath. "Were you one of the first?"

"Hello," smiled the second student, to Frank, much like a criminal greets a passing policeman. The two suddenly lost interest in their conversation, and disappeared down the stairs.

Frank waited and listened. As the students reached the ground floor the sound of a voice travelled up the stairwell complaining, "I don't know why anyone gives

you codes. You can't keep a secret even for an hour, can you?"

Frank wondered what other secrets the company was holding that students were coming across. Of course, the two were probably talking about the cheat codes for Galactic Warrior, which was all the rage among the first years.

Probably because Dewey was such a games freak, the company provided students with compilementary copies of the latest interactive games. It was supposed to hone their skills in operating the machine, but generally was a waste of time. Quite a lot of fun, but a waste of time. Compared to the fact that they could use the machine for their own entertainment and personal enrichment after finishing assignments, Galactic Warrior licences was a silly little perk.

Frank headed towards his terminal and sat down. His electronic TO-DO list was flashing red, which meant that he had to do some work, or he would be in genuine disciplinary hearing type trouble. Leaving aside the report on the virus which had shown up the strange behaviour of the machine, he began with the most urgent item on the file – an insurance claim.

Boring.

"Determine (1) the cause of fire which gutted Mike Rowe Soft Warehouse, 819 Phosphor Road, Gullet Park, Nairobi. Date 9 September 2117. Fire reported at 3:40 AM. Investigate (2) operation of sprinkler system. Produce (3) visual impression of extent of loss."

The insurance company clearly wasn't happy with this claim, and was looking for a reason to repudiate it. Perhaps it was arson or an act of God, in which case they wouldn't pay. Maybe the sprinker system failed, in which case they wouldn't pay. And just in case, perhaps the goods and warehouse were overvalued, or undervalued or the wrong goods, or something else covered in the fine print, in which case they wouldn't pay. Whatever Mike Rowe had burnt in his Soft Warehouse, he must have insured it for a large sum.

Surprisingly, the search function of the front end found only one Nairobi, and it didn't have any difficulty locating the address. Frank entered the date and the time at which the fire was reported. He clicked enter.

Frank stood outside the blazing building. It was a large rectangular warehouse, with a rapidly blackening sign that said "Mike Rowe". As the corrugated iron heated in the fire it made a groaning and shearing sound. A fire-engine could be heard approaching in the distance.

Frank clicked rewind by one hour at a time, to find the time at which the fire had begun.

At 2:40 AM flames could be seen dancing through the windows of the building.

At 1:40 AM the grass outside the building was on fire. Frank walked around to the far side of the building, and found that the burning grass there was quite long, and grew up to against the building itself. The wall was made of corrugated iron. Frank poked his head through the wall and looked around.

Inside the warehouse were rolls and rolls of material. Piled up against the wall closest to the grass fire was a pile of off-cuts, which looked like the product of an early departure by the cleaning staff. The material was beginning to smoulder.

Frank clicked fast forward to confirm that the outside fire had set the warehouse on fire. Smoke stopped rising from the pile of off-cuts and hung unnaturally in the air. A blue cow drifted into the room and looked idly at the pile of clothes as it transformed into a yellow 2057 Ford Plymouth with pulsating yellow polka dots. Frank's remote control disappeared. The increasingly strange virtual reality dissolved around him and the hard reality of the terminal room appeared. On his display he could see the grass fire threatening to set fire to the polka dot car, which was slowly sprouting wings and turning into a miniature B52 bomber.

"That is strange," said Frank. "I wonder what happened there?" He clicked "Enter". Nothing happened. He clicked it again.

“Oh no, not again,” complained a voice from the middle of the terminal room. “I hate this stupid machine.”

Gerald joined Frank in his cubicle, and had a good look at Frank’s display screen. “That’s one of the better ones,” he laughed. “But not as good as my triple murder-suicide. It now includes an unsolicited green goat and a flock of plastic ducks. It’s almost funny. Well, at least as funny as that kind of thing gets.”

“What’s going on?” asked Frank innocently, although he was beginning to form a definite suspicion.

“I think the first year students are overloading the system. They’ve got too much time on their hands, if you ask me. There’s quite a buzz down there,” said Gerald. “They seem to be playing Galactic Warrior on their terminals instead of on their personal systems.”

Frank’s screen went black, and began to boot up again.

“Yep,” said Gerald, “just like last time.”

“So you think it’s the first year students again?” asked Frank, although he had a very good idea what the last time had been about.

“Oh yes, those guys are forever messing around. They’re almost as bad as we were.”

“Hey listen Gerald,” said Frank, “sorry to rush you out, but my to-do list is flashing red, so as soon as the system is up and running, I’m going to have to get started.”

“Well, I hate to keep a busy man from his work,” said Gerald. “I’ll see you around Frank.”

“Cheers Gerald,” said Frank, turning back to his terminal screen. Gerald walked out.

Frank didn’t have time to think deeply about it. Probably it was yet another format error. He applied himself to his work again, being careful to save every two minutes.

As it turned out, the grass fire was arson, of a particular sort. A passing tobacco smoker had carelessly tossed a burning cigarette into the long grass from a passing car. The seller of the tobacco appeared

to be registered, and the sale was for genuine medicinal purposes, even though the smoking of it was not. The smoker was not affiliated to any of the company structures.

The value of the goods was exactly as insured. But the sprinkler system had malfunctioned.

Frank didn’t get to the bottom of the Knooza worm. He submitted a report on the drinking habits of the Russian government agent instead.

11 Executive Decision

The powerful yellow convertible sports car was capable of a top speed of 357 km/h. It was capable of accelerating from zero to one hundred in under 5 seconds.

The powerful yellow convertible sports car trundled up a hill along a narrow winding road. In front of the sports car trundled a black van with darkened windows. The driver appeared to be looking for an address – each time the van passed an entrance or a side road it slowed down.

"Get a move on, you moron!" shouted Dewey, the driver of the sports car, as the van slowed down yet again. He drove aggressively towards the van, as if to bump him. The driver of the van decided that he had not yet reached his destination and drove on, faster, almost approaching the speed limit.

Dewey floored the accelerator and pulled out to overtake the van, passing over a solid barrier line. Just as quickly he slammed on the brakes and pulled back onto the safe side of the road. An eighteen wheeler flashed past where the little yellow car had just been, its foghorn beautifully demonstrating the Doppler effect.

"Slow down you idiot!" shouted Dewey at the retreating juggernaut. He muttered angrily at the black van. "Careless numbskull! If you had woken up dead this morning we'd all be a lot happier."

The van trundled on up the road. Dewey was so incensed at being made to drive under the legal limit that he drove past his destination.

The yellow sports car skidded to a halt as the van trundled on. Dewey reversed for over twenty metres at high speed, and then sped up a driveway and parked in

front of a large house covered in part with ivy. Dewey got out, slamming the car door. The unused seat belt caught the door and stopped it from closing properly, but he didn't notice.

"Dithering dolt," he muttered, walking up a path through a well kept garden. He spat into a fish pond, bemusing a large fish.

As Mr Cheatham's butler opened the door, Alex Dewey barged in.

"Is he here?" he snapped, looking around.

"Mr Cheatham?" asked the butler, most politely.

"No, the Pope you idiot. Of course I mean Cheatham. Where is he?"

The butler was not ruffled – a credit to his profession. "Mr Cheatham is up in the lounge with Mr Howe. They are waiting for you, sir."

Alex Dewey entered the lounge. Martin Cheatham was standing next to the fireplace, and Sergio Howe was sitting on a chair, sipping a clear liquid from a glass – probably water, but with a cocktail umbrella in it, it was hard to tell.

"Alex! Will you have a brandy?" asked Cheatham.

"Whatever," replied Dewey. As Cheatham poured a drink for him he stood around uncomfortably, as if he was not a regular visitor.

"Well, we're all here, let's get on with it," said Sergio Howe, somewhat impatient. "Why did you call this meeting, Alex?"

Dewey gave Martin Cheatham a sulky look as he took the drink from him. "Look, Martin, this business is turning into a nightmare. We have to do something."

Cheatham frowned at him, looking a little puzzled. "Have you been taking your medication?"

"Don't you understand?" asked Dewey.

"Understand what?" interrupted Sergio Howe. "What do you want to do? Why would we do anything? Things have never looked this good! Our capacity problem is a thing of the past. The campus is turning out top quality people, and we have twenty one new governments signed onto long term protection

contracts. Everyone is on NDA, and if we hang on just a few more years and we could actually ....”

“Oh shut up Howe!” shouted Alex Dewey. “Do you think I’m a fool? Your head is so full of your physics that you think you can do anything. Don’t you read the security reports? There is no way we are going to get away with it! Why did the machine crash yesterday, and the day before too? I’ve looked at everything, and I still don’t know why. They’ve got us, and they’re going to put on the squeeze until something pops out.”

“Hey Alex,” soothed Cheatham, “let’s be reasonable about this. Don’t worry so much about the machine. Computers always have glitches. We have got away with it. We will continue to get away with it. You know they haven’t got anything. There really is no scientific reason to believe that things will change.”

“Don’t you know I spent a week on John Allen’s yacht in the Bahamas? And now the security report says he was a deliberate plant. Who knows what he’s come up with? I’m tired of living like this. You know I’ve had it, Martin,” said Dewey, “I can’t keep it up any more.”

Dewey paused, and then said, in a more controlled tone of voice, “I’m tired of worrying about what I say, and who I talk to. I can’t go on like this. I want to terminate the agreement. I want out.”

“You little back-stabbing runt!” shouted Howe, jumping out of his chair. Howe stormed over to Dewey and gave him a shove. Dewey staggered back and fell to the ground. “There is no way we are terminating the agreement!” he shouted, his face red.

“Sergio, calm down, sit on your chair,” commanded Cheatham. “We are not children. Let’s hear what Alex has to say.”

Sergio Howe sat down again, glaring at Dewey, who was dusting himself off, glaring back.

“Now Alex,” reasoned Cheatham, “think about it rationally please. What are you trying to achieve? Nobody is going to gain anything if we terminate the agreement. We have to continue with it. If things aren’t working as they should, then let’s look at how we

can adjust things. We can always deal with the people too."

"You're such a spineless jerk, Cheatham," said Dewey, "you don't care. Black and white, true and false, right and wrong, good and bad – it's all the same to you. You don't even give a hoot about the difference between legal and illegal, as long as there's a profit! Look, I know we all agreed back then that we needed the agreement, but it was a mistake. We should never have done it. I guess what I'm saying is ... is let's just look at ways in which we can go about dismantling it."

"Dewey, you are a twit. You won't make your wife come back by messing up the agreement," said Howe. "We will never never never never never cancel the agreement. Go and drown your worries and your conscience in a martini and take a double dose of your pills. We will stick to the agreement until Hell freezes over."

"You don't believe in Hell, remember?" said Cheatham.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

Dewey stood up.

"Where are you off to?" snapped Howe.

Dewey took a media device from his pocket and brandished it threateningly. "You see this?" he said. "150 terabytes of precision storage media. I am going to terminate the agreement. If you want to do something about it, then let's talk. Otherwise, you can consider the agreement terminated."

He stood, waiting for a response. Nobody said anything for a while, so he put the device back in his pocket and turned to leave.

"Alex, just one question," asked Cheatham, softly.

Dewey turned around. Cheatham shot him with a very quiet silver gun. Dewey grasped desperately at the dart in his neck, then fell to the ground.

Sergio Howe was shocked. He forgot to close his mouth.

"It had to be done," said Cheatham, "we had an agreement." He walked over to Dewey, and recovered

the dart using a fitting on the silver gun. He picked up the media device which had fallen on the floor.

“Blast it Cheatham. You’ve gone too far now. Exactly how on earth are we going to get away with this one?” asked Howe.

“Well, thanks to the histrionics, we’ve got two years, I would think we can make a plan, even without Alex. Can we agree to that?”

DC&H's Dewey dies despite double doctorate

Inventor of company's historical technology is history

Bartholomew Alexander Dewey, one of the three founder members of DC&H Corporation, and the holder of doctorates in mathematics and computer science, was found dead in his Bluewater Desert Estate mansion this morning. Police spokesman, Joel McAthini said that investigations were still at a preliminary stage, and it was too early to make a statement or to rule out foul play.

Sources close to the investigation said, on condition of anonymity, that Dewey appeared to have committed suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills. He left a note.

DC&H corporation spokesman Jean Marc Katzenellenbogen said that the company was shocked to learn of Dewey's sudden

death, and would release a statement at an appropriate time. It was too early to talk about changing the company name from DC&H to C&H.

Neighbours say that Dewey frequently held wild parties and suffered from bouts of depression and headaches.

DC&H insiders claim that the company still uses the original software written by Dewey as part of its core business function. DC&H specialist analyst Ken Greenear said that although Dewey's past contribution to DC&H was incalculable, the company operated largely without his active participation. DC&H shares fell sharply in early trade, losing 174 points in the first hour, but have since clawed their way back and recovered their early losses, and even put on and additional 32 points.

12 When The Cat's Away

While the stock market winds buffeted the share price, the DC&H ship drifted aimlessly. Nobody was doing any work. Ad-hoc staff meetings had been called to discuss the operations of the company without Dewey, and all the permanent staff and supervisors were attending. The students were left largely to their own devices. A brief paper aeroplane battle between first year students had covered the lobby of the terminal hall with litter. No doubt the security people would act with their usual discretion once the staff meeting was concluded.

Here and there groups of students stood around, chatting and exchanging ignorance about the personal habits of the DC&H directors. Frank was lingering on the outskirts of a conversation with more than its fair share of ignorance. Nobody except him had done any assignments for company security. The consensus was that although they knew nothing about him, Dewey always seemed to be a lot more approachable than Howe, and being more approachable than Cheatham was part of being a normal human being.

Frank drifted off to the lift, and pressed "5" for the fifth floor. Two second year students joined him, stopping the doors from closing. The doors closed, and the lift began to move upward. The two students fixed their eyes on the numbers, and entirely ignored Frank.

"I think the Abraham Lincoln story is much more interesting than Kennedy," said one of the students, as they passed the first floor. Frank stopped daydreaming and listened.

"Well, I'm personally quite interested in the way that language has changed. It seems that before seventeen hundred they didn't speak English in England, but some

kind of code with English words thrown in, just for fun. Then if you go forward by a few years at a time, the language gets more and more intelligible." They passed the third floor.

"What are you guys discussing?" asked Frank, innocently.

"It's ... er ... " began the one. If his skin had been light he would have blushed. Instead he took off his jacket, suddenly feeling hot.

"the ... er... cheat codes for Galactic Warrior," explained the other. "It's quite interesting what they've done in the new version – the latest one, I mean. With the historical places plug-in."

"Oh," said Frank, raising an eyebrow.

They reached the fourth floor. The two second year students got out, and so did Frank, even though he had originally been heading for his terminal on the fifth floor.

When Frank had been in first year, his class had worked on the fourth floor. They had moved up to the fifth floor for second year. For his third year, they had stayed put on the fifth floor. Somehow Frank had retained the impression that the fourth floor was for first years, where it was actually second years.

As the two second year students scuttled down a long aisle away from Frank, Frank wandered between the cubicles.

On any regular day, students would be sweating at their terminals, trying to tease information out of the unyielding machine. Those who had already mastered using the machine would lounge around, making recordings of interesting events of the last three to five years.

On this particular day, clumps of students were crowded into cubicles. This was how students behaved when they were playing Galactic Warrior, in first year before the novelty wore off. Anyone who was playing particularly well would draw a crowd.

Frank wandered over to one of the crowds. In the middle of the crowd was a student demonstrating his

prowess at zapping off laser bolts against the evil empire. Frank did notice that as he approached there was a certain quiet that fell over the group. Frank had played Galactic Warrior in second year. He closely examined the view screen of the heroic student. On the upper left corner, he could see the score. “Level 1. Kills 1. Killed 141.”

How do you get killed 141 times in Galactic Warrior on Level 1? By walking away from the terminal and not paying attention, that’s how.

Much to their collective relief, Frank withdrew from the crowd and wandered further down the aisles of cubicles. He spotted a cubicle filled with second year students who were not really paying attention to their surroundings. Faking the unmistakable air of a second year student, Frank joined them.

Frank was surprised. They seemed to know something that he thought was a secret.

The view screen showed the interior of a building decorated entirely with marble. A crowd of men dressed in white robes sat on benches around an amphitheatre. One man was standing, delivering a speech.

“Do you think that’s Julius?” said one of the students, a red-haired youth.

“I don’t think so,” said the driver of the terminal. “It’s 210 BC. I think he was more like 50 BC or something.”

Frank tapped a curly haired student on his shoulder. “Hey,” said Frank softly, “what have you found here?”

“Oh, nothing really,” explained the curly student. “Just some Roman senate stuff.” The student had a look at Frank. “What have you got?”

“More of the same,” lied Frank. The curly haired student was satisfied, and turned back to the view screen.

“Let’s look at something else – we haven’t got a clue what’s going on there,” said a blonde boy wearing a faded “Class of 99” T-shirt.

“Go back 500 years,” suggested the red head. The student handling the controls made a few adjustments, and the senate hall was replaced by forest.

“That’s useless,” complained the blond student. “Try to find some life or something.”

“That’s real living grass,” said the driver. “2500 years old. What are you complaining about?”

“Isn’t there supposed to be a Persian empire going on?” asked a back seat driver.

“No you nut,” said another, “it was the Greeks. Hey Spiro, aren’t you Greek? Maybe we can find your ancestors!”

Spiro was not amused.

Frank headed back to the elevator. This was trouble. Somehow he had managed to remove the five year limit for all users, and not just for his own terminal.

On the way out, Frank spotted a familiar looking head alone in the next row of cubicles. He walked around to check. It was Mohammed Faizal, who was concentrating intently on his terminal. He was working in virtual mode, and could not really tell that he was being observed. The screen of his terminal showed him on the back of a horse, together with a gang of men. The horsemen stormed down a sandy hill towards a caravan of wagons in the desert. It looked like fun. The men with the wagons were still protesting and explaining something when the raiders cut their throats. Mohammed began to mutter something that Frank didn’t understand. He did not seem to like what he was seeing.

Mohammed made a small movement, adjusting the controls. The screen flipped to another scene. One of the men who had been involved in the raid was seen inside a tent, greeting a man, and presenting him with a present. The man congratulated him heartily and patted him on the back.

With another flip of the controls, which Frank recognised as a bookmark lookup, the screen flipped to the entrance of a cave. Inside the cave was a man

having a fit. The fit passed, and he curled up in a blanket and made a soft moan.

It was impossible to read from Mohammed's face what he thought of this, but he clearly was thinking something as he muttered under his breath.

Frank left, and headed back towards the lift. “What to do?” he muttered. “Should I put it back?” If he put the limit back, the second year students would blab about it, until the company caught up with him.

“Wait a bit!” he said, primarily to himself. “Why is there a limit in the first place?”

As he clicked the button at the lift door, a collective groan rose up from the room.

Far across the room a burly student stood up on a table to make an announcement. “Guys!”, he shouted across the room. “You’re messing the system up here. Some of us are trying to work. Just stop trying to go further than 4000BC! That’s what makes it crash! And keep it down!”

Another student stood up on the chair in his cubicle, “Hey!” he shouted, “if you want to see something really different, check out minus 2510.”

“What coordinates?” shouted a voice.

“Doesn’t matter,” replied the student on the chair. “You’ll see.”

The lift arrived and Frank left the din and headed for the fifth floor, avoiding an erupting debate.

Frank sat down at his terminal. He typed furiously for a few minutes, and raced through a few scenes. The monitor briefly flashed on the swearing in ceremony when Frank had joined the company. He selected Cheatham, Dewey and Howe and then selected “Create group” and “Graph contact points”. The machine quickly correlated where and when Cheatham Howe and Dewey had been in contact, and drew a graph.

They seemed to see each other monthly, sometimes more often. That was understandable, because they were running a large company with diverse interests. As the graph grew longer, the machine adjusted the scale. The first time that the three had met was in

2091. There had been a lot of contact for seven years, then only sporadic contact over the next three years. From 2102 the contact frequency was at least daily, and only petered down to being monthly in 2107 – after five years.

According to one of Cheatham's boring speeches, they had originally met at university – but they didn't meet for years until 2102. Whatever got them together again would have been quite significant.

Frank pointed the cross-hairs at 2102, the part where the three got together again.

* * * * *

"Your name?"

"Frank," said Frank.

"Dianne Christine Henry," said the woman.

The security guard wrote the details down in a book. "Which company are you visiting?"

"The patent people ... just a moment," said the woman. She put her purse down on the counter, and rifled through it, finding a small paper. "Cheatham Attorneys," she read.

"That'll be 1407, on the 14th floor. There's no 13th floor here, so that's just above 12. Please sign here." He offered the guest book, and the woman wrote her name neatly in the signature column.

Frank followed her.

The door to Cheatham Attorneys was made of wood with the name written in black letters on frosted glass, just as one would expect it to be. "Cheatham Attorneys, Patent, Copyright and Intellectual Property". The woman knocked, and then entered.

"Miss Henry," said the receptionist, "please take a seat. Mr Cheatham will be with you in a moment." The receptionist's voice was a remarkably irritating, and perhaps a little familiar. Miss Henry sat down uncomfortably in the chair. The magazine on the table, "Patent news" was two years old. She picked it up and

began to read. The rate at which she turned the pages showed that she was a speedy reader.

Frank walked through the closed door. A younger Martin Cheatham sat behind a desk, concentrating intensely on his computer monitor – the older type that stood on the desk and took up a lot of space. He looked briefly at his watch, and then turned his attention again to the computer.

The phone rang, and Cheatham picked it up. “Yes, she can wait. Tell her I’m busy with something.”

Frank walked around so that he could see what was on the screen. Solitaire.

Frank fast-forwarded, and the virtual cards flew across the monitor in such a way that you might have thought that solitaire was fun. After fully ten minutes, Cheatham got up and walked to the door. Frank slowed the replay down to normal speed.

As Cheatham was about to open the door, the phone on his desk began to ring. He turned around and picked it up.

“Which ex-wife?” he asked. He rolled his eyes on hearing the answer. “No, don’t tell her something, I’ll talk to her.”

“Hello Beatrice,” he said. He smiled as he said it, but stopped smiling as soon as the words had left his mouth. As he listened he paced around, fidgeting with the telephone cord.

“No, I’m not unwilling to pay, it’s just, I’m really in a tight spot at the moment,” he replied. “It’s not just you. I had to pay costs for the malpractice suit. They had Schilles and Boeis representing them.” He mimicked the facial expressions on the other side. An assertive demand was being made.

“You know Beatrice, I’ve got someone waiting for me,” he replied, “I’ll call you back as soon as I’m done with them.” He put down the phone, cutting off a reply in mid sentence.

“Miss Henry,” welcomed Cheatham, opening the door, “I’m sorry to keep you waiting. I’ve been rather busy. Do come in. Sandra, please can you get hold of

the patent office and check that they have received the drawings for Mr Smith's application, and hold my calls while I'm with Miss Henry."

"Right away sir," responded the receptionist, in her bored irritating tone.

"Have a seat," motioned Cheatham, closing the door.

Frank was caught on the wrong side of the door, and was about to walk through, but was distracted by the behaviour of the receptionist. Sandra, the receptionist, opened her drawer and took out a nail file. She picked up the telephone, and, without dialling, said "Hello patent office, it's Sandra from Cheatham Attorneys here, just checking on the thingy for Mr John Doe, oh, you say there were naughty pictures mixed up in the folder? Well, just send those back for Martin here, he's quite fond of them. And everything else is okay? That's wonderful!" She put the phone down and filed her nails. She had beautifully manicured nails.

Frank raised an eyebrow, and then walked through the closed door back into Cheatham's office.

"Just tell me if I'm understanding you correctly," Cheatham was saying, "your invention can produce images of past events without actually having been there?"

"Yes," said Miss Henry, nodding her head, "it consists of a hardware component, which amplifies the signals, and a software component, which converts the signals to a visible image. It's tunable for any space-time coordinates on earth, provided that the coordinates are in the past, and at least a year or two old."

Cheatham raised an eyebrow. "Well, Miss Henry, as your lawyer, my job is to write up a bullet-proof legal description of your invention. If the invention is merely speculative, as in this case, it is usually quite difficult to convince the patent office that it merits a patent. It generally is more costly to file such an application, as you'll appreciate."

"But Mr Cheatham," protested Miss Henry, "it does work. I've built it. Would it help you to see it?"

“I would dearly like to see a perpetual motion device,” said Cheatham, “but I doubt that I will be able to, and neither will the patent office accept such a patent. However, if you write up a description of your invention as it stands, I will convert it into terms acceptable to the patent office and then submit it to them.”

Miss Henry began to giggle. “Mr Cheatham,” she said, between the giggles, “I want to show you something.” She reached inside her purse, and found a folded piece of paper, which she handed to him.

Martin Cheatham took the paper and unfolded it. It was a colour picture of a boy, six or seven years old standing on a chair, reaching into a jar labelled “cookies”. “Where did you get this?” he asked. “I’ve never seen this photo before. Did you get this from my mother?”

Miss Henry smiled broadly. “I printed it from my machine.”

Cheatham sat back in his chair, looking at the paper. “Would you believe that?” he said. “Let’s just think how we should approach this ....” He opened a drawer in his desk and took out a pen. He rapped the pen on the desk a few times. He rapped his head and twirled the pen between his fingers.

Cheatham tapped the picture with the pen. “Miss Henry, I am impressed, I am really impressed. You certainly have a patentable invention here. With your permission, I would like to bring in two of my associates, who are subject matter experts, to assist me in writing up the patent.”

“Well, okay,” said Miss Henry, “if that’s the way that these things get done, that’s okay with me. That’s why I came to you, because I don’t know about law and patents and that sort of thing. I just need to make sure I publish my invention in the right way.”

“I believe Sandra has your address. Will tonight be acceptable for you? Around seven o’clock? I’ll be bringing Mr Dewey and Mr Howe along to help me with describing the invention.”

“Well, I stay by myself and I work alone, so any time is fine with me,” said Miss Henry. “I’m really quite excited, because this is my first patent.”

* * * * *

“So you say that’s you stealing from the cookie jar, and she got a photo of it from her machine?” said a much younger Alex Dewey. “Isn't she having you on?”

“I suppose it’s theoretically possible to use the histrionics subparticle to trace where an electron or an atom has been, but I would never have thought you could use it to retrace all of history,” said Sergio Howe, “But I suppose, ...”

“Look, if it is for real, then there is no way I’m going to let it pass,” said Martin Cheatham.

“Well, it’s fine and well, but we can’t exactly steal the system from her,” said Howe. “Chances are we won’t even understand how the thing works.”

“She’ll tell us how it works,” said Cheatham. “Just think how much every government would pay to know what other governments are up to. Just think how much you would pay to know where missing treasure is. We could rewrite history and get it right. Insurance companies would spend millions to catch out people who cheat them. So would your wife. Do you really want some geeky spinster to have all of that?”

“What do you mean?” asked Dewey.

“Well, I mean, do you want to be mediocre for the rest of your life? Sergio, aren’t you tired of the peanuts you work for at the Institute? They’re never going to promote you to head of department as long as that old geezer is alive, and he’s never going to die. Alex, haven’t you had enough of fielding support calls from teenagers who don’t appreciate what you actually do? Do you want to spend the rest of your life writing computer games? I don’t know about you guys, but I’ve had enough of writing patents that make other people rich. It’s time that I get something back.”

Dewey and Howe considered his argument.

“So, what will we do?”

* * * * *

Dianne Henry sat at her computer, typing furiously. After typing three lines of ASCII gobbledegook which seemed to mean something to the computer, she said, “The user interface needs a bit of work, but the basic concept is there.”

“How do you manage to pick up signals for which you don’t have atoms?” asked Sergio Howe.

“The amazing thing is that after the histrionics have settled down you don’t need to have the atom you are investigating, since you can pick up that data from the interlinking. Once you have grasped the concept, any old Joe can build one of these things for a few bob in his garage, like I did. That’s why I want to patent it.”

Sergio Howe began to leaf through a notebook with great interest. “So these are the exact concentrations of each of the elements in the amplifier?”

“Well, those have a broad tolerance of one percent,” explained Miss Henry, “but if you look at the table on the next page, you’ll see the ones that need to be correct to better than 0.01 percent. After that, you simply put together the three dimensional circuit here, and you’re off. It’s remarkably simple. It’s as if the world was built for this machine.”

“Who else has been involved in this project?” asked Dewey.

“Just me,” said Miss Henry, “My father left most of the equipment to me, and the royalties for his work have paid for what I’ve done. I like to think that I’m building on what he did.”

“And your code is all in C for Microsoft Windows,” said Dewey, “but you’re using the open source rendering libraries.”

“Yes, the open source libraries are faster” she said, “there’s around one hundred and thirty thousand lines of my own code there. It’s mostly signal processing. I’m still on Windows because my media reader is

broken, so I couldn't do an operating system upgrade." She smiled apologetically.

A catchy little tune began to play.

"The light is easy, but the really complex part is the audio acquisition – you have to capture movements over a relatively long period of time, and you have to choose the right vibrating element."

The tinny music grew louder.

"Let's see – where did I write down those coordinates...." Miss Henry stopped in mid sentence, and Frank quickly turned the view screen off and picked up his cell phone.

It said "Mom :)".

Frank sighed, and answered it. "Hi Mom."

"Hello Frank," said the cell phone, in his mother's voice, "I hope I'm not interrupting you."

"Er," said Frank, "actually I was in the middle of something, but ..."

"Well, I'm glad you managed to fit your mother in," said his mother firmly. "I just want to check what your arrangements are for Christmas this year. You really missed out last year – and we missed you too."

Frank put his head in his hand, "Mom, I can't really think about that right now. It's only May now, and besides I'm ... I'm doing some research."

"I'm your mother. I'm also doing some research," replied his mother. "How are you Frank?"

"I'm okay, I guess," lied Frank.

"Are you going to come this year?" asked his mother.

"You know, maybe I will be able to make Christmas this year. I probably do need a break."

There was a slight pause. "Okay Frank, okay, that's ... that's great news. We look forward to seeing you."

"Thanks for calling, Mom," said Frank.

"We love you a lot Frank," said his mother.

"I know, mom, I know," said Frank.

"God bless you. Goodbye."

“Bye mom.” Frank hung up the phone, looked around, and turned back to his terminal, and clicked “Enter.”

“… those coordinates for one of my favourite events,” Miss Henry was saying. “Oh yes – it’s that little yellow sticky pad I stuck on the monitor there. I’ll set it up for you as a timed demonstration – with one capture per hour displaying every thirty seconds. It’s quite impressive that way.”

She quickly typed in a few lines of commands and parameters, and then carefully copied the details from the sticky pad. “33 AD. It’s my personal favourite. I think you’ll agree that this is quite remarkable. Really quite remarkable,” she said. She pressed a key.

A second monitor flashed briefly, and then showed a picture with the caption 08h00. It showed ancient soldiers digging a small hole next to a well trodden path, without supervision. It appeared to be a boring task. One soldier was digging, and the others were relaxing, and appeared to be having a good chat. Dewey looked at Howe and Cheatham. None of them appeared to have any idea what the significance of the picture was.

The picture changed. 09h00. A man was being nailed to a beam of wood in front of the hole. Bruises and blood showed that he had been beaten up. The soldiers looked as if they enjoyed the task, although the one hammering in the last nail appeared to be apologising for doing his job.

10h00. The cross had been placed securely in the hole that the soldiers had dug earlier. There were two other men being crucified, neither of whom appeared to be enjoying the experience. On the middle cross was a wooden board with writing in three different scripts, one of which said “IESUS NAZARENVS REX IVDAEORVM”. A small crowd had gathered. Those standing nearby were smirking. Those standing at a distance were crying. Howe and Cheatham put their hands over their mouths. Dewey bit his lip.

11h00. There was a larger crowd of people. Some appeared to be commoners, while others were dressed in fine clothes. All the attention was on the man on the cross in the middle. The attention of the man on the middle cross was on the man being crucified to his left. Dewey whispered something in Cheatham's ear. Howe was looking away from the screen, his hand covering his eyes. A tear ran down Frank's cheek.

"Frank?" said a voice.

Faster than he had ever moved before Frank clicked "exit" and turned the view screen off.

"What are you looking at Frank?" asked Joe. Joe had appeared very quietly in Frank's cubicle.

"Joe! You startled me," said Frank, "I didn't hear you come in." He wiped the tear from his cheek with the sleeve of his shirt.

"I just happened to be passing by your corner, and I want to know what it was that you were looking at," said Joe.

Frank said nothing. He just looked at Joe.

"Frank! Hello! It's me, Joe. I'm safe – tell me. Who are those people you were looking at?"

"How much did you see?" asked Frank.

"Just a minute or two. Or more. Tell me," insisted Joe. "Is this what you were thinking about?"

Frank looked at Joe, as if assessing whether he was really an honest bloke or not. "Joe, I'll tell you, but you can't tell anyone else. I'm serious – not a living soul. They will have my head."

"Okay, tell me," said Joe.

"That's Martin Cheatam, Alex Dewey and Sergio Howe, back in 2102," said Frank.

"Who? What?" said Joe.

"Yep, 2102. And Miss Dianne Henry is demonstrating her machine to them," continued Frank. "It looks as if she is showing them the crucifixion of Christ in 33AD."

Joe looked at Frank. He was at a loss for words – quite an unusual frame of mind for him. His mind was doing wild cartwheels.

“I thought the machine … I thought that … I … er … Put it on again, I want to see,” said Joe. “What on earth did you do to get the machine to show 2102? It doesn’t … or … What on earth are they using to show 33AD? It can’t work … unless it actually does. Why are you looking at DC and H anyway?”

“I want to see what happened, I’m still figuring it out,” said Frank, and, by way of explanation added, “There was a limit in the front end system, but I took it out – I don’t think we’re supposed to see this. There’s more than just this too.”

“I want to see.” Joe leaned over and clicked “Enter.”

Frank and Joe stood in Miss Henry’s garage. Time was passing very fast. Dewey and Cheatham were walking around with animated steps, collecting papers and putting them into boxes. Dewey picked up Miss Henry’s computer (at high speed), and put it into a box. Howe was sitting crumpled up on a step, not moving.

Frank clicked, play. “I must have pressed fast forward when you came in,” he explained to Joe.

“Get up Sergio, stop blubbering and give us a hand here,” Cheatham was saying.

Howe got up and helped get the last of the papers and equipment into the boxes.

“Bring the van in, Alex,” said Cheatham. “We’ll load this, and then we’ve got to go.”

Dewey opened the garage door and went outside. A car door opened and closed. The engine started, and Dewey drove a black van with darkened windows into the garage. He got out of the van and closed the garage door again.

The three men began loading the boxes into the van.

“What if they find the body?” said Howe as he picked up a box.

“Of course they’ll find the body,” said Alex, loading a box into the van.

“They’ll have an inquest,” said Cheatham, “and conclude that it was an accident.”

They loaded more boxes.

“Whose body?” asked Joe.

“Dianne Henry’s, I guess,” said Frank.

“Where is it? What happened to her?” asked Joe.

“I haven’t a clue,” said Frank. “I think we missed that bit. I’m not sure I really want to know.”

“Okay, so we might not have a problem with the body, but what about the machine?” asked Howe. “As soon as we set it up it will tell on us.”

Dewey and Cheatham stopped loading boxes as his words sunk in.

“Darn it Howe,” said Cheatham, “you’re right.” He bit his lip. “The only thing we can do is this: if anyone ever asks us what happened tonight, then we have to destroy the machine.”

“What?” said Dewey. “Destroy it? Why? Why not just say no?”

“They’d be suspicious,” said Howe.

“On the other hand, we can’t just throw away everything we’re risking our lives for,” said Cheatham. “There must be a better way.”

“I’ve got an idea,” said Dewey. “But it’s going to take a few years, and we’ll have to be careful.”

“What?” asked Cheatham, echoed by Howe.

Dewey explained. “We get a grant from some institution and pretend to develop this machine. We need to do that anyhow. And while we’re doing that we can improve it – you know, change from two dimensional pictures to stereograms, like a real gaming environment. And while we’re improving it, I’ll add a feature so that you can’t go back more than, say, five years. And we’ll launch our company in five years from now.”

“Fine, we’ll do that,” said Cheatham. “Just one thing – nobody is to say a word about this. Ever. To anybody. First person to rat goes the same way as Miss Henry. Are we agreed?”

“Agreed,” said Dewey.

“Agreed,” said Howe.

“Agreed then,” said Cheatham.

They finished packing the things into the van, and climbed in to drive off.

“Turn it off,” said Joe.

Frank turned clicked exit.

“What are we going to do?” asked Joe.

“We?” asked Frank. “Do you mean I have to do something?”

Night blaze destroys house

Crazy inventor violated safety standards

In other news today, fire fighters rushed to a midnight blaze, but were too late to save eccentric inventor Miss Dianne Henry who perished in the fire. She was the daughter of the late Paul Henry whose pioneering work on nuclear inductance won him several scientific awards.

Neighbours who were on the scene in the middle of the night report hearing a loud bang. "I remember that she once was working on a transmission project and one of her systems misfired. This piece of molten metal narrowly missed my washing line, and made an awful hole in the wall. She was very sweet about getting things fixed up though. A very nice girl. A little eccentric, but very pleasant. It's such a big pity that this should happen to her."

Police spokesperson Madel Leinne said that the inquest would be held once the district surgeon completed the autopsy. "In cases of unnatural death, an autopsy is mandatory, and an inquest is always held."

Fire chief John Bradley said that the blaze had been an unusual chemical fire, and was probably aggravated by the substances that Miss Henry stored

for her laboratory. "Our boys worked very hard to put that fire out. It's quite amazing that they managed to save the house. I'm very proud of them. I think that we can be glad we have such a dedicated and professional team. I would also like to remind the public of the dangers of storing hazardous materials at residential premises."

13 The World Would Not Have Space

"WHY didn't they just buy the machine from her?" asked Joe. He and Frank sat in Joe's room. On Frank's media device, the investigation Frank had carried out was playing back in miniature without sound.

"I don't know," said Frank. "Maybe killing people to get their way is just a nasty habit of theirs. I wonder if that's what happened to poor Dewey."

"Probably," said Joe. "Although he deserved it, if you ask me."

"You know, the thing that bothers me," said Frank, "is why does the system crash at 4004 BC?"

"Is that what happened the other day?" said Joe, with a laugh. "You know, I was convinced it was a power problem. I even wrote that in a mail to my mom."

"The thing is, that 4004 is mighty similar to ..." began Frank.

"To Ussher's date?" ended Joe. "Oh flip, it is. You know," he said, "if old Ussher was right all along, I'm going to have to find some really good spice for myself, because I'm going to be eating my hat a few times over."

"It's so unbelievable," said Frank, "that they are happy to throw away the entire history of the world just to cover up what they did wrong."

"I reckon," reckoned Joe, "that they thought that killing Miss Henry was a bigger crime than lying to the whole world. Although, to be fair, it's not like it's their original lie."

"Well I'm still pretty confused about what actually happened," said Frank. "Hey Joe, I'm sorry I jumped on you the other day. I guess I was a bit of a jerk."

“I’m sorry too,” said Joe. “I suppose neither of us knew what we were talking about.”

“Why don't we do a bit of research then? We could make a movie.”

* * * * *

The clock on the screen in Frank’s terminal showed the real time as five o’clock in the morning. Frank and Joe sat bleary eyed staring at it.

“Do you think we got everything?” asked Frank.

“Well, I’m really impressed at how good the compression on these little media devices is,” said Joe. “We’ve probably got the better part of the new testament there. And a good part of Genesis, or something similar.”

“Do you think anything they taught us here is true?” asked Frank. “They told us the machine can only do five years. Now we discover that it does a few thousand.”

“What really gets me,” said Joe, “is that we sit there in anthropology with Jones telling us we evolved from apes or whatever.”

“Over millions of years, while old D C and H sit up there, knowing for a fact that there only a few thousand years available,” complained Frank. “And they set the curriculum!”

“What I don’t understand,” said Joe, “is how can you end up with Carbon 14 dates of ten or fifty thousand years if there is nothing in the world that’s older than six thousand and twenty four years?”

“I looked at that Carbon 14 dating stuff way back when, and I remember being impressed that they managed to adjust for so many factors,” said Frank. “There are adjustments for how near the sample was to the sea, proximity to volcanoes, and exposure to cosmic rays. I guess there are a few more adjustments that they forgot.”

“What about the second year students?” asked Frank.

“What about them?” asked Joe.

“Do you think I should put the range check back – we can’t have them all running around and crashing the machine daily,” said Frank.

“I don’t see why not,” said Joe. “If the company’s been lying to us for as long as we’ve been here, I don’t see why the world shouldn’t know. It will serve them right. Besides, when the company finds out, just maybe they’ll blame the second years, and not you.”

“I suppose so,” said Frank. “They’re not going to believe us, you know.”

“Well, what do you expect?” said Joe. “They didn’t believe in him when they saw him in person, so what difference is the recording going to make for them?”

“Well, I’ve uploaded what we’ve got to BlargShare, and set it for public release in 1 month from now – just in case,” said Frank. “You never know what they’ll do when they find out. At the very least they’re going to turn our bursaries into budgies.”

“That’s cool. We’ll be suffering for the sake of Christ,” said Joe.

“Well, suffering for Christ might be your idea of fun. I’m not sure what I’d be suffering for,” said Frank.

“Maybe you should give that some thought,” said Joe.

“I’m doing that,” said Frank. “Say, do you happen to have a Bible I can borrow? I seem to have misplaced my own.”

* * * * *

The butler answered the door. “Mr Faizal?” he asked.

“I’ve come to see Mr Cheatham,” said Mohammed.

“Come in, please, Mr Cheatham is expecting you in his office.” The butler led the way down a broad passage. He opened a solid oak door for Mohammed.

“Sit down,” said Cheatham.

Mohammed sat down, looking uncomfortable. Cheatham shuffled between papers on his desk for a good half minute.

“A breach of security, you say?” said Cheatham, not looking up. “You do realise that security should be handled by campus security. I can’t have every student coming in here because his lunch money is lost.”

Mohammed said nothing.

“I hope you've got a good reason. What kind of breach?” asked Cheatham, still not looking up. He made a note on a document in front of him.

“Well,” said Mohammed, “it’s the second year students. It seems like one of them broke the five year limit on the machine.”

Cheatham looked up sharply. “Sorry?”

“Well,” said Mohammed, “it’s the second year students. It seems like they broke the five year limit on the machine.”

“Yes, you said that. In what way did they break the five year limit, Mr Faizal?” Mohammed had his full attention.

“They’re going all the way to 4000BC, and then the machine crashes. You must go and see it, sir,” said Mohammed. “There’s no control at all. They’re researching anything and everything without any regard for people’s feelings. I brought you one of the recordings. They’re even talking about putting it all on the Internet. That’s just so wrong.”

Cheatham looked grim. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention,” he said. “I’d like you to help us in the investigation.”

“I was just so angry,” explained Mohammed. “Especially that Christian fanatic guy. He says I must look at things with an open mind. And then he says sorry. I think he was just trying to insult us. No they shouldn’t have fiddled around with the machine like that. That’s when I decided it was better that you know. You have the authority to fix the situation and put things right again.”

“You did the right thing Mohammed,” said Cheatham. “It's good to know who puts the company's interests first.”

* * * * *

“Hello,” smiled the pimply faced youth on the screen, “my name is Kevin Niemandt, and this is my first historical revelation tape. Our subject today is Abraham Lincoln.” The screen faded and Kevin stood next to Abraham Lincoln in a theatre.

“Abraham Lincoln was shot in this theatre by John Wilkes Booth,” narrated Kevin. “There has been much speculation about the exact motives behind this, and the possibility of an unrevealed conspiracy.” At this point a man entered and drawing a revolver, shot Abraham Lincoln at close range.

“For the first time in modern history, we are going to get behind the scenes and see what really happened,” said Kevin.

“That’s enough, I get the idea,” said Sergio Howe. “Stop it.”

Cheatham stopped the replay. “This is not the only one. It’s been going on for over a week.”

“How much of this is there? How many people are involved?” asked Howe.

“As far as we can tell, it’s about half of the second year class,” said Cheatham. “They don’t seem to have any clear idea of what they’re looking for, which is a good thing. But they have compiled enough recordings to be quite damaging. Young Mohammed is feeling quite damaged already. If we don’t do anything, word is going to get out. I won’t be surprised if word has already got out.”

“Didn’t Dewey fix the machine?” frowned Howe.

“I guess he didn’t fix it well enough,” said Cheatham. “Maybe he was right after all.”

“I think if they were on to us, they would have acted by now. This story seems to be just the second years. Do you know if they’ve found out about us yet?” asked Howe.

“Well, there’s nothing out there yet,” said Cheatham, “but you can be sure that they will get it quite soon. It just takes one bright spark to ask the question, and all

our dirty laundry will be hanging on the public washing line."

"But they can't do this," said Howe. "They all signed the new contracts. No media from the machine is allowed to leave the company. Why don't we sue the lot of them for breach of contract? Hit them for a few million each. After we hit the first few ..."

"That won't work," interrupted Cheatham. "As soon as one of them talks, it will be enough. People will start asking us questions, and things will get very messy very quickly."

"Okay, I have another plan," said Howe.

14 Curiosity And The Cat

Joe and Frank sat in the cafeteria, contemplating cups of luke-warm tea. Outside they could see into the lobby of the terminal building.

An unmarked black van with darkened windows had parked on the paving outside the terminal building. A team of men wearing red overalls with the logo "BUG SQUASHING PARTY (Pty) Ltd" had hauled an assortment of dusty bags out of the van. All of them wore gas masks. Coughing students scattered away as the men approached in a cloud of acrid dust.

"Word on the street," said Frank, "is that there is an infestation of cockroaches on the fourth floor."

In confirmation of Frank's words, one of the men placed a large automatic signboard next to the lift door. In colourful animations it said, "MEN AT WORK, 4TH FLOOR". A little cartoon man shot a cloud of gas at a cartoon ant, which coughed, grasped its neck and exploded in a puff.

"I haven't seen a bug since the day I arrived," said Joe. "What do you think they're up to?"

The men with the gas masks loaded some obviously heavy equipment into the lift. Dangerous looking powder puffed here and there. The men in the gas masks coughed occasionally.

"I reckon they're onto us," said Frank.

"Why?" said Joe.

"Well, it's just that you're right. There aren't any bugs here. There never have been."

"So what do you think they're doing?" asked Joe.

"Probably they're fumigating," guessed Frank.

A campus security guard approached the black van and walked around it twice. He took out his personal radio and spoke briefly into it.

“I wonder what the second years are going to do?” said Frank. “Where are they going to do their assignments? They can’t exactly work in a place that’s being fumigated.”

“They’re not here any more,” explained Gerald, arriving in a most uninvited manner. “They’ve all been sent home. I think things got entirely out of hand with the paper aeroplane war on the day after Dewey died, and they broke some terminals or something.”

“Really?” asked Joe.

“Well,” said Gerald, “that’s what I think. Nobody spoke to them. While we were all tied up in that general campus meeting this morning, they all disappeared without a trace. I know a couple of those guys, but they didn’t even have the decency to say bye.”

“I heard something about a field trip,” said Joe. “Maybe that’s where they’ve gone?”

“That could explain it,” said Gerald.

“Isn’t that Cheatham?” asked Frank.

Cheatham’s red Mercedes and a number of smaller cars had arrived. A familiar looking retinue of bodyguards and official looking people followed the figure of the man in the suit into the lift in the terminal building.

“What’s he doing here?” wondered Gerald. “Do you think he’s coming to smell the fresh air of the fumigation team?”

A tow truck arrived. The driver began to hitch up the black van.

“Probably. Or maybe they’re not a fumigation team,” speculated Joe.

The illegally parked black van was towed away. As the tow truck turned, the nose of the van brushed against the side of the red Mercedes leaving a long unsightly black mark, and knocking the indicator off.

“Frank,” said Joe, looking suddenly worried, “I wonder if... if...”

“No, I don’t think so. Do you think...” began Frank.

“Well, they’ve done it before,” said Joe.

“What?” asked Gerald.

“Oh flip,” said Frank. He sat up and drew in a deep breath.

“Do you think they’re there?” asked Joe.

“Who?” asked Gerald.

“I think we have to check,” said Frank. “They might be. Otherwise where?”

“Who? Where? What’s going on?” asked Gerald.

“Come,” said Joe, taking him by the hand. “Just be quiet.”

Joe led Frank and a rather perplexed Gerald out of the canteen. They walked across the concourse towards the terminal building. As they walked into the foyer, one of Cheatham’s bodyguards appeared from the shadows and blocked the path.

“Go ’way,” he commanded.

Frank, Joe and Gerald stopped.

“We’ve got assignments to do,” offered Joe bravely. “On the fifth floor.”

“Go ’way,” insisted the bodyguard. His body language said, “or I will do something about it.”

The three students did an about turn and headed back to the canteen.

Gerald asked, “Do we want to go to the fifth floor?”

“No, the fourth,” said Frank. “To see.”

“Good. Come this way.” Gerald led the way back into the canteen. Ignoring the “staff only” sign on a door, he opened it, and led the other two up an unlit flight of stairs.

“Where does this go?” asked Frank.

“To the roof. I haven’t been this way for a year,” said Gerald. “You can walk across from here to the old fourth floor emergency exit of the terminal building.”

“You can?” asked Joe. “On what?”

After climbing a few flights of stairs, Gerald stopped and opened a dirty door labelled “Hazardous Area”. The door complained with a terrible creak as it opened, revealing a grubby landing without a guard rail preventing the unwary from falling a few floors to their death. They could see across to the terminal building twenty meters away.

“What’s the use of this?” asked Joe. “Did you bring a rope? We can’t exactly fly there.”

“Why not?” asked Gerald. Before anyone could stop him, he stepped off the landing into the void and stood ... on nothing.

“Super light, super strong, super fine, self cleaning, almost invisible safety mesh,” he explained. “This stuff is so good, you can only find it when you’re the screaming first year student that the fourth years are throwing from the building. They frightened the wits out of me. You’d better not tell, or they won’t let me do it next year. Just don’t step over the edge.” With those words he walked across on thin air to the terminal building.

Gingerly Frank and Joe tested the invisible walkway. It seemed solid enough, so they started across. As they walked on the walkway, the lines it was composed of became faintly visible and dissolved again beneath their steps. They joined Gerald on a similar landing at the terminal building where he was was prising open the emergency exit door with an extension of his cell phone which somewhat resembled a can opener.

“What’s with the invisible gang plank?” asked Joe. “I didn’t know such a thing existed.”

“Oh it’s the last project by the polymer physics research group, just before they got disbanded,” explained Gerald, fiddling with the door. “You remember, this was a university before DC and H got it? Well, they funded a polymer research unit for five years before they realised that it wasn’t part of their core business. The people who built this thing are still so angry at the way the company shut down the project that they didn’t let the company know what they had achieved. They all went to Brazil or something.

“So,” whispered Gerald, as the door swung open, “now that we’re here, would you ladies mind telling me what we are doing here?”

“I think they might be fumigating the second year students,” said Joe. “If you know what I mean.”

Gerald did not really know what Joe meant, but nodded encouragingly. “Why?” he asked.

“We know that they know too much, but nobody knows that we know that they know,” clarified Frank, helpfully.

The three stepped into a narrow corridor that ran the length of the building. Water pipes, electrical cabling and bits of nondescript plastic tape protruded from the wall and went through ducts in the ceiling and the floor.

Gerald led the three to a glass door from where they could see into the fourth floor terminal hall.

“I hope this is one way glass,” said Frank.

“We’re quite safe, but it’s not soundproof,” whispered Gerald. “Say, where’s the fumes these fumigator men are supposed to be making?”

“There’s one of them,” said Joe. “What’s he carrying?”

“It looks like a media device,” answered Gerald.

The fumigator coughed loudly and struggled with his gas mask. Contorting his body, he ripped off the suffocating device and threw it on the ground. He began to fiddle with one of the terminals, opening the access panel. Reaching in he unplugged it’s memory device, adding it to his collection.

“Say, isn’t that Mo?” asked Gerald.

“No,” said Frank, “I think he just looks like him. Mo’s a happy looking chap. That guy ... although you know, it’s quite a resemblance.” He squinted at the figure through the dusty glass.

The fumigator was joined by other fumigators, pushing the machine that had earlier been loaded into the lift. Each fumigator took his collected media devices, and loaded it into the machine.

“No, look again,” said Joe, rubbing the dust away from the glass with a corner of his shirt. “It is Mohammed. Look at the way he fidgets. He always did that when I talked to him.”

Gerald started fidgeting.

Cheatham arrived, and nodded to a man who appeared to be supervising the operation. The man

pressed a button on the machine, and there was a flash of bright light from its interior. The man tapped Mohammed on his shoulder, and Mohammed put his gas mask back on. Cheatham stood back while a pile of smouldering cinders was removed from the incinerator and dumped in a refuse bag. He breathed in some of the acrid fumes and gagged a bit.

"It looks like they're destroying the media devices," whispered Gerald. "Why are they doing that?"

"Come, lets go," said Frank. "It's a long story."

"I'm just glad they're frying the terminals and not the second year students," said Joe. "I'm not sure what we would have done."

"I wonder where they are?" said Frank.

* * * * *

Martin Cheatham, looking absurdly confident, sat in the office of John Allen. Next to him sat Sergio Howe, looking intensely uncomfortable, despite the fact that the chair he occupied had been advertised as ideal for curing back ache. Allen sat behind his desk. A man in a suit sat next to Cheatham, with a man in uniform next to him. At the door stood a quiet and dangerous looking man in a black suit, wearing dark glasses.

"So that's it," said Cheatham. "You get the machine, and we get a retirement plan and a blanket indemnity."

"I can't believe you guys would pull a stunt like that. We suspected a lot of things, but not that. But we would have had your system years ago as well, if you had used our libraries instead of the open source ones. I still don't get it. Why do you want to give it away now?" asked Allen.

"Because we need the indemnity. You'll see. And you need the machine," said Cheatham. "We know you've been watching us for years. Now you can have it. Provided you don't go after us."

"Why don't we just wait until the thing that you're worried about comes out," said the man in the suit. "Then we go after you and get the machine anyway."

Howe squirmed and looked even more uncomfortable.

"If we can't agree today, then we will make the machine's output public. And after that there won't necessarily be any more output. It's going to hurt us, but it's going to destroy you politically." Cheatham still looked ridiculously confident.

The man in the suit raised an eyebrow. "Look," he said, "we understand that you've got us in a hard place. We certainly don't want the cosy relationship between our department and Microsoft to become public knowledge. That would set us back more than just a few years. We would have every single hacker on the planet ripping into our systems instead of the other way around."

The man in uniform spoke up. "Not to mention that we'd look mighty stupid. We've been funding SETI 2 and the space projects for years. It's now one of the biggest reasons for support for this administration. They'll crucify us if you go public."

"Well," said the man in the suit, "if we do what the corporation has been doing, then we're not going to have any problems."

The man in uniform said, "The public is doing well enough with an evolutionary understanding of history. I don't see how replacing that with what the machine shows would be of any great benefit. We shouldn't rock the boat. The voting is going exactly the way we want it to. Besides that, my department would benefit greatly from having direct access to the machine."

"Besides us, does anyone else know?" asked Allen.

"We've established that it's limited to just a few people at the moment," said Cheatham. "We've made an interim plan, but we can't keep things on hold indefinitely."

"Okay, so that's the deal," said the man in the suit. "I'll arrange the indemnity for you two."

"I'll sort out the handover," said Allen.

"We look forward to working with that equipment," said the man in uniform.

“That’s what you think,” said Howe, without expression.

“Okay, are we agreed then?” asked Cheatham.

“Agreed,” said the three men. Howe remained silent.

The meeting adjourned.

Corporate plane crash

Ageing 747 slams into dormant volcano

C&H corporation lost its corporate jet today in a freak accident. The ageing Boeing 747 slammed into the slopes of Mount Etna yesterday in what is described by Italian police as a navigational error.

Villagers near the scene of the crash report hearing a loud explosion. Wreckage was strewn over a wide area. Aviation investigators are on the scene and are trying to recover the flight recorder.

An eyewitness said it appeared that the jet crashed into the side of the mountain after losing altitude.

"I saw the plane coming over when I was standing here. It was flying really low," said Mario Bellini, a local wine farmer. "I think that's the reason it crashed. They were flying too low, and the mountain is quite high."

C&H corporation bought the ageing Boeing 747 from British Airways in 2117 as part of that airline's closing down sale. The jet was used by the corporation for around the world trips on which they collected high altitude atom samples. These are used for calibrating the corporation's history acquisition machine.

Of the 289 second year students and crew on board there are no known survivors. Operations at C&H have been temporarily suspended as the company mourns the loss of their trainee staff. The names of the deceased have not yet been released, as their next of kin have not been informed. Concerned relatives have been encouraged to call the company head office.

C&H Corporation recently suffered the loss of one of its founder members Bartholomew Alexander Dewey, who committed suicide. It appears that it is finally buckling under government pressure to be nationalised.

Martin Cheatham, managing director of C&H Corporation said that the loss of the second

year class was a great setback for the company. "We will be consulting with government to establish ways of moving forward from this difficult and awkward position. This will involve drawing in state expertise, in return for control of the company."

The C&H Corporation share price fell by 78.3% before trade in the share was suspended. Analysts say that the situation is unprecedented, but that the government intervention that the chairman has called for appears to be legally mandated by the crisis. A payout of 10c per dollar is expected.

Critics of the plan claim that it amounts to the valuable corporation being nationalised. However, taken together, minority shareholders do not have

enough votes to overturn the decision.

It is expected that the regulator will approve the plan over the objections of minorities. It is known that minority shareholders in C&H corporation have particularly poor political connections.

15 All Things Bright And Beautiful

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” whispered Frank. He stood nervously in the front row, next to Joe, who was trying to sing.

“Sure. Just be yourself,” said Joe.

The man with the poorly tuned guitar finally stopped playing, and the unduly enthusiastic singing ended. The small hall was packed with people, including some standing at the back. Only the front row of chairs was empty, and at the back of the hall there was some movement as people tried to see if they could still get in.

Harold Freedman stood up and stood at the microphone, just in front of a low stage. “Welcome to our sharing service,” he said. “I'm glad to see so many visitors – we don't often fill the first two rows. I've only got one announcement for this evening, which is that we're still looking out for someone to stand in for Howard, who was going to speak next week on the subject of 'Does God keep his commitments?' If you have something you would like to share, have a word with me after the service. Before we continue, I'd like you to greet the person behind you.” Everyone began to greet the back of someone that had turned around, and Harold beckoned to Joe, who stood up and joined him at the microphone.

Harold interrupted the chaotic pleasantries being exchanged among the congregation. “I know that our regular members here at our church know Joe. Joe’s one of the few from the company who fellowship here regularly. We're giving him an opportunity to share with us tonight. I understand that Joe and Frank have a

presentation for us." The assembled people applauded politely as Joe took the microphone.

"Good evening folks," began Joe, with a genuine Joe smile. "Thank you for coming out tonight, especially all the visitors. Almost all of you believe, as we have been taught, that the world is millions of years old. Rocks are millions of years old. Dinosaurs lived millions of years ago. We've been told that the same geological processes which are happening in the present formed the earth into its current form. What we have been told leaves no room for the history recorded in the Bible. This has always been something of a problem.

"What Frank is going to show you is the truth of what we discovered on the company machine. Before someone objects that we are not allowed to release company material, I'd just like to point out that this material is not from the last five years which is covered by the data retention law, and, being over 150 years old, it is no longer covered by copyright." There was a murmur among the audience as people whispered their thoughts about this unusual treatment of intellectual property.

"I'm going to hand over to my friend and brother Frank. If there's time afterwards, we'll try to answer your questions too. Over to you Frank."

Frank stood up, and took the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began uncomfortably, before being briefly interrupted by a squeal of feedback. He had the control for the projector in his other hand, and looked fabulously awkward. The room, which was full of people, was absolutely quiet. "The material you are about to see has changed my life. And even if it doesn't change life, it will probably rock your boat more than anything else we could show you." He grinned and added, "And when I say 'rock your boat', I mean the boat part literally."

Miss Voleikov, sitting in the fifth row caught Frank's eye. Somehow he hadn't seen her until then. He didn't quite know what to make of it. The rest of the room

suddenly disappeared, and for a moment he didn't know what to say, so he said, "Um." Someone sneezed.

Mercifully, Miss Voleikov looked away, and Frank continued. "Er, we don't have a 3D projector, so I hope you don't mind if it's a little primitive. Of course, there aren't subtitles, so I'll try to explain as we go along. We're starting at around two thousand five hundred BC, and you'll see why." He pressed play.

On the screen, four men, probably all forty years old or so, were painting a wooden wall with pitch. The picture zoomed out until the men were only just visible as specks on the medium resolution image. The wooden wall was part of a large ship – the size of an ocean liner, or larger.

"That ship is the ark, and we think that the men working on it are Noah and Sons, but I, er we, don't know who is who," said Frank. "They don't have name tags, and they don't speak English. The ship's about the length of a double soccer field, and in this view it was about finished."

The men continued their work, and for a moment the hall was totally quiet – without the ruffling of papers, shuffling or coughing. Frank cleared his throat, and the sound was amplified by the sound system, setting off a chorus of coughs.

The picture on the screen changed. One of the men was holding a large bread roll, and using it to coax fourteen small sheep, and two large cats, one of which looked like a lion and the other like a tiger, across a wooden gangway into his ship. Why there was such an odd mix of animals, and why the cats were interested in the bread was not entirely clear. A pair of young giraffes followed behind. The entrance to the ship was rather large, but the giraffes were not particularly big, so such a large door didn't seem necessary.

"They started loading the ship about seven days before the rain started," explained Frank. "They seem to have woken up one day and decided that it needed to be done."

The picture followed the herd of animals into the ship. One of the cats made a sudden move, and flawlessly grabbed the entire loaf of bread out of the man's hand. He gave it a sharp smack on the nose. The bread fell out of its mouth onto the deck, and there was a brief scuffle between a few of the sheep and the cat, from which the man emerged with the loaf in hand. Somehow, there were no injuries.

Holding the bread high above his head he led the way down a wooden ramp into the depths of the ship.

There were rows upon rows of cages containing mostly young animals. Most of the cages contained just two, but some contained a few more, and sometimes there was a cage jam packed with all kinds of animals. The man walked past ducks, geese or swans or some combination of those, a cage containing medium sized cats, cages containing slightly woolly elephants, gorillas, chimpanzees and some rather strange looking variations on the orang-utan. There was a pair of bears in a larger cage. One looked like a brown polar bear, and the other like a panda. Not impressed by the variety of wildlife on show, most of the animals looked spectacularly bored.

There was a larger cage shared by two rhinoceros and a single tyrannosaurus rex. The smaller tyrannosaurus rex was sharing a cage with a pair of zebra-striped horses.

The man opened the door to the adjoining large cage, and coaxed all the sheep and the big cats into it together. He threw the bread into the far corner and, as the animals pounced on it, he closed the door behind them.

The camera left the man behind and went further into the ship. There were many small cages for smaller animals here. There were rats, rabbits and squirrels all together in one cage. There was a pair of wild looking hares, one of which clearly thought that digging a hole in the corner of the cage was possible. There were bats, lizards, badgers, beavers, chickens, koala bears, the platypus (but you wouldn’t know just looking at it).

“You’ll notice that it starts off very neatly – birds and mammals and reptiles all separated, but it looks as if they started stuffing the animals in wherever they would fit physically and have the correct food,” explained Frank. “Or maybe they did have a plan, and I just can’t figure it out. It's really quite hard to figure out exactly, because I can't read the labels.”

The scene projected on the screen changed. It showed a cheerful sunny day.

“This was the last day,” said Frank.

Noah and his three sons were standing on the wooden gangway of the ship. They were all trying to close the door, which was stuck to the hull of the ship with pitch. The door had been painted with pitch since the last scene, and had somehow become glued into position, or the pitch had seeped into the hinges and solidified. It would not budge. The three were heaving against a large pole with which they were trying to shift the door. The door was not moving, and the lever kept on slipping out of position. They stopped and had a little chat. They looked out wistfully at the scenery.

A woman came from inside the ship, and said something which sounded remarkably like “there’s a telephone call for you”, but which probably meant, “you guys should take a break, I’ve made some scones.” The four men reluctantly put down the pole and trooped off inside.

“And this is the interesting part,” said Frank. A couple of leaves tripped past in a light breeze.

The young man operating the sound desk suddenly realised that the mute button for the projector had been pressed in. He corrected his mistake, as the previously immovable door began to close, as if blown along with the leaves by the wind. The door slammed tightly shut, and a hidden bolt fell loudly into place. An old man in the tenth row dropped his hearing aid onto the floor as he tried to adjust it for the sudden noise.

The ship stood still in the sun. The sound of a few restless animals could be heard inside. Someone banged on the door from the inside. It became quiet.

With a sudden roar, the ship was struck by a twenty metre high wall of water. It disappeared from sight as the entire screen was covered in spray for a moment. There was an awful creaking sound, as if the ship was about to break into two. Along with the wave came trees, a horse and a rhinoceros, and the body of a woman. The camera followed the ship, which made a groaning sound, and lifted off the ground, now floating on the water. The water grew a little calmer. Many little animals which had been under the water until now came to the surface, and swam desperately for the nearest flotsam. A fully grown brontosaurus washed past, struggling ineffectively against the surf.

A second wave came, from the opposite side. This wave was ten metres higher than the level of the water, and the spray splashed over the ark. The ship tipped in a most dangerous fashion and then righted itself, and drifted slowly from the screen. An incredibly strong wind began to blow, and first dust, then leaves, then branches, and then small and larger trees blew past.

It grew dark, and a few individual drops spattered visibly against the already wet sides of the ark. The rain increased steadily until it was difficult to see the ark.

"It really did rain for forty days," said Frank. "Just like you see it starting, it went on, and on and on."

A new scene appeared on the screen. It was the ark, serenely floating on the sea. The sea was not blue, but brown. Here and there dead things floated – parts of trees, reptiles, fish and birds. More than a few birds were perched on the roof of the ark. They seemed tired and listless.

"This is 40 days into the flood," explained Frank. "The rain has more or less stopped, and all those birds I guess can't find any dry land. I'll show you a zoomed out picture of the globe."

The screen zoomed back from the ark. The circle of the earth appeared. The entire globe was covered in ... water and cloud. There was not an inch of land to be

seen. A huge cyclone could be seen in the southern part of the oceans.

"The other side is the same," said Frank. "It seems as if the continents and high mountains as we have them now are quite recent phenomena."

The screen changed again. It showed the ship stranded on a muddy island with the sea lapping all around it. There were lots of little islands dotted all around.

"This is seven months into the flood," Frank explained. "The water has run off the continents, and the ark has come down. You'll notice that all those birds we saw earlier are gone – they flew off and drowned, or died of starvation." If you look at the mud, you'll see it's got sea creatures embedded in it. That's how all that stuff got there.

"And after a year," said Frank, "we get this." The screen showed the ship, with a large part of the roof missing. Next to the ship stood a large pile of rocks, on which a large fire was burning. Noah and his family seemed to be having a barbecue, but they weren't paying attention to the meat. Noah lifted his hands to heaven and prayed. In the distance was a rainbow.

"When I was in school," Frank explained, "they taught us that things on earth have been going on more or less as we see them now for millions of years. I never actually saw the evidence for this, but I believed it anyway. Now, while I was working for DC&H I saw the pictures for myself, and it wasn't what they taught me at school. You know, my parents taught me the truth when I was young. I always knew they were sincere, but I never suspected they were right. I'm sure a lot of you are in the same situation as I was. I encourage you to think again about the Bible. I thought that if it started with a huge scientific error nothing in it was trustworthy. So when I discovered that it started with the truth, I had to repent, and put my faith in Jesus – just like my parents taught me to do. I encourage you to do the same."

Joe stood up, “Thanks Frank.” He stopped Frank as he was about to leave the stage, saying, “And now, there may be questions. If Frank has any trouble answering them, I’m sure he’ll ask me.” He grinned, and sat down at a safe distance in the second row.

A young man sitting at the back stood up and asked, “How can your recording be correct if it shows dinosaurs and man living together? That’s impossible, since the dinosaurs were extinct one hundred million years ago, and man only evolved ten thousand years ago. Scientifically what you’ve showed us is nonsense.”

“That’s exactly the problem,” said Frank. “The recording shows what actually happened. So that means what we’ve been told as fact is not actually correct, at least as far as the dinosaurs and man connection goes.”

“So are you trying to say the Bible is literally true?” responded the young man.

“Well, it certainly looks that way,” said Frank. “From what I’ve seen, that view fits with the evidence.”

A middle aged woman stood up. She was dressed smartly, and spoke with the sort of accent that one acquires at a private school. “I want to ask you,” she enunciated, “how we can see stars that are a few billion light years away if the world is only six thousand years old? Are you able to shed any light on that?”

“Well,” said Frank, “that’s a problem for the astrophysicists to sort out. The point is, they don’t have that many years to play with. If your theory needs a few billion years, then there’s a problem with your data or with your interpretation, or both.”

“So you’re saying that if established scientific fact disagrees with your recording it must be wrong?” she asked.

“I suppose you could put it that way,” Frank said.

A friendly looking balding man in the audience raised a hand. Frank invited him to speak. “Do you really think,” asked the man, “that this is a responsible way to present the gospel to modern people?”

“I’m sorry?” said Frank, “I don’t think I understand your question.”

“Okay, I’ll try to explain,” explained the friendly balding man. “When Christianity was confronted with the scientific evidence for evolution, the theologians realised that what Genesis actually teaches us is that God did everything using evolution. So now we take science as our starting point and use that to interpret the Bible. But taking a literalist approach like you are doing just turns people off. What I’m saying is that what you have done is a presentation of the literalist viewpoint, but that we don’t teach that any more.”

“Well, yes,” said Frank. “It would be more of a literal view because it’s what came off the machine about what happened back then.”

The balding man remained friendly. “That’s exactly my problem – you are presenting the myth as if it is true and that doesn’t help people to believe the Bible is true. I could just as easily make up a fictional account of the Gilgamesh epic with Microsoft Visual Worlds, but we hardly want people to believe that either. The only thing that we should be concentrating on is preaching the gospel. We should just preach the gospel, and avoid this kind of distracting illustration. We've moved on.”

“Well, actually we didn’t make this with Microsoft Virtual Worlds,” protested Frank. “It’s direct off the company machine.”

“It doesn’t matter where you got it,” insisted the balding man, “As responsible Christians, we can’t just go and rubbish years of accumulated research in geology, biology and evolution and think that people are going to take us seriously. I’ve been preaching to students for years, and I’ll tell you that you’ve got to bend over backwards to make them listen to your point of view. They won’t listen if you start with scientific nonsense. We should concentrate on preaching the gospel. That’s what people really need to hear.”

The man sat down, and didn’t seem so friendly any more.

There weren’t any more questions.

The meeting was closed off with the obligatory prayer, and an invitation to coffee. The previously friendly balding man thankfully didn't take up the invitation, leaving via the side door.

Frank sipped his cup of coffee, and hoped against good sense that nobody would talk to him. A small crowd gathered.

An old man, probably seventy years old gave Frank a hearty pat on the back. "I am so glad that this matter has finally been laid to rest," he said. "This thing has been a thorn in the side of Christianity since before Darwin. I praise God for revealing it to you, and I pray that he gives you the strength to go on making it known. And good on you for telling the bishop off." He grasped both of Frank's hands and shook them firmly, somehow not spilling Frank's coffee. "God bless you."

"Hi," said a teenager, "my name's Steve. Would you mind if I get a copy of your presentation? It's really impressive." He helpfully offered a media device.

"Sure," said Frank as he linked up his device with the teenager's. "I'll copy the whole archive for you while I'm at it. The good stuff on Jesus is there too."

"Can you give me a copy of your scripts as well?" asked Steve.

"Which scripts?" said Frank.

"The Microsoft Virtual Worlds scripts," explained Steve.

"We didn't use it – it's real. You'll see there's no Microsoft watermark. We got it straight off the DC&H machine."

"You mean ... wow ... you know, I thought that that guy said it was a Virtual Worlds presentation?" said Steve.

"I don't think he did, and he was wrong anyway," explained Frank. The teenager was speechless. He looked at his media device with great interest, and pressed "play", wandering off into the corner, with other teenagers following.

A voice with a very slight Russian accent said, "I really enjoyed your presentation." It was Miss Voleikov.

“Oh, hello, thank you,” said Frank, smiling nervously.

“You know, you remind me of someone.” She smiled disarmingly. Frank suddenly remembered why he loved Russian. “I think I have a student who reminds me of you,” she said. “What is your name again?” she asked.

16 Getting Nailed

Frank looked at it again. He still didn't get it. The bread they started with was definitely five large buns. And everyone took about a quarter of a bun. And everyone got some, and then more. The problem was he couldn't actually see where the bread came from. He rewound the player and pressed play again.

“I'm bored,” complained Gerald. “Do you think they will ever turn the machine back on?”

“Look at that,” said Frank. He paused the playback. “You see, here,” he pointed at some bread on the screen, “it's about five centimetres across.” He went forward by one frame, “But here, it's five point five centimetres across. Do you see?”

“Sure, so what?” asked Gerald. “There's more bread. I'm still bored.”

“It's a miracle,” explained Frank.

“It's not a miracle that I'm bored,” said Gerald. “You've been looking at that scene for half an hour. It’s starting to make me hungry now. I want to play superhero again. Didn't you maybe record something interesting?”

“You don't get it, do you?” asked Frank. “There's Jesus, feeding five thousand people with some scraps of bread and a bit of fish. Doesn't that tell you something about him?”

“Yes, it tells me he was one strange man,” replied Gerald. “Give that thing here, I'll find you something interesting.” He took the player from Frank.

“Look up the crucifixion and the resurrection,” said Frank. “Then you'll understand.”

“Whatever,” said Gerald, fiddling with the controls on the player. “I think he had a bad hairstyle. Now

just compare that Judas guy. At least he had style." Gerald showed a picture of a bearded man to Frank.

"You think you're very funny," frowned Frank. "Do you think anything in life is serious?"

"How about this?" said Gerald, adjusting the controls.

There was a knock at the door. Frank got up to open it, and was almost knocked over by ten men dressed in black military uniforms who barged into the room. One of the men was filming the raid with a portable camera.

"Hands on your head," shouted the leader, as his helpers twisted Frank and Gerald's arms behind their backs, making it impossible to place them on their heads.

"Look here, captain," said a serious sounding man with a name tag "Christiansen". He showed the media player to the leader. Indicating to Gerald, Christiansen said gravely, "He had it."

Gerald's face said, "Who me?"

"Good work sergeant. Bring them both," commanded the captain. "It's not our job to sort it all out. And bring that thing along too. Christiansen, Clinton, Cartwright, you three, come with me, and bring the prisoners. The rest of you, I want every last speck of this room in evidence bags."

Without any explanation of what was happening, Frank and Gerald were hustled out of the room, and frog marched down the hallway.

"Hold on," protested Gerald, "what's this about? I'm not involved in this."

Christiansen tightened his grip on Gerald. "Shut up," he requested, less than politely.

"Youch!" cried Gerald. "Okay, okay!"

Frank didn't say anything, and didn't get abused in the same way.

The men walked their prisoners out of the service entrance of the residence and bundled Gerald and Frank into the back of a black van with darkened windows. Before they closed the doors Frank saw that they were joining Joe and Jeremy van Turken, of all

people. Joe and Jeremy sat slightly subdued on a bench that ran the length of the rear of the van. Jeremy looked slightly pale.

“Hi Frank,” said Joe, with an air of resignation.

“Hello Joe,” sighed Frank. “I see you brought Jeremy.” The van began to move off.

“I didn't ask to come on this little trip,” complained Jeremy. “I was just asking if Joe could help me with the physics assignment – you know, the one about the interface between general relativity and quantum mechanics – and then these goons bust down the door and drag us off. I'm not impressed. You guys never struck me as drug dealers. Shows how wrong a person can be.”

“Drug dealers?” asked Gerald, incredulously.

“Well, that's what it's all about, isn't it?” whined Jeremy. “Joe was saying, 'Let me show you something,' and I still thought he was giving me this media player when the drug squad busts in and takes it as evidence. I'm sure it's full of poppers.”

There was a brief silence in the back of the van.

“What?” asked Jeremy, in response to Frank, Joe and Gerald staring questioningly at him.

Frank started with a snigger. Gerald responded with a suppressed laugh. Joe put the finishing touches on the cacophony with a hearty laugh. Jeremy was not quite sure what to do, and alternated between laughing and embarrassed silence.

“Sorry,” said Frank, as the laughing subsided. “We should explain.”

“We should explain,” agreed Joe.

“Yes, indeed,” said Gerald, and they all burst out laughing again.

“You guys *are* on drugs!” accused Jeremy, only increasing the laughter, as the van came to a halt.

The rear door of the van opened, revealing Sergeant Christiansen.

“Out!” he commanded. The men who had hustled Frank and Joe off were there too, along with a few

more, who stood with their hands on their automatic weapons.

Still sniggering, Gerald, Joe and Frank stumbled out of the van into an underground parking area.

“You too,” said Christiansen as Jeremy reluctantly followed.

“I just want to say,” protested Jeremy, “I've got nothing to do with these guys.”

“Sure kid,” said Christiansen. “Just don't think that I care. Move along.”

The laughter subsided, and the four stood uncomfortably next to the van as the doors were closed. The soldiers helped the four towards and into a lift. There wasn't a lot of free space in the lift with eight soldiers and four captives. The overload light flickered on, and then went off again. One of the soldiers pressed the button for the eighth floor.

“This is the administration block,” whispered Gerald. The soldiers glared at him, but did not protest that he was talking.

“Where are we going?” asked Jeremy.

“Up,” explained one of the soldiers, gruffly. The other soldiers laughed, and relaxed a little.

The doors opened on the eighth floor. The soldiers and their prisoners stepped out of the lift. The captain led the way along the drab corridors, and stopped at an oak door. He knocked, waited a moment, and entered, closing the door behind him.

“I wonder how many oak trees they cut down for this door,” said Gerald.

“Quiet,” commanded one of the soldiers, politely jabbing Gerald on his sore shoulder.

“Say,” said Frank, to one of the soldiers, “which branch are you guys from?”

“Special intelligence operations,” said the soldier. “We're seconded here for security. And you guys keep talking, which is irritating me.” He jabbed Frank's back. “Shut up.”

After a brief pause, during which Jeremy glared at Joe, the captain returned. “Bring them in,” he commanded.

The four were ushered into the company boardroom, where Howe and Cheatham sat around the polished boardroom table which they had inherited from the university senate.

Howe sulked over a cup of black coffee, while Cheatham pored over a mass of printed documents in double spacing bearing official stamps. He continued to read the papers as the four were ushered into the room. The other soldiers went outside, and the captain stayed to guard the dangerous prisoners. He placed the two media players that they had confiscated earlier on the table.

Howe glared over his cup of coffee.

“You know why you are here,” said Cheatham, not looking up. He scribbled a note on a paper in front of him.

“Sir,” said Jeremy, “I would just like to say that ....”

“Shut up!” shouted Howe. He crumpled up his paper cup and threw it in the direction of Jeremy. “Bunch of morons. Who cares. Just expel them all.”

“Well, well,” said Cheatham, ignoring Howe. “You're the famous four. Are any of you perhaps familiar with section 7 paragraph 3 (e) of the standard terms and conditions?”

Gerald looked at Joe, hoping to find an answer to this probing question. Joe was looking at Jeremy, who was looking at his shoes. Frank was looking out of the window at birds flying by.

“It says you're not supposed to be poking around our machine,” growled Howe, glaring across the boardroom table.

“And you will also be familiar with section 9 paragraph 5 (j) of the contract you signed when you joined the company,” suggested Cheatham.

Frank was a little unfamiliar with the exact wording of the thirty page document, and said “Er”.

“Nothing, nothing, nothing from the machine may leave the company without clearance from the security desk,” snarled Howe.

“So how is it then,” asked Cheatham, more loudly, and emphatically, “that I find myself having to explain to our new friends in government about this?” Cheatham picked up Joe’s portable media player and slammed it down onto the boardroom table. It made a nasty mark in the polished wood, and the casing cracked down the middle.

It was quiet for a moment.

“Which one of you did this?” asked Howe menacingly. “Or was it all of you?”

“I've been trying to tell you, sir,” squeaked Jeremy, “I don't even know what this is about.”

The captain spoke up. “Those media devices we found were with these two.” He indicated to Gerald and Jeremy.

“Sir,” said Frank, “if you could tell us what we are accused of doing, then perhaps we can respond.”

“One of you made a recording, and put it on BlargShare. We want to know who made this recording,” said Cheatham. “Otherwise we're going to expel you all.”

The broken media player suddenly began to play a scene showing a man's body being carried by mourners through a garden towards a man made cave. There was a sudden fuzz, and it played the same snippet again and again.

Joe spoke up. “Mr Cheatham, Mr Howe. I know what you did.” He paused, as the words sank in. Cheatham and Howe gave him their full attention. “I just want to tell you that no matter what you've done, it's never too late. Don't you remember the clip Miss Henry showed you? Jesus died for your sins. For your sins, Mr Howe, and your sins too, Mr Cheatham.”

“Shut up!” shouted Cheatham, rising from his chair. “I don't need you to lecture me!”

“You can't go on rebelling against God indefinitely,” said Joe, boldly. “God is calling you to account, but

there's mercy if you repent. Jesus didn't die for the righteous, but for sinners, and ...”

Joe stopped speaking as Cheatham picked up a glass ashtray and threw it at him. The ashtray narrowly missed the captain, and broke into pieces against something hard. Cheatham knocked his chair back and lunged towards Joe. As he was passing Howe, Howe pushed his chair back. Cheatham tripped and sprawled on the floor at Joe's feet. In a flash Howe jumped on him and held him down.

“Martin!” shouted Howe. “Don't you see? He's right. We always said it was too late. That's why we kept on.” A tear ran down his red cheek.

“Get off me Sergio! And shut up!” Cheatham struggled against Howe's weight, but couldn't shift him.

“You never listen to anyone. We should never have done it. Why did I ever listen to you?”

“As I recall, it was your idea,” said Cheatham.

“I'm such a stupid fool,” said Howe, and began to cry pitifully.

As he became more and more emotional, Howe became less and less effective at holding Cheatham down. Cheatham threw him off, and Howe lay on the floor whimpering to himself. “Yes, Sergio,” said Cheatham scornfully, pulling his clothes back into place, “you are a stupid fool. I think I've had about enough of this.”

Without even looking at Joe or the others, Cheatham returned to his place at the boardroom table. Finding a fresh page, he quickly wrote five lines in lawyer's scrawl, and signed it with a flourish and a scowl.

“You're expelled. All of you. Refund of all benefits required, as per section 11 paragraph 17 (a). Get out.” Passing the paper he had written to the soldier, he said, “Captain, special treatment for the one with the big mouth, as indicated.”

C&H board member jumps

Company share price falls again

C&H Corporation suffered another setback in what appears to be an ongoing struggle with staff. During its nationalisation conversion, the dynamic corporation, which has access to historical archives for the last five years, has suffered the loss of its second director in as many months.

Sergio Howe is reported to have committed suicide by jumping off the roof of the cafeteria building on the C&H campus after a brief stand-off with security officials.

"We are saddened by the loss of such a brilliant and principled man," said C&H spokesman Mohammed Faizal, who interrupted his Friday prayers to respond to the incident. "Our head of security was still negotiating with him to try to stop him from jumping," said Faizal, "and then he was gone. We called the emergency services, and they are on the scene trying to recover the body."

In other C&H news, company insiders say that seven students were dismissed from the internship programme for breach of contract. The reasons for their dismissal were not announced by the company, but an unnamed source informed this writer that their dismissal is connected with the fraudulent recordings which have been widely distributed via BurbleShare, and malicious damage to an official company vehicle. At the time of going to press, we have been unable to verify this information.

17 It Ain't Necessarily So

Joe stumbled out of the glare of the sunlight into the dark room as the door slammed behind him. Slowly his eyes adjusted to the dimmer light. The cell was about ten by five metres, and was full of people.

“Hey mun,” welcomed a slightly foreign voice. “What you in doin' here mun?” The speaker was a short man with dreadlocks and, strangely, lily white skin.

“Hello,” answered Joe hesitantly, “I'm Joe.” All his life he had managed to stay out of dark alleys, and now he was faced with a welcoming committee from one.

A wiry man with two days of beard spoke up. “You got hash, Joe?” he demanded.

“I haven't got anything,” said Joe. “They even took my glasses.”

“Have some hash,” offered a tattooed man generously, thrusting a small object into Joe's hand. “It's good,” he explained. The men of the welcoming committee laughed.

Joe examined the object, which seemed to be the top of a glass bottle. “I'm sorry, guys,” he said, “I can't take this.” He offered it back to the tattooed man, who didn't take it.

“No worries mun,” said the lily white Australian Rasafarian. “It will do you good. Here, I'll show you, mun.” He took out a pipe of some sort, drew a deep breath, and exhaled some sickly sweet smoke into the already stinky room.

“Have some hash,” commanded a tall dark man.

Looking the tall dark man in the eye, Joe explained. “I can't take drugs because I'm a Christian.”

Someone sighed deeply. “Another one of Jesus' disciples, bringing light to a dark world,” complained the tattooed man. He snatched the pipe from Joe's

hand. The convicts returned to various corners of the cell, muttering to each other, except for the tall dark man.

“Have some hash,” he offered. He was really tall, and seemed to be ready for a fight.

“Leave him alone, Ramon,” called a man from across the cell. Ramon glared at Joe briefly, and then headed off to a corner of the cell and began to do pull ups.

“Come here, have a seat,” offered Joe's defender. He was probably about sixty years old, and looked like he hadn't had a bath in all that time.

“Nice bunch of guys,” commented Joe, sitting down on a rather dirty bed.

“So you're Joe. I'm Dick, although for some reason these guys insist on calling me Richard.” He smiled, putting down the newspaper he was reading. “I'm glad to have another Christian here. It's been almost lonely with just me and Ramon praying together.”

“Ramon?” asked Joe. “That big guy who offered me hash?”

“He's got a terrible sense of humour,” said Dick. “Besides, it's good to know who's real and who isn't.”

“What are you in here for?” asked Joe, a little suspicious.

“Careful! You're not at the mall any more. Most people here will rip you to shreds for asking that.”

“Sorry then,” apologised Joe. “Should I not ask?”

“Well, in my case, you're welcome to know. I'm here for disturbing the peace, vandalism, hooliganism, and being a public nuisance in general.”

“Yeah Richard,” agreed a voice from across the cell. “You're a real vandal.”

“What did you do?” asked Joe, curious.

“Street evangelism,” said Dick darkly. “I happened to speak to someone who has connections. But this is where the Lord has put me, and this is where I'm going to stay.”

“Oh,” said Joe. “I see. Things have been a little rough since those freedom of religion laws I guess.”

“What brings you here? Are you also on a mission?” smiled Dick.

“Well, I wouldn't put it that way,” said Joe. “Officially I'm here for fraud, theft and indecent assault, but unofficially it's for calling evolution a lie. I put together that history archive.”

“Ramon!” shouted Dick. “Come over here and listen up.”

Ramon came and sat on the bed next to Joe.

“Joe here is the man who did the Internet history exposé.”

Ramon examined Joe like a butcher examines a cut of meat. “I love you brother,” he said gravely, and gave Joe a huge hug.

“You'll be interested in this,” said Dick to Joe, taking up his newspaper again. “You've caused quite a stir.”

“That's good,” said Joe. “People have been deceived by this evolution story for far too long. Even I believed it.”

Dick suppressed a laugh. “Not that kind of stir. Have a look.”

Joe squinted at the headline in the poor light. “The world is *not* 6000 years old. Would you read it for me?” asked Joe. “They took my glasses for some reason.”

“Sure,” said Dick. “It's quite long, but we've got time.” He began to read the article.

“Occasionally, when I report about archaeological and palaeontological finds, I still receive adamant letters from readers who insist that this evidence is being misinterpreted. Such letters commonly ask for further evidence, and usually end up claiming that evolution is a load of hinkum.”

“Is too,” said Ramon, in a deep voice.

“What is most amazing is that people can be so ignorant, in the face of scientific facts, that they honestly and sincerely believe the Earth is only a bit over 6000 years old. No matter what science says.”

“Is too,” said Ramon.

“And now, in a bizarre twist, someone has gone to a lot of trouble to forge evidence in support of these loony

theories. An unknown person (or persons) produced a poorly shot pseudo-documentary on the history of the world. This fantastically boring piece of fictional work has been widely circulated."

"Fictional work?" asked Joe incredulously. "Are they seriously trying to pass it off as fiction?"

"It was first published on BlargShare, but was removed after valid objections from history company C&H, which owns the rights to authoritative statements about history. However, this only happened after 83408 people made their own personal copies. While mainstream Christian leaders are denouncing the production as a poor forgery, their imbecilic followers are lapping it up."

"Reading between the lines," said Dick, "you can see that everyone who wants a copy has one. It's wonderful."

"Read more," said Ramon.

"One does not need a degree to spot the errors in this supposed history. The ice age is represented as having occurred less than four thousand years ago. Science tells us that it actually occurred over ten thousand years ago. Laughably, dinosaurs are shown coexisting with man – an error of over 100 million years."

"Of course there's an error," protested Joe. "But the error is with the evolutionary theories. I wonder how many people take this propaganda in?"

"Reading on," said Dick, "The cheap CG (computer graphics) effects really show in a few scenes where Noah's ark, represented as an ocean-going shoe box, is tossed around by the waters of the flood. It looks like a child's toy being splashed around in the bath."

"A big flood," said Ramon in summary.

"I don't even want to venture into the reasons for all the time and money that was expended in this pointless production. I would rather devote the rest of this article to briefly explaining the modern techniques used by scientists to determine the age of rocks, fossils and other matter on Earth. When people understand the

depth of evidence that underlies these techniques, they will not flee to unscientific fantasies."

"So you see," said Dick. "They don't want to look at evidence, instead they go back to the same old lies they've been telling for the last two hundred and fifty years. The Lord has opened the door for everyone who was uncertain, and now they are trying as hard as they can to close it. Should I read more?"

"Why not?" said Joe. "Does it get better or worse?"

"There are two classes of natural clocks used for dating. The one relies on radioactive isotopes, and the other on determining the effects of heat and light.

"The measurements of minuscule amounts of atoms in a sample to be dated can be done very accurately with modern techniques. While uneducated and ignorant people have raised questions about the degree of certainty with which we can know the initial concentrations of various atoms, no scientist working in the field of radioactive dating takes these questions seriously."

"What that means," explained Dick, "is that they choose to ignore the inconvenient problems."

"Thermoluminescence techniques rely on the amount of heat stored by particles. With a number of entirely reasonable and defensible assumptions, you can make an accurate determination of how long the particles were underground."

"Like, for example, assume evolution is true," commented a cell mate from the other side of the room. A few people laughed.

"Radiation exposure techniques include fission tracking, thermoluminescence, optical luminescence and electron spin resonance."

"And you will notice," commented Dick, "that there is no reference to the limitations and assumptions of these techniques."

"Even if there are flaws in every single one of the techniques described above, the collective weight of evidence means that the dates are probably correct. To be sure that the data agree and that unnecessary

controversy is eliminated, scientists have calibrated them against each other. All of these techniques are calibrated against the index fossils, whose age is given by evolutionary theory, and they therefore fairly consistently provide dates for these same index fossils."

"The question is not how many arguments there are," commented Ramon, suddenly quite eloquent, "but how many of those arguments are correct."

Dick read on, "I am, however, not really optimistic that this data will change what people who want to believe in myths, believe. There are always people reluctant to throw out everything they have been taught in order to espouse a new understanding of the world, no matter how compelling the evidence is."

"And that's exactly the problem," concluded Dick. "Even when the weight of evidence goes against their materialistic theories, they cling to them without reason."

The tattooed man had come and stood close by, while Dick was reading the article.

"Hey new kid," he said. "Tell me about this time travel thing. Did you really travel into the past?"

"Well," said Joe, "you can't change the past, but can see everything that happened with the C&H machine. That's what I'm here for – I put it all on tape and put it on the Internet."

"Well, okay then, what I really want to know is this. Did Jesus really raise the dead, or is Richard telling me stories?"

18 Not The Nine O'clock News

“Look, it’s not going to be easy for you,” said Frank’s dad. “But remember, you agreed that if you left the programme early, you would pay back the expenses.”

“But it’s not my fault, Dad,” complained Frank. “I didn’t exactly ask to leave.”

“You didn’t read the contract carefully either, but you still have to do the honourable thing,” said his dad. “It’s not so bad, though. I’ve spoken to Mr McBride for you, and he says he can get you a junior job at the firm, provided you behave well at the interview. They’re not company customers, so you should be okay there.”

“Ssshh!” said Frank’s mom. “It’s the news! Let’s see what they said about the announcement.”

“Good evening. I’m Kim Jackson, and this is 9 dot TV. In our top story tonight, the NASA Sentinel probe is launched.” The screen showed a rocket streaking away into the sky. “Public hearings on the promotion of access to archives continue.” The screen showed a few men in suits sitting around a conference table. “And an official statement from C and H Corporation”. The screen showed Martin Cheatham. A sound bite played, with Cheatham mumbling “unusual circumstances of the past months”.

“Would you like a mince pie, Frank?” asked his sister Margaret.

“Ssshh, I’m listening, oh yes please, thanks,” said Frank, taking one.

“The NASA Sentinel probe, which is set to scan for signs of water on the asteroid belt was launched today. NASA says that although Pluto did not contain the ingredients they hoped for that are required for life,

analysis of the data from the FAR HOPE project was still under way."

The screen showed a greying bearded man, captioned "Tony Lipslitch". He nodded, and said, "Yes, ever since Darwin, we have recognised that it was never possible for life to have started on earth, I mean, in an evolutionary sense. That was never feasible. And we don't want to pin all our hopes on the Pluto data. In many ways that data looks promising, but we remember how the Mars data looked before the creationists analysed it. That's why we're sending off this mission – to see if we missed something in the solar system, right under our noses."

The screen showed the rocket streaking into the sky again. "Muza Jacobs, spokesman for the space programme, said that the launch was a huge boost to our search for intelligent life."

"Hmmf!" said Frank's father. "If you're looking for intelligent life you don't need to look any further than the government."

"Ssshh!" said Frank's mom.

"It's only an advert now," said Frank's dad.

The advertising flashed text and wildly changing images on the screen. "A long long long long time ago, in a galaxy far away ..." A fighter space ship screamed across the screen, sounding remarkably like an induction motor. Laser bolts flew everywhere. An older woman sat calmly, explaining to the exasperated teenage girl with the illuminated sword, "Use the force, Akkaneem, use the force." A horde of strange and dangerous looking creatures rose slowly from a slimy blue liquid. "Do you remember the magic of Star Wars?" said the voice-over. A young boy piloted some kind of dangerous looking vehicle over rough terrain at high speed. "Share the memories with your children," said the voice-over. An imposing figure in a dark helmet said to a teenager, "Luke, I am your father." A large spherical structure exploded in a graphic display of wanton destruction. "All 21 episodes wonderfully remastered in 3D with look-behind technology. Buy the

complete set today, and we will include a free episode one console game *and* a comprehensive study guide to help you with your school assignments. Enter STARWARS.AD on any console to order. Terms and conditions apply. Batteries not included."

The head and shoulders of the news reader appeared again on the view screen. "Public hearings on the promotion of access to archives continued today, with the committee hearing argument on whether access to the archive system should be open or not."

The committee chairman, captioned as "Damon Ehrenreich", was explaining the committee's proceedings. "I think that there's just a small lunatic faction that wants to try to push the system beyond its five year capacity. But the consensus of the committee is that we don't want to give up the gains we have made in scientific investigation, just to satisfy people who really don't have a scientific agenda." He coughed.

A person off screen asked a question, which was not picked up clearly.

"Well, one of our recommendations will be on the acceptability of content which falls outside the scope of the proposed act. So until we make a ruling on whether it is acceptable or not, we are not going to be reviewing any of the existing supposed historical archive material."

The news reader continued. "The question of access to historical archives has attracted the attention of privacy activists who are concerned that information about government finances should not be made public."

An overweight middle-aged woman appeared on the screen. The caption read "Ms. Tennessee van Winkel". She did not look happy. "I don't see what gives the government the right to see into my shower. That's just not right, is it?"

The news faded and the advertising continued.

A little child admired a bubbly green liquid. "Have you ever wondered about your origins?" said the soundtrack, along with a jazzy accompanying tune. A gangly teenager sized himself up against a skeleton of

tiny Homo Austrolopithecus. “Are your kids the missing link?” A strangely anachronistic family consisting of a father, mother and two children, strolled into a theme park. “Come to the cradle of humankind theme park.” The screen was showing a roller-coaster ride, with children having fun and eating candy floss. “It’s fun.”

The screen faded to a cast of a skull, most of which was made of plaster. A few bits of genuine fossil bone could also be seen. “The Cradle of Humankind. See the Proof for Yourself.” A small footnote said, “We accept no liability for injury or death.”

The news continued. “C&H Corporation, which provides access to complete historical archives for the last five years, today released a statement on the future direction of the company. Our correspondent Kerry Brandson filed this report.”

“Listen up, this is it,” said Frank’s dad.

“Thanks Kim. Martin Cheatham, the director of C&H corporation, today announced that his company will be giving away the company’s most valuable asset to the government. This is largely in exchange for indemnification from prosecution under the terms of the new archive act.”

Martin Cheatham stood at a podium with the C&H logo on it. The logo was quite similar to the previous DC&H logo, but without the D. “Sergio Howe’s sudden passing was a shock to us all. We are really going to miss his input, and his unique point of view. I think that the unusual circumstances of the past months put an unbearable amount of strain on him.

“As you know, C&H has been trading under a cautionary since shortly after the death of Alexander Dewey. We have now finalised a transfer of the company’s operating divisions to government control in exchange for a lump sum payment and certain guarantees and ...” Cheatham coughed and cleared his throat. “... Sorry, and certain broad indemnifications. Our new partnership with the government makes it possible for us to leverage synergies and build shareholder value.

“We wish to put on the record that C&H corporation is not in any way associated with certain archive material which has been widely circulated on the Internet. We are opposed to this type of misrepresentation, and support efforts to expunge the information. In addition to our partnership with government, we have also entered into a cooperation agreement with Microsoft for the use of and further development of the Microsoft Virtual Worlds range of products. We will be working together over the next few years to produce scientific educational material of the highest quality and accuracy which every child should benefit from.”

“And, in other news, scientists at Tshwane State University have completed a forensic study on the Internet archive of the historical film. Their findings are that the archive is only accurate on the assassination of John F Kennedy and the battle of Marathon.”

A man captioned “Lucas van Tonder, chief scientist” reinforced the notion that science and charisma don’t mix. “Our study analysed the amount of background noise in the various scenes. A meaningful correlation was found between the amount of background noise and the mythological element. All of the scenes which correspond to mythological events are lacking in background noise.”

“What does this mean for the accuracy of the archive?” asked the interviewer.

“Well, it means that only the JFK and Marathon scenes are real. The rest must have been made with Macromedia Scene Editor.”

“Hmmf,” said Frank’s father. “Typical. They haven’t got a clue.” He clicked the set off with a remote control.

“Let’s eat,” said Frank’s mom. “Samuel, will you cut the meat?”

Everyone sat down around the table. Frank’s dad carved the meat without very many words.

“Let’s pray,” said Frank’s dad. Everyone bowed their heads, except for Frank’s two year old nephew, who used the opportunity to bury his hand in a dish of beetroot.

“Thank you Father for this food. Thank you for sending your Son into the world for us, as we remember today. Thank you that we can all be together today, especially Frank too.”

“Amen.”

➢ Epilogue

PROMOTION OF ACCESS TO HISTORICAL ARCHIVES

BILL 4931/4/CKK

WHEREAS it is in the public interest for accurate and timely information about historical events to be available to the public, and whereas it it in the national interest to protect genuine scientific research, the following provisions are hereby enacted:

1. The RECALL machine will be administered exclusively by the department of historical affairs. All copyright, trademarks, patents and intellectual property in all existing RECALL recordings is transferred to the department of historical affairs.

2. The department of historical affairs shall promote government and public access to the RECALL machine by making requested recordings for the payment of an access fee, to be determined from time to time by the director general. The director general of the department shall be responsible for ensuring that no inappropriate content is released by the department. Recordings shall be available only within the two to five year statutory natural window of operation of the RECALL machine.

3. No information from the RECALL machine may be distributed into the public domain. Although there are no genuine RECALL recordings in the public domain, all copies of RECALL recordings in the public domain are ordered withdrawn, and are found to be in breach of copyright. No person is permitted to act on any information contained in such recordings.

4. The National Academy of Evolutionary Sciences shall receive a grant of 25% of the fees paid for access to the RECALL machine. This money shall be used for the promotion of scientific education and awareness in the public sector.

5. No person shall make or make available any media purporting to be a RECALL recording outside of the statutory natural two to five year window for the RECALL machine for the purposes of promoting unscientific theories. Violations of this provision will be subject to a minimum fine of 10 000 units on the penalty scale, and a minimum sentence of five years imprisonment per hour or part thereof.

* * * * *

Somewhere else, a dirty door labelled “Hazardous Area” opened slowly, with a good number of loud creaks, revealing the small landing. Sergio Howe, his lip broken and one eye badly swollen, peeked out cautiously. He limped through the door and headed down the stairs, clutching a cracked media player, playing the same scene over and over.

➢ Postscript

THIS is the verdict.
Light has come into the world,
but men loved darkness rather than light
because their deeds were evil.