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Even God has agents

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EVEN GOD HAS AGENTS

A Creative Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Melody Walsh

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ABSTRACT
EVEN GOD HAS AGENTS

by Melody Walsh

This novella is a modern myth. It opens with a mythic prologue, which, seemingly, has little to do with the story that follows, but there is an important connection of which the reader is gradually made aware. The novella closes with an equally mythic epilogue, effectively tying the story together.

The story contained between the "Prologue" and the "Epilogue" deals with dualities, shadows, and wonder. It is ultimately a story about hope. It is a story about learning that happiness is not necessarily found in security security, and security does not have to mean stagnation. These themes have the effect of leaving the reader with a positive view of the future, but a view which does not attempt to answer all questions.

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**v, The poem entitled JUGGLER by
Richard Wilbur**

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When a juggler performs his magic, it is difficult not to feel a sense of wonder at his perfectly coordinated, seemingly effortless artistry. Richard Wilbur, whose poem opens this work, must have felt this when he wrote his poem "Juggler." It is a fitting opening to *Even God Has Agents* because it reminds me of the sense of joy in seeing a juggler as a child, and it is that sense of joy that I hope a reader will take away from this story. It is the juggler after all who truly creates the illusion of weightlessness, making jugglers magicians in the very truest sense of the word. In Wilbur's words, it is vital to human existence "To shake our gravity up." I believe our gravity needs shaking up now and then, and I have struggled to imbue *Even God Has Agents* with a similar lightness to Wilbur's juggler. While this is a story about magic and wonder, I think it is also a story about working for change. Most of all it is a story about "learning the ways of lightness," which are easy to forget in the face of adult responsibilities, but which are also to be found quite often in the juggler's "five red balls."

I first learned some of the ways of lightness when I was about seven years old, and I discovered that books were full of stories. Among my early favorites was a book entitled *Myths and Enchantment Tales* by an author I have long since forgotten. The book was old and dusty when I got it, which made me love it all the more. While the book itself no longer exists except in my memory, the stories of King Midas, Daedalus, Pandora, and Athena inspired my love of mythology and stories. I loved the stories for their magic and wonder, and I wanted, more than anything, to be a creator of wonder myself. However, creating wonder, I discovered, is no small task, and finally, after thirty-five years of experimentation, I am finally beginning to understand how the process works.

In the past, my typical pattern has been to conceive an idea and struggle

with a way to make it conform to my preconceived sense of reality. In his essay, "The Working Novelist and the Mythmaking Process," Andrew Lytle writes, "When I first began thinking about the book which was to become *The Velvet Horn*, I was thinking consciously: That is to say rationally" (140). This statement is noteworthy only insofar as it echoes my own tendency to approach the creative process with a definite plan; however, Lytle's next sentence is far more telling. He goes on to say, "I could almost say falsely, except that the creative act uses all the mind's faculties" (140). His realization stunned me. During the drafting of *Even God Has Agents*, I also began to understand that I had the creative process backwards. "The language leads," according to Wright Morris, "and we continue to follow" (qtd. in Murray 172). I was trying to lead the language because I did not trust it enough to follow where it led me. The result of my mistrust was that I was rarely satisfied with my writing because it did not have the elements of magic and wonder that I was looking for. My error lay in over-zealous control instead of trust in my own intuitive writer's voice.

Robert Frost wrote, "For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew" (qtd. in Murray 22). While writing *Even God Has Agents*, I experienced Frost's delight. It was the first time I allowed the process to unfold without being sure of the outcome. For the first time, I felt like a writer, a feeling validated by Eudora Welty in her book *One Writer's Beginnings*: "My first good work began spontaneously" (94). As *Even God Has Agents* began to take form, I experienced both Frost's delight and Welty's sense of spontaneity. I was never quite sure what turns my writing would take each day. Often I would meet a new character who seemed to have nothing to do with my original plan, or I would discover that old characters had new dimensions. I

never knew exactly where the plot was going, and when I finished writing for the day, I was never sure where I would begin the next I would sit down to write. This approach not only gave me a great motivation to sit and write daily, it also gave the resulting writing a more genuine tone than writing whose outcome I had attempted to control to a greater extent. During this time, I often felt insecure to the point of wanting to abandon the story. I had no clue to how I would end it; it did not even have a title, and I never knew from day to day what the major themes were. However, friends who could see more than I could, encouraged me to persevere. I am grateful for their vote of confidence because I am pleased with the result.

When I read a good book, I am always delighted by the fact that I can enjoy it first as a good story, second as it has meaning for my life, and third as a literary explorer, looking between the lines for literary connections. As *Even God Has Agents* began to take shape, I hoped that it would be first and foremost a good story; now that it is finished, I think it is. It has an element of surprise, it communicates a subtle humor, and the characters are likeable in an off-beat way.

But I hope the reader will find more to appreciate than is immediately obvious. Joseph Campbell asserts that no matter what form stories assume, from simple folktales to complex novels " . . . it will always be the one, shape shifting yet marvelously constant story that we find, together with a challengingly persistent suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told" (3).

The one story I believe Campbell refers to here is the story of all human lives, changing shapes to reflect our individual natures and remaining constant to

celebrate our sameness. I hope that there is an element of Campbell's one story in the characters of *Even God Has Agents*.

Sam, the unsuspecting hero of the story, epitomizes the vision of an increasing tendency in our society toward apathy. His life is orderly, and he sees no reason to change. His grounding is definitely in security, and he is unwilling to risk it despite his own dissatisfactions regarding his situation. Sam is a victim of the protestant work ethic who knows that his life will improve in the future, "if he keeps his nose to the grindstone" and takes his responsibilities seriously. Unfortunately, during the course of being a dutiful husband and father, he has alienated his wife and, in all probability, his sons as well. Unlike the mythic hero, Sam has no taste for quests; in fact, he and Barbara have planned their lives to avoid any possibility of one.

Because of these negatives, Sam's emergence as the story's savior must come about through trickery and cajolery. Murray is Sam's opposite and it is his purpose to help Sam overcome "the world's weight." Murray is a trickster refusing the responsibilities of adulthood. He exhibits many of the qualities of the primitive folktale animal tricksters in that he is "...instinctual, uninhibited and childish" (Henderson 104). However, the animal trickster is also "...cruel cynical and unfeeling..." (Henderson 104). While Murray obviously enjoys making Sam uncomfortable, he is not a cruel or cynical person. According to Joanna Cole, the editor of a collection entitled *Best Loved Folktales of the World*, "the humorous trickster tales... have something serious to say about the rights of the 'little guy'" (xxiii). Murray is very much in keeping with Cole's interpretation of the trickster figure. He acts as catalyst for Sam, who is precisely the "little guy" Cole is talking about. In his role as helper, Murray more closely embodies a

shamanistic trickster “ . . . whose magical practices and flights of intuition stamp him as a primitive master of initiation” (Henderson 147). Through the use of deception and play, it is up to Murray to initiate Sam back into the world of the living.

Sam and Murray represent order and chaos, respectively. Order is seen in Sam's dreary existence and the drab surroundings in which he finds himself. Chaos is seen in Murray as bright colors and delight in life. One of the shifts in the story is Sam's transformation from his apathetic, grey existence to a life filled with emotion and color. The catalyst for Sam's transformation is not only Murray's prodding but Sam's own awakening to his sense of dissatisfaction. While security may be comfortable, it can also lead to stagnation. Sam's realization that security may not be as important as he once thought comes about when Murray tosses Sam his red juggling balls. The imagery here is similar to the allegorical children's film, *The Red Balloon*. The predominant memory I have of the charming short film is its use of black and white film colored only by the red of the balloon. I think Sam's life was rapidly becoming black and white when Murray tossed him those red balls.

While Sam and Murray reflect the polarity of order and chaos, Fiona and Barbara reflect a polarity confronting many women today. Fiona Burns is a woman who has decided that career is more important than family. On the other hand, Barbara gave up the promise of a career in order to have a traditional family. My reason for mentioning this sub-text is to illustrate further one of the happy surprises of *Even God Has Agents*. It has become a story full of polarities. Besides those I have mentioned, connections can be made between Maurice and Murray, Barbara and Sam, The Abolonia and the Juggler, and

between Murray and the Juggler. There are also polar themes running throughout the story such as: order and chaos, male and female, reason and intuition, and myth and reality.

The structure of *Even God Has Agents* is mythological as a result of "Prologue" and "Epilogue." In these chapters, the Abolonia and the Juggler represent two possibilities for divinity. The Abolonia creates beauty without passion, and with a dread of chaos. To him, chaos is too close to a loss of control, which makes him feel uncomfortable because he considers his responsibility for creation too important to leave to chance. On the other hand, the Juggler thrives on chaos. She realizes that, while perfect order has its own appeal, it is too much the same. Perhaps she is a juggler due to the nature of juggling, which, though controlled, has wonderful chaotic possibilities.

During the process of writing the story, I played around with the genders of the Abolonia and the Juggler. The Abolonia is a creator of something from nothing, and my first inclination was to make the Abolonia feminine to indicate the maternal nature of creation. In order to give the story balance, I cast the juggler in the masculine gender with the logic that although the male cannot give birth, he can influence events later on. However, this configuration made the story seem flat and predictable, so I recast the genders of these two characters reasoning that if the god of Judaism and Christianity is masculine, the Abolonia could be justified as a masculine form. The effect was to open up the levels of the story in much the same way that a pair of mirrors jump to infinity when they are properly aligned.

The Abolonia represents an older, more cautious order than the juggler who delights in being off-balance. The Juggler's presence in the story

demonstrates Joseph Campbell's idea that "the center of gravity, . . . the realm of mystery and danger . . . has shifted" (390). While I disagree with Campbell's ideas about the location of the new center of gravity, I agree that a shift has occurred. Richard Wilbur's need to "Shake our gravity up" also acknowledges that there has been a shift from order to chaos.

Additional evidence of the shift can be found in the structure of Carson McCullers' novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. McCullers understood the structure of classical music, and she based the structure of her novel on that of a sixteenth century fugue. Graphically it would resemble a set of stairs leading up to a connecting bridge with a parallel set of stairs leading down the other side. However, when the reader comes to the final chapter in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, the second staircase collapses into twentieth century chaos because the final stair has been omitted and the support is gone. McCullers novel deals with isolation and despair, and the effect of chaos on her characters is tragic. Chaos as represented by the Juggler in *Even God Has Agents* suggests a more light-hearted cacophony of waking up to possibilities. In contrast, there is another element in *Even God Has Agents* which is a darker, heavier wake-up call.

The nature of the shadow as first seen in Sam's obsession with the Russians taking over New York and culminating in the Prime Ministers' gradual take-over of the earth is, like much of the story, based in mythology and folklore. Sam's obsessive hope that "the Russians will take over New York" reflects a hope that the shadow self will relieve him of the responsibility for what Jung called the ". . . peculiar feelings of hopelessness. . . " (73) he experiences in regards to his own life.

According to Jung, "the face of his own evil shadow grins at Western man

from the other side of the Iron Curtain" (73). Now with the tearing down of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the West's shadow has had to undergo a massive revision. Sam cannot look to the Russians for salvation from his dreary existence; Western Culture has lost its symbolic shadow; it needs either to be replaced with another symbol or to be examined in "a serious attempt to recognize [it] and its nefarious doings" (Jung 73). In *Even God Has Agents*, the true shadow is found within the rank of the Prime Ministers. Unlike the Russians, who are human, and therefore known quantities, the Prime Ministers are truly alien, and therefore terrifying because there is no way to understand them or counter-act their take-over. Ultimately, the characters must work to recognize their own shadows. At that point, the action of the story is over, and the mythic "Epilogue" reconnects with the "Prologue."

I think the primary focus for *Even God Has Agents* is the figure of the juggler. It is primary because I believe that I am working with a personal archetype since figures like the juggler have appeared in my writing quite often. While I am still unsure of the exact nature of the juggler, I am reminded of Wilbur's poem, and I become convinced that it has something to do with my refusal to accept the idea that the human race is doomed to destroy itself. I believe very strongly in the concepts of hope and wonder. There is an element of hope in the juggler figure as we see her in the "Prologue" and "Epilogue." The juggler embodies what I feel we all must become: creators. It is she who creates the spark of life in this story, and it is her responsibility to save it. She represents order in chaos. Her roots are in the traditions of folklore and mythology, harkening back to Pandora who, it will be recalled, inadvertently released all of the gifts from the gods save hope (Bulfinch 935). In *Even God Has Agents*, the Juggler retains

hope by creating a bit of chaos in an otherwise static reality.

Much of my work has explored the nature of the juggler, and I do not feel that I have exhausted the possibilities of this archetype. I am an optimist: I believe in a message of hope; I believe that there is the possibility of magic in the world; I still get excited on Christmas morning.

Although Sam is a modern day savior, a reluctant messiah, he can share his hope for little more than a moment. The story ends on a high point, with the red juggling balls "learning the ways of lightness," but eventually gravity calls the juggler's balls to earth, and the real work of waking up begins. This is Murray's message to Sam, and the ultimate message of *Even God Has Agents*.

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Prologue

In the beginning of our time, the universe was nothing more than scattered fragments, shards of the massive explosion that occurred before the Abolonia was born to prevent it. The explosion was the result of the last resort efforts of the Abolonia's ancestors to undo a galactic mistake. Unfortunately, there was no way to protect any of the good they had done, so now it was up to the Abolonia to begin once more with bits of clay and try to create a self perpetuating system. The Abolonia had searched for the ancestors' plans but was unable to locate any, thereby running the risk of making a similar mistake with a similar end. He hoped he would be able to avert massive destruction when it became necessary to eliminate a cancerous growth.

To this end, the Abolonia spent a millennium studying the bits of clay as they spun in elliptical orbits around him. Sometimes the orbits created pleasing patterns of colors and shapes; while at other times the patterns expressed discord and made the Abolonia feel ill at ease. The Abolonia, unlike his ancestors, learned patience from this practice of watching the orbits, so when the need to give birth became so urgent that he could no longer ignore it, he was ready for the process to begin.

Slowly, he gathered all of the pieces from their orbits, and he sorted them according to shape and color. After he completed this process, he vaporized any fragments showing signs of the cancer that had caused his ancestors' failure. He then took the most promising of the rest and put them in a giant cylinder with a viewing lens on one end and a clear crystal on the other. Slowly he set the fragments in motion. Each turn caused the birth of a new pattern, and when at last the Abolonia felt a satisfied sense of accomplishment with one particular

pattern, he stopped the rotation and removed those fragments not playing a part in the design. Finally he set the rest free, and with a flick of his finger sent them spinning.

The Abolonia found his creation to be pleasing for several centuries, but its unchanging nature caused him to feel restless around the beginning of the seventh century, and he realized something had to be done to introduce an element of chance into the increasingly stagnant beauty of his design. His ancestors had created a changing system which eventually was overcome with a cancer so vile that, in the end, nothing was left to save. The Abolonia had struggled hard to eliminate the cancer, and the resulting pattern was beautiful albeit somewhat stagnant. It needed an element with the ability to change, and, as the Abolonia studied his creation, he became aware that he could create a changing pattern safely by growing a pure clear crystal that would reflect every possibility and hope the Abolonia had for his child, and, at the same time, enable the pattern to become random as it travelled through space.

When at last it had grown sufficiently, the Abolonia introduced this single creative seed to his pattern. Colors of every range in the spectrum from the palest yellow to the deepest purple spread across the galaxies the Abolonia had created out of his patterns to tint the skins of a thousand-billion species of sentient beings. The Abolonia watched for a time to see what might happen, and finally satisfied that he had eliminated the cancer of his ancestors, he gave it a spin and waited.

The Juggler, awakened by the sudden force and her sense that the creators were at work, stretched, thankful that her long sleep was finally over. She studied the Abolonia's creation and was pleased by the pattern; it would work

well for her needs, but not yet. The Abolonia still had more strength than she, and he might destroy her in his effort to keep his creation pure. She carefully avoided detection until she became strong enough to counteract his ability to eliminate her nature from his pattern. While the Juggler was not responsible for the earlier failure, she knew that the Abolonia would see her as a threat, and he would take action against her. Until she grew enough to demonstrate the absolute need for her presence, she hid between the densest folds of the Abolonia's robe and waited for the right time. She had also learned patience during the long period of void, and she knew that it was only a matter of solar time before he would fall asleep.

When the Juggler saw that the Abolonia was beginning to become drowsy, she knew it was time. She turned around with the system and caught a bit of light that had separated from a nearby galaxy. She turned once more and managed to grab a passing comet. On her final turn, she found a planet the size of Jupiter, and she swept it up in the circle which formed when she juggled. A small part of the Abolonia's creation child belonged to her now, and she would make it grow beyond any of their expectations. She would prove herself worthy to become the next creator.

Maurice DuPone arose at his accustomed six a.m. despite the fact that he had been up all night with indigestion. Fog whited out the view from his bedroom window of San Francisco Bay and Alcatraz. Not good. This time of year wasn't supposed to be foggy, and the view, or lack of it, discouraged Maurice. Still feeling somewhat queazy, he went into the bathroom and closed the door.

He emerged about an hour later and called downstairs for the maid to bring his coffee and the *Wall Street Journal* up as he still felt a little under the weather and had decided not to go into the office this morning. As the owner of DuPone Industries, a moderately sized communications network, he was entitled to an occasional morning off.

"Good morning, Mr. DuPone," said Margaret, a good and reliable woman who had been in Maurice's employ for at least a dozen years. "A bit under the weather are we? Perhaps I should ring for Dr. Walters, so he can have a look in on you. There's some nasty flu going around, and it doesn't hurt to be too careful, if you know what I mean."

"Thank-you Margaret, but no. I'll be fine. Just a bit of indigestion. . . must have been something at dinner last night. God, those dinners are awful. They never start until eight or nine and then it's one rich thing after another. I'm surprised it didn't get to me before now. That'll be all for now."

When Margaret left the room, Maurice opened his paper and sipped his coffee slowly. The economy, though still not great, was recovering with the development of open trade with Japan. Maurice had been instrumental in working out the arrangements, and DuPone Industries would benefit on several levels. In fact, Maurice was working on a deal to open a limited number of shares to

the public. He had an appointment at two-thirty with his accountants and lawyers to finalize the negotiations. After finishing both his coffee and paper, Maurice decided to try to get some sleep before he had to get ready for the meeting.

He was sleeping soundly when the alarm jarred him to consciousness. His indigestion, instead of going away, had gotten far worse. When he tried to get out of bed, Maurice found that he was unable to stand, which didn't cause him so much alarm as anger. How dare his body fail to cooperate with him! Hadn't he given himself the morning off? Hadn't he gotten some well needed rest? He should be fine. Dr. Walters always said Maurice had the body of a thirty year old. Feeling a sense of defeat, he rang downstairs for Margaret. Then he called Fiona Burns, his personal attorney.

"Fiona. Maurice here. Listen, I'm afraid I won't be able to make it to the meeting today. No. Nothing serious, I think I have a little touch of the flu. Please cover for me. Don't tell them I'm sick. They might stall to see if I get sicker, so I'd be willing to let go of more control. Tell them I was called unexpectedly out of town on family business. You know the drill. As soon as the meeting's over get your beautiful ass over here and give me the scoop. Thanks, Gorgeous, I'll see you later." Maurice hung up the phone and fell back into his bed, exhausted.

Margaret knocked on the door and entered Maurice's massive bedroom. "You rang, Mr. DuPone . . . My Lord! What's come over you?"

"Please call Dr. Walters, Margaret. Tell him to get here as soon as possible."

Margaret was soon back in the room with a damp compress and soothing manner. After fluffing Maurice's pillows and straightening his sheets, she was off to get a bit of tea "for the gentleman" and to await Dr. Walters' arrival. Actually, it

didn't take as long as it might have for the doctor to get to the house because he had been attending patients at Presbyterian Hospital and was on his way back to his office when the call came through. When he got to the house, Margaret showed him upstairs and discreetly closed the door behind her as she left.

Maurice felt even worse than when he had awakened from his nap. Not only did he feel incredibly weak, his head pounded with the slightest movement as well. Dr. Walters diagnosed the flu and prescribed bed rest and aspirin. Before leaving, he apologized that there wasn't more he could do to treat a virus, but that it should run its course in a few days, and the only thing to do was to try to stay as comfortable as possible. Margaret showed Dr. Walters to the door and returned to fluff the pillows and straighten the sheets before she closed the curtain and left "Poor Mr. DuPone to get what rest he could."

Maurice slept fitfully, and what sleep he was able to get was aggravated by the strangest dreams. He dreamt that he was all alone in the world, somehow having slept through the end of civilization undisturbed. The first time he woke up, it was still daylight out, and he vaguely recalled thinking about calling Margaret to show Fiona up when she arrived. Then he was back in the dream of the end of civilization. It wasn't what everyone thought. There wasn't a war or anything as devastating as that. It just stopped. One day there was commerce, people going to work, people coming home and going out for dinner, then to the theatre or symphony. And the next day it wasn't. The weirdest part was that no one seemed to miss it except Maurice. He kept trying to get people to realize that civilization was gone, but nobody seemed the least bit anxious or concerned.

Maurice had no idea how long he had slept when he was suddenly jarred awake by--what? A noise? A precognition? He couldn't tell because by the time he was fully conscious, it was completely silent. His room was dark, so he

assumed it was night until he realized that Margaret must have pulled the dark shades because he could see a crack of light outlining the expansive windows of his room. He looked at his alarm clock: 3:30. If everything had run smoothly, he should be hearing from Fiona Burns soon. He felt a great deal better and actually felt like he could eat something. He rang for Margaret. There was no immediate answer, so he rang again, and she finally came up.

Her expression caused Maurice a moment of concern. She looked different than the well-groomed, calm woman who had brought him tea and fluffed his pillows a while ago. But she was obviously the same woman, and Maurice forced himself to abandon his flight or fight response; after all, it was probably his imagination - the dreams caused by his illness. He asked Margaret to open the blinds and bring him some lunch as it was definitely not his imagination that he was extremely hungry. When she left, Maurice climbed out of bed and prepared to dress. He discovered that he felt much stronger; he even felt a little silly that he had called Dr. Walters for such a slight malady.

Maurice felt the same urge to flee well-up when he opened his closet doors. Really there was no apparent reason for this, so, once again, he stifled it. But there was something going on. His clothes were neat as ever, hung in groupings of colors and textures. He chose a summer lightweight navy blue sportscoat and khaki slacks. He didn't need to power dress for Fiona. She'd probably laugh at him if he tried just like she laughed at him when he'd tried to put the move on her in college. Maurice swore that he'd never settle down with anyone except Fiona, and Fiona showed no signs of wanting to settle down. Her legal mind was one of the sharpest in the country, and Maurice remained ever grateful that she was on his side.

Maurice noticed some dust on the shoulders of his jacket, which he assumed was due to the fact that he hadn't worn it for some time. He got out his clothes brush and began working on the offending dust when he remembered that he had worn the jacket only last week. Funny that it should get dirty so quickly; he must remember to tell Margaret to be more careful cleaning. Finally satisfied with his efforts, Maurice slipped into the jacket; the sleeves seemed slightly longer than Maurice remembered, and the fit was kind of baggy. Must be that the diet he had been on was beginning to do some good, and he made a mental note to call his tailor. In the end, Maurice decided not to wear a jacket and went downstairs to await Fiona's call.

The apartment was a rich tapestry of Maurice's good taste and wealth. The thick carpets allowed him to reach his livingroom without being detected by Margaret, who seemed quite busy. As Maurice entered he saw a scene that gave him, finally, a real reason to be concerned. Margaret was busy removing sheets from all the furniture. When she realized that Maurice was in the room she apologised for her part "in all the doings."

"But they made me, Mr. DuPone. I swear I didn't want any part of it. They told me it was for the best."

Maurice couldn't understand what Margaret was talking about. "What doings, Margaret? Who are they?"

Margaret collapsed in the chair she was working on. "Oh, Sir. It's a bit of a story. I think you'd better wait for them to come."

"Once again, Margaret. Who are they? And what's going on here?" Maurice's flight or fight response was now fully engaged and working hard on the side of fight. "Get me Fiona Burns on the phone this moment!"

Margaret's look was so pathetic, Maurice realized that she would be of

little use in helping him determine what was going on. "Oh, never mind. I'll do it myself. Just finish in here before I get back."

Maurice left the room and returned to this bedroom without investigating any further. He had to talk to Fiona, and he had to talk to her now. As soon as he was in his room with the door secured, he dialed Fiona's private number. "I'm sorry, the number you dialed is not in . . ." Maurice hung up before the recorded voice could finish its insane message. He dialed again, sure that the problem was that he had inadvertently dialed the wrong number. Again he got the recording. He called directory assistance. "I'm sorry, I show no listing for a Fiona Burns. Could it be under another name?" Maurice hung up. He called his office. "DuPone Industries. May I direct your call?"

"Yes. Get me Fiona Burns. She's in conference room three."

"I'm sorry. Ms Burns is out of the country. May I take a message?"

Out of the country? Not possible! Maurice left a message to have Fiona get in touch with him as soon as she returned, and tried to think of a way to figure out what was going on before "they" came. He decided to get a newspaper from the stand in the lobby; however, when he tried to leave the apartment, Margaret blocked his way.

"You don't want to go out there Mr. DuPone. We've got everything we need right here. Why on earth do you want to go outside?"

At Maurice's request, she produced a paper dated May 14, _____, the date Maurice expected, but he didn't expect it. Everything else indicated the passage of time.

When the alarm went off at 6:00 am, Sam rolled over and secretly wished that, during the course of the night, the communists had taken over New York, so he wouldn't have to go to work in San Francisco. In the past he wished for an earthquake or a flood, but recently it had been communists in New York. However the flat mid-western twang of the newsman's voice gave no such indication of national peril, so Sam got up to begin his day.

Barbara was in the kitchen when Sam came in and sat down. His orange juice and coffee waited at his place, which was set with the morning placemats and napkins. Sam would have known that the communists or somebody had taken over New York had there been any change here. He ate breakfast with the resignation of one who had just been given last rites, kissed his wife of twenty-five years, and left for work.

The bus stop was one block from his house. Sam didn't have to cross any streets, but there was a driveway or two which might have yielded a car suddenly backing out and bumping him just enough to exact sympathy and cause him to be able to retreat back to his home with a justifiable excuse for missing a day of work. However, there was not even the muffled sound of a car door slamming as Sam made his way down the street. At the bus stop, Sam bought a copy of the *Chronicle* and fumbled in his pocket for his bus pass. The first search seemed hopeful. No pass. But on the second go around Sam found the tattered pass in his wallet and resigned himself to the fact of another day on the job.

On the bus Sam read his paper. The economy was terrible. Oakland residents had awakened to more drug murders. The results of the latest political poll showed the president's popularity to be as strong as ever. Out of the

corner of his eyes, the other passengers on the bus looked gray, and Sam wondered if he looked gray as well. He decided he probably did and glanced out of the window. The foggy morning made everything look bleached and apathetic.

The ride downtown never varied. Neat houses turned into not-so-neat houses, turned into run-down houses intermixed with business, turned into areas of urban renewal that always looked more like bomb craters than the suggestion of anything creative, finally turned into faceless monolithic giants at the end of the ride. Sam got off the bus and was swallowed by one of the most faceless of them.

His office on the tenth floor was really nothing more than a gray metallic desk surrounded by four partitions impersonally lighted from above by banks of fluorescent lights hidden in the ceiling. On the desk was a computer terminal and a telephone and a stack of files in manila folders. The Industrial Indemnity Company felt that it was extremely unprofessional to have personal mementos displayed, so Sam's cubby had a print of the company's headquarters in Little Rock, Arkansas, framed in chrome. It was an aerial view which made the architecture of the complex look something like a low security version of Leavenworth stuck in the middle of Little Rock's industrial prairie. Sam reached his cubby at precisely 7:59 and booted up his computer.

At first the computers had been a fun distraction. Sam had already been working for Industrial Indemnity eight years when they got them. There had been weeks of special trainings, warnings concerning their delicate nature, and threats if abuses should occur. And then one glorious spring morning, Sam entered his cubby and found that his typewriter had been replaced by his very own Pro Max 9000 terminal, which meant that he would no longer have to wait for hours while

someone at the main office dug up the information he needed. It didn't take long, however, for Sam to realize that the Pro Max also eliminated the need for human communication and its element of chance, so now Sam hated the Pro Max for depriving him of even that small bit of happenstance in his otherwise routine existence.

While he waited for the Pro Max to bleep and sputter to life, Sam folded a paper airplane out of an office memo dealing with a rumored corporate take-over and the offence of extended lunch breaks, and he threw it at the print of headquarters. It looked like a MIG fighter coming in for a kill, but Sam figured that not even a desperate Russian would want to take over Industrial Indemnity; although if the memo he had just flown was any indication, some kind of take-ove seemed imminent.

Not that it mattered much to Sam who the big wigs were. His job, as long as he didn't make any mistakes, was relatively secure in that he had never risen to management level. He had decided long ago, and Barbara fully agreed with him, that he wouldn't aspire to any position in the company which might be threatened by a change of ownership; therefore, he followed office policy to the letter, accomplished exactly what was expected of him, brown-nosed every new office manager, and never showed the slightest sign of management potential. Unfortunately, Sam couldn't always depend on his moods to follow the company line, and occasionally he came in late from lunch. It was never his fault really, but his tardiness had been noted and duly recorded at his last performance review. Sam suspected that the portion of the memo dealing with extended lunch break was directed specifically at him.

Barbara said good-bye to Sam and returned to the kitchen to do the breakfast dishes. Sun streamed in the window above the sink, and Barbara hummed along with "Sunny Side of the Street" which had been playing in her mind since she had woken up that morning. From her vantage point, she watched Sam almost until he got to the corner. She stopped humming when she saw how slowly he walked; she could remember when Sam jumped out of bed and couldn't wait to get to his job. But his pace this morning made him seem like an old man to her. She was certain that he hadn't been so slow before, and she tried to remember the last time she had watched him walk to the bus.

The memory of Sam kissing her good-bye and whistling as he left the house was vivid. She had a vague recollection of rushing to the window to watch him walk up the street toward the bus stop, but her memory was so dim that she wondered if she had ever actually done this or if it was, like so much of her life had been, an idea that seemed to fit the definition of a good wife. Good wives stayed home and supported their husbands' careers by providing a stable home life. So Barbara stayed at home and watched her husband walk to the bus each day. If there ever was any longing to be in his shoes, Barbara didn't know it. Of course she would miss him while he was at work, especially in the beginning, but that made his homecoming at the end of the day all that much better. She would greet him at the door freshly groomed, and he would tell her stories of his day while she finished preparing dinner. She tried to remember precisely when that was, but she knew it couldn't have been too long ago because it seemed so clear to her. Funny, she had a difficult time placing it. The boys were home, so that must have made it a year or two? No it would have had to have been longer

than that because Tommy had been married for at least three years, and college before that.

Then she remembered: It was the summer that she had gone to visit her family alone. Sam had been fine when she left, but she had to return a week early because Sam got that bad flu going around that summer. It took him a long time to recover, and Barbara noticed that he began to walk to the bus a little more slowly than he had before. Barbara assumed, at first, that Sam's recovery was the reason he walked to the bus so slowly. But his kiss every morning began to feel more like an obligation to her, and even though he seemed well in every other way, his pace to the bus stop never increased. It didn't really matter if Sam walked fast or slow because Barbara had stopped noticing how he walked. It just didn't seem to matter anymore. Sam went to work every day and Barbara cleaned the house, shopped for groceries, cooked dinner, and went to bed. Sam moved around her when he was home, but they didn't seem to have a lot to say to one another anymore. She stopped looking forward to his homecoming, stopped primping just before he came home, and began using more prepared food in their meals. Sam didn't seem to notice, or at least he never said anything, and after dinner he watched television until eleven-thirty and went to bed. Barbara let her appearance go. Her weekly visits to Hannah's House of Beauty seemed like an unnecessary expense and too much effort. Sam never noticed how she looked anyway.

Now why had she started thinking about all this? Barbara went to the livingroom to try to sort things out. Sam got sick in 19__, ten years ago. Ten years? Had they really lived like that for ten years and not known it? Barbara supposed it was possible. When she was working on her degree, she never

thought she'd finish, but after she graduated, it didn't seem that long at all. When Sam went away to the army, she thought that the six months would never pass, but they did, and after he was home for a week, it was like the six months had never happened. That was when they still made love several times a week. Now, she couldn't remember the last time they made love. But then making love was for kids; she didn't really think she and Sam needed all that sex stuff to prove that they loved each other, did they?

Barbara looked at the tattered photo album gathering dust on the coffee table. She picked it up and began leafing through its fragile pages. She remembered the way it used to make her feel when she rushed home with a fresh batch of snapshots of the boys. The photo album was shiney new then, and she couldn't wait to feed the hungry pages with frozen moments of their lives. The book fell open to the last full page of photos. It was Fisher's eighth grade graduation. It gave Barbara a start because she was sure it hadn't been that long since she spent an afternoon engrossed in putting pictures away. It didn't seem like that long ago anyway. When was the last time she had looked at it? When did she last put any pictures in it? Suddenly she felt an overwhelming sense of despair come over her. What had happened to the perfect life she had given everything up to have?

Unable to deal with the thought of depression, Barbara determined that she would change things immediately. She had paid dearly for her life and she didn't quite understand how she and Sam had fallen into such a deep hole, but now that she knew what the symptoms were Barbara knew she could fix them. Sam would find a very different woman than the one he so apathetically kissed before he went out the door. Barbara went to the phone and called Hannah's

House of Beauty.

"One o'clock will be fine." She hung up and hurried to finish the dishes, so she could do the shopping and be ready for her appointment. A new hairstyle and maybe a new outfit would make Sam notice her. Maybe she'd even have time to rearrange the furniture. Everything fresh - that would do the trick!

Fifteen minutes later she was out the door with her shopping cart. And twenty minutes later she was back. What was the use? Sam wouldn't be in any mood for change tonight. He liked things to be the same, at least that's what he always said. And especially now with all the changes in the company. Only last night Sam had mentioned that he might have to stay late to work on them. So there was no way he would notice anything about her tonight. She'd better save her money for some time when Sam would be more receptive. On the other hand, Barbara could keep the appointment and make Sam his favorite dinner and buy some fresh flowers - anything to overcome the feelings she had. But then what if Sam somehow, despite their careful planning, was closer to losing his job than he let on? Hannah's House of Beauty would be a luxury beyond Barbara's reach. Reluctantly she called and cancelled the appointment she had just made.

She left the apartment dragging her shopping cart behind her. Sam would still be expecting dinner afterall.

"God-damn them! If they think they can railroad me they've got another thing coming." Maurice went to the phone and dialed. While waiting for an answer, he paced the length of the receiver's cord. Margaret hovered in the corner, having come in after hearing the crash that had sent a desk in Maurice's private study into the corner with its legs in the air. "Margaret! Stop that cowering and get me a Bromo Seltzer! I can't believe you let them do this to me. Do you have any idea what you have done?"

Margaret backed out of the room immediately. Maurice felt a sense of grim satisfaction that he still had some power over her. Of course, she would have to go for her disloyalty to him. They'd all have to go for that - even Fiona. Fiona! And life could have been so good for the two of them. But at least he could make Margaret suffer for a few minutes more.

"What?" Maurice had become so caught up in his thoughts that he was caught off guard by the sound of a woman's voice announcing that his call had gone through.

"Industrial Indemnity. May I direct your call?"

"Oh, yeah . . . excuse me. I was just distracted. This is Maurice DuPone calling. Is my agent in? I can't remember his name, I think it was Smith or James . . . Jones? Yes that's it. Yes I'd like to speak with him as soon as possible . . . A message to have him call will be fine . . . But I need to speak with him ASAP! Got that? Yes I'm at home, and he has the number. Thank-you."

Maurice hung up the phone just as Margaret reappeared with a glass of bubbling liquid. He took the glass but instead of drinking from it he set it on the table and faced Margaret. "I'm afraid that I can no longer keep you in my employ. You'll

pack your things and be out by nine tonight; I'll have your check ready then."

When Maurice finished his speech, he turned back to his telephone table. Margaret didn't say anything, but she didn't move from her spot either.

"That will be enough, Margaret. You can go now." Margaret remained rooted to her position. Maurice sensed that dynamite couldn't have budged her. "What is it Margaret? Do you think I can let you stay after what you've helped them do? Do you honestly think I don't wish there was a way to keep you?"

"Drink your seltzer Mr. DuPone." Margaret's voice stopped Maurice. It was steady, calm, and absolutely emotionless, and her face betrayed no sign of the person who had been Margaret Riley, housekeeper.

"Get out of here right now or I'll be forced to have you ordered out by the police. I think I've been very fair with you!" Maurice's flight or fight response firmly locked itself in flight mode, but Margaret blocked the door, and the only other way out of the room was a ten story drop out the window, so his only option was fight. But how could he fight with this woman who had been his trusted housekeeper for twelve years? His upbringing wouldn't allow it. But then obviously the person who returned with his Bromo was not Margaret no matter how much she (it?) looked like Margaret. "Leave this minute!"

"Drink your seltzer, Mr. DuPone. It will make you feel so much better. We don't want your indigestion to act up again." While she was speaking, Margaret picked up the glass and slowly and deliberately walked toward Maurice. When she was an arm's length away, Maurice's fight response became fully engaged, and he hit the arm carrying the glass with the telephone. Margaret appeared not to notice. She simply continued walking toward Maurice. "Drink your seltzer, Mr. Dupone." The glass remained in her hand, but its contents spilled on the floor

and burned a hole in the carpet. Magaret's hand hung limply from her obviously broken wrist. Maurice now had a free run to the door which he took advantage of without considering what might be on the other side. The only thing he knew for sure was that he didn't want any more contact with the thing in his study.

The hall outside was empty. Maurice quickly slipped into his bedroom and locked the door. He knew he couldn't stay there very long, but he needed to get some things together, and he needed time to make a plan. He pulled his father's old leather duffel, which he normally used for hunting trips down from a shelf in his closet. Into it he threw what cash there was in the safe and a change of clothes. Then he looked in his closet for a disguise of some sort. It wouldn't do for anyone to recognize him until he had a chance to figure out what in the Hell was going on.

A suit would identify him to readily with the group of people he most wanted to avoid; the same was true for any of his sport clothes. Hunting clothes? Too conspicuous in the summer. Then he remembered the old chest in the back of the closet. Perfect! When he finally emerged from his closet, he bore little resemblance to one of the wealthiest men in America. He wore a tattered jacket with a plastic flower as a boutonniere. His slacks hovered between camp and disgusting. Actually in their youth, they had been a fine grey flannel, but now they had a couple of patches covering the larger of many holes, and there were some stains of dubious origin covering the seat. Neither the jacket nor the pants had ever been cleaned which tended to give Maurice an authentic aroma.

Maurice was determined that they, whoever they were, would never be able to find him until he wanted to be found. He grabbed the duffel and hoped he managed to leave the apartment unnoticed. On the street, he immediately went

in search of a newspaper which he found without any trouble. The date: July 25, _____, a full two months later than what he expected. Spurred on by this new bit of information he quickly blended in with the city traffic more firmly convinced than ever that he had to discover who they were and how Fiona was connected. He did have some suspicions, but Fiona's involvement threw him. At this point Maurice was a man without allies, a situation not at all to his liking, but one past experience told him he could handle.

5

The highlight of Sam's day was lunch. There was an unpredictability about it that pleased him. True, he always went to the same bench in Union Square, but he never knew exactly what might be happening. In the sixties, the place was alive with dirty kids protesting everything and street performers making social commentaries. But the sixties gave way to the seventies, and slowly, so slowly nobody seemed to notice, the protest gave way to silence. The kids looked wild with multi-colored hair and a violent assortment of spikes and safety pins poking out of and into places Sam didn't think they had a right to be, and they looked angry, but Sam could never figure out why because they weren't talking anymore. Finally, more suits, like himself, appeared. They sat alone or in small groups reading the *Wall Street Journal* and discussing stock options and insider trading scams, and Sam suspected even more boringly sinister ploys only

to be interrupted by the rag tag army of homeless begging nickels and dimes for booze or food.

Of course there were always pigeons. There seemed to be a lot more of them recently, and Sam had learned to be prepared. To this end, he removed from his pocket two large bandana handkerchiefs. One he spread over the bench before delicately sitting down; the other he was in the process of spreading in order to accommodate his lunch when a red juggling ball from god knows where disrupted everything. Sam picked up the intrusive missile with every intention of throwing it away so that it couldn't bother him again.

"Over here!" At first the voice blended with the park noise so well that Sam was able to ignore it. "Hey, Buddy! Toss it over here!"

Sam looked in the direction of the sound of the voice and saw a small crowd gathered around an obvious throwback from an earlier era. Sam looked at the ball in his hand and at the street performer.

"Come on Buddy, I ain't got all day! These folks want to see the show! Just give me back the ball ok?"

Sam woodenly threw the ball in the direction of its owner and finished making preparations for his lunch. Of course he had to start all over again, but before he managed to eat anything, the offensive ball was back, this time landing in his watery tomato soup. The cup spilled and Sam leapt up to avoid being covered with the steaming red liquid which still managed to splotch his light summer trousers. Grabbing the ball, Sam marched into the crowd and handed the ball to the performer. "Sir! I'll thank you not to let this happen again!" Sam returned to finish his lunch.

After getting over his feelings of invasion (Is this how New Yorkers would

feel if the communists actually did take over their city in the middle of the night?), Sam began watching the juggler. A juggler? The guy couldn't catch two balls. Sometimes he had a hard time with one. He looked like he was about Sam's age, but it was hard to tell. The small crowd that had been the audience left one or two at a time until they had dwindled to nothing. About ten minutes after sitting down, Sam was the only semblance of an audience that remained. There were still about a dozen pigeons hanging around, but they appeared much more interested in Sam's lunch than in watching displays of artistic talent.

"Aw come on folks!" The juggler's countenance faded with the last departure. "Gimme a break! I'm just warming up!" He pulled several hoops from a brown leather duffel on which he had scrawled in white shoe polish, "Murray's Magic." Sam raised the shield of his sportspage too late to be unnoticed.

"Hey buddy, I know you." Sam crouched behind the paper. "Hey you with the snotty attitude."

Sam readjusted the paper and crossed his legs, but Murray persisted in his effort to get Sam's attention. "You're the sort of guy who knows talent when he sees it." Sam raised his paper higher. "I'm talkin' to you. It ain't polite ta hide behind the paper when somebody's talkin' to ya."

Tentatively, Sam looked around the corner of his paper. The juggler, Murray, was only about five feet away and looking straight at him. "Yeah, I'm talkin' to you. It's no good hiding behind your god damned paper!"

Sam dropped his paper, giving up any hope of a peaceful lunch. "Why are you bothering me? What gave you the idea that I want to watch you perform?"

Murray looked hard at Sam. "I seen you watching me from over there, and I know your type. You weren't going to give me anything when I passed the

hat cause you might get involved somehow." Sam wriggled beneath the weight of his accusations. "I thought so. Life is great as long as it doesn't get too close, that about right buddy?"

Sam began putting his half eaten lunch away. The only hope of salvaging the rest of his lunch hour was to ignore the fellow and leave the plaza as quickly as possible. "Hey Buddy! I'm talkin' to you!"

"Here's a quarter! Now leave me alone! I'm not your friend and my name's not Buddy." Sam tossed a quarter past the juggler's gear in the hopes that greed, if nothing else, would allow him time to make an escape.

For a moment Sam thought he had met with success as the juggler's attentions shifted toward the sound of the quarter hitting the pavement. "A quarter? You think you can buy me for a quarter?" The juggler spun around bristling with threats.

Sam didn't expect this. Sam really didn't expect anything, but he really didn't expect that this man who didn't smell very good, who wasn't very talented, and who had let the rest of his audience go in relative peace, would have the gall to confront Sam, who hadn't really been a part of the show anyway. Sam held out his hand, unable to think of anything more suitable.

"I'm Sam Jones."

The juggler's face softened a bit and he returned the gesture. "Wha . . . Oh, Murray, Murray . . . oh hell, the last name doesn't matter. Mind if I sit down for a bit? My dogs are killin me."

"Suit yourself. I gotta get back to work soon anyhow." Sam gazed into the distance and thought about the MIG memo. For a minute, the sound of fighter jets seemed real, but then Sam realized that it was only the alarm on his watch

signaling that he only had fifteen minutes more of freedom. "Oh shoot. Where did it go? Seems like these lunch hours go faster every day!"

6

As soon as Maurice broke Margaret's wrist, the Prime Minister's pain receptors alerted all units that something had happened in vector sixteen. Margaret felt no pain because the automatic nerve over-ride occurred so quickly that her brain never received the message that her arm was broken. Unfortunately, because of Maurice's discovery of her mission, she could no longer serve as a ministerial ambassador, and if Maurice had lingered in the study, he would have witnessed Margaret Riley's fatal heart attack.

Other ministers would have to pick up Maurice's trail before the danger of chaos would pass; however none were close enough to reach his apartment before Maurice left. This situation was not at all pleasing and could not be allowed to continue. The Prime Ministers called an emergency meeting in order to discuss the matter.

The conference room at DuPone Industries was the closest of all secure areas, and soon about twelve men and three women were seated around the table. To anyone passing by, everything looked very normal. DuPone Industries had just been taken over by Wang, the largest communication network in China, and meetings were commonplace occurrences. The ministers planned it that

way so there would be nothing out of the ordinary for anyone not immediately involved to question. The only unusual quality about the meeting was that it was silent. The Ministers had no need to use speech since they were all connected telepathically.

"The situation is quite serious. Mr. DuPone has escaped and thus far has managed to elude us. We do not intend for this to continue, and if you are unable to fulfill your obligation, you will be replaced." Several people around the table shifted uncomfortably. They had seen the effects of replacement and didn't care to think about that particular option.

"Is there any indication of the direction Mr. DuPone took?"

"No. The last Ambassador Margaret saw of Mr. DuPone was when he left the study. She became ineffective after that and was eliminated."

"How shall we best proceed?"

"Look for strangeness and report. We will eliminate. You are free to leave."

7

Murray lit a cigarette, sprawled across more than half the bench, and propped his feet on his well-worn duffel. The buttons on his thin shirt strained to be released from their obligation to cover his paunch. His pants were probably grey at one point, but now they seemed kind of brown, and they had some large

greasy splotches on them. His shoes were held together with bits of duct tape. Sam sat next to him wondering how to politely get himself out of a conversation with Murray and still have time to get back to work before his lunch hour ended.

"Yep. Every time I think of cashing it in and leading a regular life, I just gotta listen to one of you suit types to know it ain't worth it." Murray said, settling into the park bench as if it was an over-stuffed sofa.

Sam saved his bandanas from contamination and scooted as far to his end of the bench as he could without being obvious that Murray was as frightening to him as the Russians would be if they ever actually got as far as New York. "What do you mean?"

"Well lookin' at you, I'd say you were about fifty, you been working at the same place forever, there's no chance of advancement cause you don't got a fancy degree. The young jerks you work for don't appreciate you cause they don't know shit from shinola. You got a wife, maybe a couple of kids . . .how am I doin' so far?"

Sam nodded.

"Like I said you got a wife who needs for you to work and kids in college workin' on those fancy degrees that you never had so they won't have to settle for a life like yours. No thank you very much."

Sam just sat there. Nobody had ever called his life a boring failure quite so accurately before. Barbara always found plenty of things to complain about, but Murray, without even knowing him, had just managed to spell out everything that was wrong with Sam's life. The problem wasn't finding things wrong though. The problem was figuring out how to make it better. Or make it matter. The alarm on Sam's watch went off even more persistently than before, and

automatically he gathered the last of his lunch together. "Listen, I gotta go, but it was real nice sharing a conversation with you."

"Yeah, sure." Murray stared into the distance.

Sam got up and crossed the square in the direction of his office. He still had ten minutes, so he didn't need to walk fast; in fact, he walked more slowly than usual. He turned around to look back at Murray several times before he reached the street gate. Murray appeared not to notice. When Sam reached the gate, he stood with one foot in the park and the other pointing toward the street. The alarm on his watch beeped urging him back toward a dismal afternoon of files in his grim cubby. The sunshine on his back seduced him into wanting to stay an extra ten minutes, an offense he was sure would result in a serious reprimand if nothing else. He looked again at Murray, who looked lonely despite his bravado about his lifestyle. He continued to sit on the bench and smoke and stare into the distance as if nothing could reach him. Finally, Sam couldn't stand it, and he crossed the square back to Murray.

Sam sat down as if he were hypnotized. His alarm went off signalling that he should already be in the office building, but for once Sam didn't care. The Russians had landed, and they looked like a bum named Murray.

Murray brightened. "Now that's more like it. I figured you might be coming back. But turn that god awful thing off; it's giving me a fucking headache!"

Sam looked at Murray and smiled. He had been waiting for the invasion for a long time. The alarm on his wrist continued to nag him, and gradually he became aware of it, but instead of rushing back to his office, he fumbled with the miniscule button to turn it off. The resulting silence affected Sam more than the electronic beeping. He jumped up in a panic. The Russians weren't coming, and

Sam was going to be late getting back from lunch. "What am I doing here? I should be back in the office!"

Sam tried to run back to his office, but Murray grabbed the back of his coat. "Nah. You don't belong in that stuffy office any more than I do. Now let's just enjoy ourselves for a little while."

"But you don't understand! I'll get fired for sure, and I can't afford it. I mean I've got a pension and if I leave now I'll lose it all. And forget finding another job! I'm too old . . ."

"Hold it! You're gettin' all ahead of yourself now. Stop worrying about things so much. You figure that just because you come in late one time that your life is wrecked. Ain't much of a life if that's all it takes to wreck it, I'd say. Now let's just sit here and have some coffee and enjoy ourselves." Murray got up to get a couple of coffees from the vendor who parked his cart in the park at lunch-time.

Sam didn't move from the bench, but he alternately looked at his watch and wiped his forehead with one of his bandanas. If he lost his job, Barbara would probably throw him out of the house. Of course if he lost his job he'd probably lose the house anyway, so it didn't matter if she threw him out or not. But if he lost his job the Russians wouldn't have to invade New York. Life could go on pretty much as usual except that he, Sam Jones, would never have to go to that little piece of hell again. Sam didn't notice Murray holding out a steaming paper cup until some of the hot coffee spilled on his leg.

"Ow! Sorry, I didn't realize you were here. How much do I owe you for the coffee?"

"It's on the house. The hotdog guy was about to throw it out anyhow."

Murray set his cup on the bench and lit another cigarette. Sam looked at him carefully. Despite several days' growth of beard, Murray wasn't the vagrant Sam had figured him to be. He was dressed the part, but there was something about him that Sam couldn't put together with the rest of the picture. Murray gazed into the distance and smoked his cigarette, and Sam tried to put the pieces of the afternoon together, and the afternoon shadows reached across the park.

"How do you live?" Asked Sam. His voice sounded too loud, and it didn't really sound like him. In fact, he almost imagined that he hadn't spoken at all and was surprised when Murray answered.

"What?"

"How do you make enough money to live? I mean you're not much of a juggler, at least if today was typical you didn't make enough to buy your dinner." Sam reached in his billfold and handed Murray a five and felt immediately embarrassed.

Murray looked at Sam and laughed. "Put your god-damned money away!" "Sorry. I only thought . . ."

"You thought nothing. That's the trouble with the world. Nobody fucking thinks."

Sam stuffed the money back in his pocket and wished he could erase the last five minutes. "Seriously Murray, how do you make it?"

Murray stared hard at Sam for several seconds. Sam squirmed under the harsh glare. "I don't make it according to your standards. But it ain't hard if you don't got so much stuff to haul around. I lived with the circus for long enough to know that."

"You lived with the circus?" Sam's eyes widened at the mention of this

forbidden place.

"Yeah. I ran away when I was about twelve. Worked with the sideshow. Ran the Wheel of Fortune." Murray kicked at the pigeons. "God-damned pigeons shit everywhere."

Sam tried to imagine what living with a circus must have been like. The closest he ever got was sneaking into the tent before his mother caught him. But Sam never forgot the smell of the sawdust and animals and sweat. "Was it great?"

"What great? The circus? Yeah it was pretty great all right. They fed me, gave me a place to sleep and some of em were even real decent people. But even the circus has assholes. Got so bad that I just had to leave."

Out of habit, Sam looked at his watch. "Oh geez! I gotta get back to the office! They sent a memo! Oh man they're gonna fire me if I don't come up with a great excuse! What's Barbara gonna say?"

This time, Murray grabbed Sam's collar before he had a chance to get up. "Hold it! I never saw one like you before! You're either comatose or so flippy that you can't sit still. Either way you can't do anything. Just relax." The tension against Murray's grip lessened, and he relaxed the hold he had on Sam, but he didn't let go. Sam felt his muscles go slack against his will.

"Let go of me or I'll call the cops."

"No you won't. You're not gonna call anybody."

"I swear I will. Who the heck do you think you are to be mauling me? Let me go!"

"You're not gonna call nobody because you don't want to go back to that hell hole you call an office and sell yourself to those pricks you call bosses. You

want to tell 'em all to go fuck themselves, but you can't because you ain't got the guts."

Sam looked at Murray for a long time. His face was covered by hundreds of wrinkles that made him seem a lot older than Sam had figured, but his grip and his eyes made him seem way younger. Especially his eyes. They were greenish yellow, and the whites were perfectly white. Sam couldn't see any telltale veins that might indicate age. He acquiesced to Murray's accusations.

"So I'm not going to call anyone. So what? I don't understand what you think you're trying to prove by keeping me here. I mean what's the point? I get fired and I'm screwed. You don't get anything out of it, do you?"

Murray let Sam go and leaned back, lighting another cigarette. He stretched and smiled. "Well, let me see . . . Do I get anything out of the fact that you may lose your job, anything out of watching you squirm around and slobber after a dead end job? You bet your fucking ass I do. Like I said before, I don't want to live like a fucking suit, and watching you reminds me why."

For the first time Sam felt in danger. Murray was suddenly more than anything Sam had imagined him to be. Sam tried to get up and run, but Murray was too quick for him. "Ok. Ok. I'll do anything you want. Just don't hurt me, ok?"

Murray began to laugh. It wasn't a crazy kind of laugh, which pleased Sam, but it was the kind of laugh that made Sam feel like an outsider, like a gigantic practical joke was being perpetrated on him, and soon he would be let in on the gag. "So what is this? Candid Camera? Boy you guys are good. Where's the camera?"

Murray, still laughing, clapped Sam on the back. The force of it caused

Sam to lurch forward which made Murray laugh harder. It made Sam feel like all the times the kids had teased him in school because his mother had made him wear ugly brown oxfords instead of cool Converse hightops. His shoulders slouched, and he looked at the ground.

Murray's convulsive laughter gradually gave way to chuckles as he struggled to contain himself. As he did so, he reached into his bag and brought out the red juggling balls that had been so offensive to Sam earlier. Murray began to juggle them with ease and a grace that amazed Sam. He not only helped the balls dance in a perfect circle before him, Murray was able to stop the balls mid-air on the back of his hand. It was as if Murray and the balls were connected by some kind of invisible string which came out of the nerve endings on his skin. Sam had never seen anything so magical.

"But earlier. I mean you couldn't. How?"

Murray didn't answer, but retrieved three more balls from his bag and tossed them high into the air, caught one in mid-flight on the tip of his index finger. The next he caught on the back of his wrist and sent it running up his arm to rest in the bend of his elbow. The third ball seemed to float down to Murray's ankle, where he caught it and sent it immediately skyward again. Then he brought the earlier balls back into play, and soon all six balls were defying the most rudimentary laws of physics. Sometimes Murray made all six balls spin in an ever increasing circle only to make them stop suddenly and catch them before they could touch the ground. It made no sense whatever to Sam, but the vision of Murray's juggling skill was so wondrous that Sam was content to simply watch the balls create complex patterns at Murray's command. Then, without warning, Murray tossed three balls to Sam. Sam fumbled, and the balls went in at

least three different directions. He sat down in defeat. Undaunted, Murray tossed three more balls to Sam. This time he caught two of them. For the first time in his life, Sam felt empowered. He looked at Murray, who was watching him with a certain amount of amusement. "What does this mean?"

"Forget what it means. Enjoy the feeling."

Sam tossed the ball he held in his right hand into the air and caught it with his left hand. He repeated the procedure with his left hand. It worked again. Soon Sam found that he could handle three balls, and delighted in sending them through the air and catching them in a variety of ways. During his experiments, Sam forgot about Murray; when he finally remembered and looked up, Murray was gone. Sam looked around the square, but there was no sign of Murray or anyone else for that matter; however Murray had left his duffel bag, so Sam assumed he'd be back shortly. Sam returned to his juggling. Once more, Sam lost all track of anything other than watching hands--his hands--manipulate three fairly ordinary balls, and transform them into magic objects that the laws of the universe had no control over.

Then it happened. At the sound of a coin hitting the pavement, Sam looked up in time to see a couple walking across the square. At his feet was a quarter. Sam didn't have a clue how long they had been watching, but suddenly he was very aware of the passage of time. Dusk had given way to evening, and the only light was artificial. Sam looked at his watch. 8:30. The only way he was going to get out of trouble was if the Russians made a very quick and very massive invasion of the entire United States. And where in the world was Murray? Sam really had to get home, but he really couldn't leave all Murray's stuff where just anybody could take it. There didn't seem to be anyone around to watch it, so

Sam finally decided to take Murray's bag with him and leave a note on the bench in case Murray came back. He searched his pockets for something suitable and found an envelope. Shit. The water bill. Barbara told him to be sure to drop it in the mail slot for the morning pick up. Too late now. Sam tore the back off the envelope and wrote:

Dear Murray, Had to go home. It's quite late, and I can't wait for your return any longer. I took your stuff for safe keeping. Call me so I can get it back to you. Sam Jones. 332-4534.

Sam left the note wedged between the slats of the bench, gathered up the case, and left the square quickly. As soon as he was outside, he hailed a waiting cab, and prayed that he could patch things up with Barbara.

8

Fiona Burns was lying on a beach just outside of Rio when the call urging her to return came through. One of the hotel pages had found her despite her best efforts to find seclusion on the beach.

"Damn. I thought he'd take longer," she thought, willing her body to rise from the warm sand and move toward activity. "I wonder who placed the call."

She didn't appreciate these invasions on her free time. Even if the Ministers were who they said they were, what right had they to interrupt her like this? After all, hadn't she done what they had asked? She delivered DuPone

Industries at the expense of one of her closest friends because she believed that since the take-over was inevitable it might as well be peaceful, but there was nothing peaceful in this intrusion into her time off! Maurice would never have dared to interrupt her vacation. How dare they!

Fiona dismissed the page without bothering to send an answer with him. They would just have to wait until she gathered her things together and went back. She had no patience for thinking in codes, which is what she would have had to do in order to send a message through the page. Besides they deserved to wait for being so rude and going back on their promise not to involve her further.

She slowly put her books and towel into the straw bag and wrapped a brightly colored sarong around her waist and meandered back to the hotel lobby. Her anger and frustration gave her permission to walk far more slowly than normal. When she finally entered the Hilton's spacious lobby, she was surprised to be greeted by Je Li Fou, the CEO for Wang Communications.

"Je, how nice to see you, but what are you doing here? Don't tell me they sent you to find me?" Fiona, though not thrilled by the prospect of cutting her vacation short, was genuinely happy that Je was sent to bring her back. They first met when Je had been touring the United States with the National Chinese Acrobats in 19___. She spent the summer between her senior year at Vassar and her first year at Harvard Law School as a good will ambassador assigned to accompany the troupe and assure them of a good time. With Je, she took her work very seriously. His compact body had thrilled Fiona in more ways than one, and by the time the summer was over their friendship was guaranteed.

"Yes, Fiona, my darling they did. And I am charmed because you look

more beautiful than ever." Je kissed Fiona's hand in their accustomed greeting.

"Cut the crap Je. You and I both know that they want me back pretty badly if they were willing to risk losing you in order to get me back. Of course I could persuade you to stay here for a few days with me. Soo Lee would never have to know a thing. I'm not sure that I've forgiven you for getting married anyway."

Fiona crossed her arms and turned her back in a mock display of petulance.

"Please, Fiona. Not now. There have been threats against me if I don't bring you back immediately."

For the first time since the page had found her on the beach, Fiona felt concerned about the mission. Threaten Je? Even the Prime Ministers would have to have a good reason to threaten the sacrificial lamb. Exchanging her glib attitude for one of concern, she motioned her old friend to a table in the corner of the hotel bar. "What have they done Je? Aren't they happy with the deal?"

"Oh, yes, yes. They are very happy indeed," Je seemed reluctant to mention the real reason for the threats. "Something has come up, Fiona, that the Ministers do not like, and they think you are able to fix it."

"Like what? I told them that after Maurice I was through with their schemes. I'm sorry if they threatened you Je, but I've never known you to be incapable of defending yourself. What's the deal?"

Je looked around as if checking for spies hidden among the potted palms. "Shh, Fiona. You don't understand. I told them you wouldn't come back even if they threatened my life, and they did . . ." Je let his words trail off into the garden.

Fiona remained silent for awhile until she realized that he wasn't going to add anything. "But?"

"But? What is `but'?" Je tried a little guiltily to divert Fiona's pursuit of the truth.

"Come on, Je, your English is better than that. But . . . except . . . In other words: Why did they send you?" Fiona knew that they thought Je could control her with his Eastern powers of concentration, but why did they want her back at all? Surely it wasn't Maurice. All they had to do was keep him thinking he was the president of DuPone Industries, and he would be easy. Maurice wasn't smart enough to realize the scope of things even if he did suspect a takeover. Ok, so then what else could have gone wrong? The press got wind of the takeover and fouled the deal before it went through. Doubtful. Besides Fiona had been assured that they had infiltrated the press first. So what was it?

"Fiona, hurry. We must be on the evening flight to D.C. They are having a meeting and request your presence. If I don't bring you, they have promised to take action themselves."

Fiona cringed. So far only a few select people knew and understood the takeover. Mass panic would result if the ministers moved too quickly or too publicly. Riots would follow, and the Prime Ministers would be forced to annihilate life on earth because the Abolonia had ordered it if he felt any more loss of control of the planet earth. On the other hand, if everyone knew, perhaps the takeover could be averted. Fiona considered McCarthy's botched attempt at preventing a takeover. Unfortunately, while ruining more than a few innocent lives, McCarthy was ineffectual at stemming the tide of infiltrators. Of course he was so stupid as to think they were the communists, and he went straight for the one group of people capable of understanding the nature of the true infiltrators and capable also of finding a way to stop them. But there was no use in playing

“what if” now. The Prime Ministers could not be stopped, but the transition could be made a little smoother by people like Fiona and Je.

Fiona sensed the futility of trying to keep Je from taking her back to the States with him. He was probably right in urging her to go back, but the prospect of a couple of days in Rio with Je Li Fou's agile body was a difficult fantasy to let go. Reluctantly, Fiona went to her room to pack while Je confirmed their travel arrangements. In the space of an hour, Fiona went from sun bathing on a beautiful clean beach to taking off in a 747 bound for Washington. How cruel the fates can be.

Once they had taken off, and the steward had gone through his obligatory speech, Je filled in some of the cracks in the story. The DuPone deal had gone down just as smooth as butter; everything had happened just as Fiona had promised. Maurice was awake, and Margaret was busy keeping him indoors, but really he posed no threat. Besides now that DuPone was in the bag, Maurice was really nothing more than an appetizer for the main course. No, the problem was some kind of wild card trickster who had come from nowhere, and who wittingly or unwittingly threatened to destroy everything. He had his own system, and from what Je told her, it was a very effective system indeed. Fiona suspected he knew exactly what he was doing because he had accomplices, but then he might simply have his own agenda and be unaware of any plan of theirs. There was another possibility that Fiona didn't want to think about, but she knew she must sooner or later explore the potential for another group of infiltrators besides the one she was aware of.

“I don't like it, Je. What if they think we're trying to undermine them? It certainly won't look very good on our records come harvest time.”

Je looked at her with a great deal of concern. "You don't think," Je had a two year old daughter. "You don't think they would cull us after everything we've done?"

"I think it's a real possibility if they think we're in some kind of conspiracy with this other guy. What did you say his name was?"

"Murray D. Putts." Je said the name so seriously that for the first time since they met that day, Fiona laughed her deep throaty laugh. "Tell me now, what have I said that's so funny?"

"Murray D. Putts? Is that what you said? Forget it Je. I don't think I can explain it to you, but I don't really think that's the guy's name." Fiona chuckled softly and settled into her seat to grab a catnap before she had to deal with anything she might confront in Washington.

9

Barbara went to the window for what felt like the millionth time since six o'clock and looked down on the empty street. The streetlight cast a pinkish glow at the corner, but there was no sign of life out there. She stared at the street, willing Sam to turn the corner, and when he did not she bit her lower lip and looked at her watch: 8:30. Sam never came home this late.

Trying not to appear concerned, Barbara went to the stove and looked at what had once been Sam's favorite dinner. Damn him anyway, how dare he do

this after she made the special effort of making chicken and dumplings from scratch. She should have followed her instincts and just made Ragu. Sam wouldn't have known the difference anyway. Well, if he'd come home on time, he might have, but certainly not now. Well, it'd be a whole year of Sundays before she tried anything like this again. Sam wasn't worth it. Barbara went to the window again. In it she could see her own reflection and the remnants of her attempt to fix herself up before Sam got home; why had she bothered?

But she knew why. She bothered because in spite of everything Sam was her life, and Sam wasn't happy. He had mentioned something about early retirement because work had gotten so bad, and Barbara knew what early retirement meant. It meant that after everything she and Sam had worked for they couldn't afford a condominium in Arizona. It meant that they couldn't afford to travel much and what travelling they could do would have to be economy class. It meant that they couldn't surprise their children with a little extravagance occasionally. It wasn't that Barbara was mercenary, but she had worked just as hard as Sam all her life, and now she felt left out of the decision. Barbara realized that she had to treat Sam very carefully if she wanted to continue living in the style to which she had become accustomed.

Not that they lived in regal splendor; in fact far from it, but they did all right on Sam's salary and Christmas bonuses. And if Sam worked until he was sixty-five, he would receive his whole pension, and they could afford to cash in some of their bonds and buy a place in Sun City and still have enough left to travel during the summer. Early retirement meant they would have to stay in their rent controlled apartment and take week-end trips. If prices kept going up it also meant that Barbara would have to get a parttime job. Sam had to work no matter

how bad things got, and it was up to Barbara to keep him happy.

But where was he? Barbara became angry at six-thirty when he failed to come home. But when Sam didn't show up by seven, Barbara felt sure that there must have been some kind of accident, so she called all the hospitals. Nothing. And now it was past eight and Sam had neither come home nor called. An affair? Perhaps, but with who? Sam wasn't any great Valentino. He was too short for one thing. But then so were Napoleon and Woody Allen, and they seemed to do ok. Of course they weren't completely bald, but what about that thing in the Cosmopolitan at the beauty salon? The article about bald men? Ok. Ok. So Sam could be having an affair, but who with?

Barbara went to the window and willed Sam to come around the corner again. Damn him. She knew now. He was having an affair with that Miss Jamison from work. Of course! It made perfect sense when Barbara thought about it. Sam complained that he might get stuck at the office later than normal because of the merger, and that's where he was, but it wasn't because of any merger other than Sam's scrawny body with Miss Jamison's. It galled her to think that she had given up so much to be with Sam, and he valued her so little. How could she have been so blind? Barbara called Industrial Indemnity. No answer, but then what was she thinking-that Sam and Miss Jamison would be doing it in Sam's cubby? Or even if they were, that Sam would actually answer the phone? He might if his patterns remained the same at work as they were at home.

Now she was mad. Sam had no right to cause her to suffer. If he was having an affair, the least he could have done was call her and lie. Barbara looked at the clock: 9:05. Where was Sam? Shit. Barbara knew her mother was

right about Sam; he never considered her feelings at all. What did it matter to him if she was in a panic as long as she kept the house clean and dinner on the table? Well he was in for some big changes if he thought he could treat her this poorly and get away with it.

Barbara went to the bedroom and took an overnight bag from the shelf. When she had finished packing a few things, she returned to the kitchen and was in the process of writing a note when Sam came in.

At first she felt so relieved that he was home that Barbara temporarily forgot to be angry with him. However, before he had a chance to move, she confronted him. Sam just stood there with a sheepish grin on his face and swayed side to side the way Barbara had seen elephants in the circus move.

"Couldn't you have called? . . I was worried sick. . . Besides that dinner's completely ruined. Honestly Sam, I don't know what to do with you anymore. . . I almost went to Mother's. . . I just don't understand what you were thinking. . . There are phones everywhere. . . Couldn't you have called? . . I always think of you. . . Just for once, I wish you'd consider my feelings. . . Maybe mother was right. . . What am I going to do with you? . . "

Each time Barbara paused to take a breath, Sam shifted his weight as if to try to respond to her barrage of accusations, but each time Sam got ready to speak Barbara was off again on another tangent, so he finally stood still and let her energy run down. When she seemed finished, Sam said nothing at first, but he hugged her, which made her break down in giant sobs, and he guided her to a chair place at the kitchen table, into which she slumped, exhausted by her emotions.

"I don't know quite where to begin . . ." Sam hunted for the words

carefully. A wrong word could be treacherous.

"I knew it! You're having an affair!"

Barbara's outburst had a comic effect on Sam. He couldn't stop laughing and was unable to speak for some time. Barbara couldn't figure it out at all.

What had she said that was so hysterical?

Finally, Sam got himself under some control and was able to relate the story of his lunch to Barbara, who became sicker and sicker with each detail.

"A quarter? You expect us to live on a quarter? Sam! What have you done? What are we going to do?"

"In the first place, I don't know if we have to do anything. When I realized how late it was, I went back by the office to see if anybody was there. It was locked up tight, so I don't know yet if I was even missed. Secondly, Barbara, I had fun! No matter what happens, I know it's not going to be like it was. Barbara I love you. You know that, and you must know that I would never have an affair with anybody. But I can't promise that I'll stay with Industrial Indemnity unless some pretty amazing changes take place with the merger. I don't know if I can handle another seven years of the same crap."

Barbara looked at her husband as if she were looking at a stranger. Sam had never seemed so strong before, so in charge. In the past, she had made all the decisions; after all that was a woman's strength. Her mother had taught her that men really didn't want to take the lead; they were much happier doing as they were told than having to take responsibility. Sam's mother treated him like a little boy before his marriage to Barbara. Barbara thought a little too much so in fact, but once they were married, Sam's mother ceded her authority to Barbara, and Sam had always seemed happy to let her make the choices concerning their

marriage and his career. Now Barbara had the impression that she would be unable to buffalo Sam any longer.

While somewhat mystified as to how the change occurred, Barbara found Sam far more exciting than she had in years, and soon the tired dumplings and threatened career were nothing more than small wisps of memory as Sam and Barbara reacquainted themselves with each others bodies.

10

Murray smoked a cigarette from a vantage point just out of the streetlight's glare. He thought Sam was progressing nicely despite his earlier concerns regarding Sam's suitability. Not only was Sam malleable, he seemed to have a natural proclivity for juggling. Yes, he would do fine.

Rosie and Bert played their roles perfectly. Of course Murray knew they would. When he realized that he needed help, he knew he could trust his old friends from his circus days to not only maintain a level of confidence, but to play their parts to the max as well. The idea of tossing a quarter was Bert's, and it amazed Murray to see how well it worked on Sam. That wonderful little metallic tinkling followed by the clattering that told you someone liked you. There was nothing else in this world quite like the sound of monetary approval. He clearly recognized Sam's expression upon hearing the sound of money hitting the ground, and he knew Sam was the one he had been waiting for.

44

Murray waited until Sam was well out of the park before he went to the bench to retrieve whatever it was that Sam had written. The note was a welcome surprise. They never left notes. Most of them took the case, and Murray always had to think up some weird story when he went to collect it, but Sam had actually gone so far as to give Murray permission for more contact. Sam was the one all right.

Murray slipped the note into his pocket and quietly vanished into the unlit night.

11

Despite many meetings with the Prime Ministers, Fiona never felt any more comfortable around them than the first time she saw them, partly because they looked so normal. As she entered the board room, she could almost convince herself that it was just another meeting, dull to the point of tears, but oh so necessary to the functioning of culture as she knew it. Even that thought made her a little nervous from time to time. She wondered if most people realized how much of their daily lives was controlled in corporate board rooms. Now this couldn't have been truer. Here were a group of men and women working for something called Abolonia, something far beyond normal comprehension, something capable of destroying the universe, and it looked like any other meeting of a board of directors.

Fiona couldn't understand the seeming nonchalance of it all. When she walked into the room, she was aware of the small groups discussing their special interests in muted undertones. She was also aware of the unusual sweet odor in the air which signalled the presence of a Prime Minister or two. That automatically indicated importance as generally the Prime Ministers didn't bother to communicate directly with the ministers; it was somehow beneath their dignity, and they were bothered by the sound of human speech. Even though no one else seemed particularly nervous about the subject of this meeting, Fiona knew it wasn't just another briefing session.

The Prime Ministers had been around since the early fifties. Actually, it began shortly after Korea. They came looking like perfect beatniks in order to remain on the fringe of society while they learned and grew. Some people suspected that something was going on then, but the Prime Ministers succeeded in focusing any suspicions away from themselves by pitting the super powers against one another. In the sixties, they looked like hippies. Nobody took them seriously except their apparent peers, and so they were left to infiltrate the only group that mattered to them.

Now they looked like the young urban professionals that many of the hippies had graduated into. Fiona came into what could have passed for any corporate boardroom in the country and took her place at the end of the table. She looked around for Je, but he was conspicuously absent, which Fiona found curious because this was, or used to be, his board room. As soon as Fiona took her seat, however, all conversation stopped and the empty chairs were soon filled. In the silence that followed, Je came in and took a spot at the head of the table. On either side of him were two Prime Ministers. They managed to look

both human and other worldly at the same time. Part of it was due to the fact that they both were close to seven feet tall, and their skin was quite pale. Now, standing on either side of Je they really looked more alien than human. Even Je looked a little alien to Fiona in that he hadn't told her he was so involved, but she relaxed when she caught Je's eye with a look of question, and he responded with a slight shrug indicating to her that his position was political only, and he had no real power. Finally the rest of the ministers took their seats, and the meeting began.

"Fiona." Je stood up and bowed slightly toward the far end of the table.

Fiona rose unaccustomed to this level of formality with her old friend. "Je. How may I be of service to you?" She figured it was best to play along with whatever was going on, but she felt a little like making a mockery of the pomp and ceremony, like maybe doing a jig on the table, or speaking in rhyme.

Without saying anything more, Je smiled cryptically and sat down. Fiona relaxed slightly but remained standing. Something didn't feel right to her. Ever since they got off the plane, Je had been distracted. When they got to the hotel, Je checked them in and suggested they go to their rooms to freshen up before the meeting. Since Fiona had taken no time between the beach and boarding the plane, she was thankful for the opportunity. Once she got to her room, she realized how tired she was. Overnight flights always exhausted her because flying made her too nervous to sleep. Je said that the meeting was scheduled for 2:30, so she had time for a short nap before she had to get ready. When Je came to get her, he seemed to her strangely formal. This she shrugged off as nerves. Je never liked the Prime Ministers and always felt uncomfortable when he had to meet with them--even if things were running smoothly, but now

something happened that was not according to the master plan, and Je was afraid of retaliation. Given his cultural background, Fiona understood why and let him remain distanced.

“Sit down Fiona,” Je spoke smoothly and in a monotone that made his voice unfamiliar to Fiona, “so we can begin our little meeting.”

Only then did Fiona realize she was the only one in the room still standing and she took her seat, quietly apologizing to the ministers sitting close to her for the delay.

The Prime Minister sitting on Je’s left took command of the meeting. Fiona didn’t recognize him at first, and then she realized he was one of the first to approach her concerning the DuPone Industries deal. He had changed his look since then, and now wore a nicely fitting three-piece suit instead of the loosely fitted pajama-like garment that they seemed to prefer.

“Miss Burns. Je has informed you why we brought you back from Brazil. Since he left here, the situation has grown more serious than what we originally suspected.” Fiona cringed at the monotone voice. The Prime Ministers had been able to simulate everything human except speech. “Mr. DuPone broke out of his apartment. We didn’t find out about it until yesterday. So far he has managed to elude our detection, but we will find him with your help. In the meantime, we are sure you realize our need to keep you closely watched--we believe he will attempt contact, and we are concerned--for your own protection of course.”

Fiona looked at Je who was staring at a point on the table about three feet ahead of him. He appeared more robotic than most of the other ministers which made Fiona relax slightly for the first time since the meeting began. She knew that Je’s training included Zen meditation techniques which he used whenever he

felt the need to escape the possibility of one of the Prime Ministers reading his thoughts. She tried to find a similar spot herself so that her thoughts would be unreachable as well. But Maurice was loose! He must have discovered the missing time, so he would know of her duplicity, and that meant the Prime Minister was correct in assuming that her life might be in danger. It also meant that Maurice might be aware of the reorganization, and he might be part of a counterforce, and if that was the case, Fiona had to find a tranquil shield to protect the movement against detection. "I understand," she willed herself to say aloud. "May I send to the hotel for my belongings?"

"No. You will return to the hotel with Mr. Fou. You will both have access to the entire hotel, but you will not be permitted to leave the building. Our sources indicate that you have angered Mr. DuPone to the point that he will seek you out." With that two ministers stepped to either side of Fiona's chair and helped her to rise. She and Je were then escorted back to their rooms.

As soon as Fiona's door closed behind the minister, Charlotte Fisher, Je entered through the balcony door. Fiona had learned never to be alarmed at the way Je came into a room because it was rarely through the front door. Before she could speak, Je motioned her to be silent and went back on the balcony indicating that she should follow him. Fiona thought that Je's actions were a bit James Bondish, but then James Bond could be fun, so she decided to go along with it, but she couldn't help giggling when she got to the balcony and saw Je going over every inch of it looking for bugs.

"What are you doing?" she managed to say through her giggles. "Je don't you think we'd have more fun inside? You can look for bed bugs."

"Shh, Fiona. When are you going to realize how serious this is? They've

already threatened my life, and maybe even killed some people, and you're still laughing. This is no joke Fiona."

Fiona stopped laughing. She grabbed Je by the shoulders and forced him to look at her. "Of course I know it's serious, Je. That's why I'm laughing. Look what happens to the people who take it seriously. They turn into little ministers, and that's not going to happen to me. Now let's go have some fun and you can tell me everything you know."

12

After making love, Barbara and Sam held each other silently with a sense of commitment to one another that they hadn't felt since their youngest child had left home four years before. Still it felt different than that even, more like they were just beginning to know each other. But they knew each other so well! The only way Sam could later describe the feeling was that after twenty-five years of cohabitation, they embraced for the first time. Sam didn't want to let go, and Barbara was quite content to snuggle for the rest of the night, but finally a biological urge made an end to their endless moment.

When Sam came back from the bathroom, Barbara was already asleep, and she looked so peaceful that Sam decided to sleep in the guest room, so he wouldn't wake her. He couldn't believe he felt so wide awake after having just a minute before felt so relaxed, but now he felt energized and a little guilty for not

slipping next to Barbara and attempting sleep. On the other hand, he knew from experience that sleep was hours off, and it didn't seem right to upset Barbara's peace with his tossing.

The guest room smelled musty from being closed up. Sam turned down the covers and realized that there were no sheets on the bed. After some deliberation, Sam opted to sleep without sheets rather than go to the trouble of looking for them, and making the bed. Barbara knew exactly where such things were kept, but Sam always figured that the beds were always made. He crawled under the blankets which felt scratchy against his skin and gave him a new appreciation of his wife's homemaking abilities, and he tried to make the best of it. He attempted to read, but the light was terrible. The radio beside the bed yielded only static hissings. Finally, Sam turned off the lights and stared at the ceiling.

A light from somewhere outside cast strange shadows in the room which gave Sam slight feelings of anxiety like when he was a kid and he had watched the "Twilight Zone" or Alfred Hitchcock too soon before going to bed. His mind told him there was nothing wrong, but he was always certain that Rod Serling was delivering a monologue just outside his window. "Sam Jones, average American kid has just left his bedroom on a one-way ride . . ." With that, Sam Jones, typical American male, fell into a deep sleep.

A circus tent provided a backdrop for Sam's dream. The dust wafted skyward as the elephants thundered around the track. A calliope puffed out a march, and the smell of popcorn and cotton candy completed the scenario. Sam was sitting in the bleachers with a couple of the kids from his old neighborhood. All of them, Sam included, were working on a scheme to get some more candy

since none of them had any money. Sam figured they could offer to clean-up after the elephants.

"Are you kiddin'? Have you ever seen elephant shit? Man, Sam, elephant shit ain't nothin' ta mess with. I mean you can do it if you want to, but I sure wouldn't even if they paid me about a million bucks!" Tommy knew what he was talking about because just then the air began to smell so bad that all the boys held their noses and groaned when an elephant passed by leaving a trail of the biggest droppings Sam had ever seen.

"Nah, I guess you're right about the elephants." Sam put his face in his hands and thought very hard of a way to get some candy. The boys hardly ever included him in anything, and they did now only because he snuck out without his mother's permission. "Hey! I know! We could dress up like clowns and do some tricks for the people outside. They'd pay us I bet."

"Yeah, right. And where are we gonna get the clown suits? Did ya think we could just borrow them?"

Sam felt his face turn red. Tommy was right again. Tommy was always right. The guys'd never ask Sam to do anything again because he was so stupid.

"Heathens!" Sam recognized the voice all the way from the ticket booth outside the main entrance. "You've got my boy in there, and I'm going in to get him. No I won't pay for a ticket! I'll not be caught supporting such a subversive form of entertainment. Now, I'll thank you to let me pass before I report you to the Committee on Un-American Affairs. And don't think I won't! Why Mr. McCarthy lives just down the street, and he'll listen to me. You won't have another job anywhere in this country again."

Sam sat up in bed. After such a loving experience with Barbara, his

dream seemed unnaturally harsh. He hadn't thought of the circus in ages. Not since . . . Murray! Son-of-a-gun really did something to him this afternoon, maybe even ruined him. But then, what was there really to ruin? A tired marriage--well it was tired before tonight. His career? Perhaps, but Sam didn't think so; although, he couldn't figure out why. Then Sam remembered the duffel bag. Sleep was clearly impossible, so Sam went into the kitchen and fumbled around looking for the bag. It was next to the door, just where he'd left it. He grabbed it and went back to the guest room and locked himself in.

Sam hadn't had enough time to really go through Murray's duffel in the park. Actually he felt strange about doing it now except that he rationalized he might find a phone number or address that would enable him to return it to its proper owner. He didn't expect to find anything more than a few cheap tricks and maybe a razor and change of clothes. He found these items as expected, but he also found his office extension and Industrial Indemnity's phone number scrawled on a notepad. That was enough to cause the blood to run from his face, and he sank back onto the bed certain now that Murray was a corporate spy hired to give Industrial Indemnity reason to fire Sam before he could earn his full pension.

"Shit." The sound of his voice startled Sam. At first it seemed to him that there was somebody else in the room, but then he realized that he had spoken aloud. It didn't matter that he had already decided to leave the company. In fact now he realized that his decision was based on his experiences with Murray that afternoon--not on anything he had thought of all by himself. He determined not to give in to any more manipulations from Murray or anyone connected with Industrial Indemnity for that matter. He would handle another seven years. He would be a model employee. He would make sure that Industrial Indemnity paid

him his full pension. Of this he was certain. Feeling better for his decision, Sam put everything back in the duffel except the notepad and turned out the light.

Soon, he was asleep and back at the circus. Instead of sitting on the bleachers, he rode an elephant around the track surrounding the performing rings. The music blared, and the lights glistened off every rhinestoned costume. The elephant thundered around the track, and Sam became gradually aware that he was unable to control it and that a crowd of people he had assumed to be part of the parade was actually trying to stop the elephant before Sam got hurt. Sam's mother chased the main pack, full of threats. Despite his fear of being on the back of a run-away elephant, Sam had no desire to have the elephant caught because that would mean having to face his mother's anger.

Once more, Sam sat up in a cold sweat. The circus! His mother dragging him from the tent in front of all the guys. All the memories came rushing back, and Sam didn't know how to deal with them. One thing was certain. Murray had done something to him, and Sam was determined to find out what. He looked at the clock: 5:29. He might as well forget trying to get anymore sleep. Sam got up and went to the kitchen to make coffee and figure out what to do next.

Maurice watched the third window from the corner of the tenth floor of the Palace Hotel. Fiona was in there and he knew that if he went directly into the hotel, no disguise in the world would protect him from the Abolonia's many pairs of human eyes. And yet he knew he had to talk to Fiona. He couldn't believe that Fiona could know the full extent of the Abolonia's plan and still be involved to the level of minister. On the other hand, if she knew less than Maurice, she might still be under the impression that the take-over was for the best. He hoped that this was the case, because if he could reach her in time, and if she remained apparently loyal to the Prime Ministers, she would be a valuable link to the resistance.

Maurice turned his attention toward the busy street. A yellow cab pulled up in front of the hotel and a well dressed woman with a poodle stepped out. The cabbie picked up another fare and drove off. A group of boys strutted down the street moving their bodies to the rhythms of the boom box they carried. The doorman yawned and picked up a paper cup that a passerby dropped. He looked at his watch and returned to his post next to the front door. The Abolonia wanted to make everyone the same, and it amazed Maurice that nobody knew about it or, that if they did, they didn't resist.

A bus stopped directly in front of him and blocked his view of the window. Maurice waited patiently for it to move, but it seemed to take forever. Finally it left in a great cloud of ozone depleting gasses which filled Maurice's eyes with tears. Maurice laughed at the inefficiency of it all. While it might be politically correct to ride a bus, it was definitely not cool. This meant that the bus companies didn't have enough money to maintain their vehicles properly, so they

belched noxious gasses into the atmosphere which was being poisoned by the overuse of industrial chemicals and emission fumes. That was why riding the bus was politically correct. But busses were so inefficient that no one wanted to ride them which is why they weren't cool. Maybe the Abolonia was right in wanting to get rid of the chaos.

On the other hand, Maurice had experienced the mind numbing feelings of total consensus once before. He discovered then that not only was it extremely difficult to act along party lines and spout the rhetoric, his thoughts eventually broke through and exposed him. Then he had been subjected for days to the grim questioning, "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?"

At first Maurice thought they were joking. He a communist? Hardly! His father was one of the nation's wealthiest capitalists, and Maurice always knew that he would one day take over DuPone Industries, but he spent the summer of 19__ touring with a Russian Circus as a goodwill ambassador. He found that he had a natural talent for juggling, and soon he was actively performing as a clown. When Senator Joseph McCarthy began his investigations, Maurice's name came up as a known consorter with communists, a fact he couldn't deny, so he spent his final year at Harvard and a considerable sum of his father's money demonstrating what an upright American he was. Unfortunately, he couldn't keep quiet about Korea, and he found himself facing the House Committee on Un-American Affairs.

However, his current situation was far more serious. After leaving his apartment, Maurice received his first message from the Juggler. It was more of a thought flash than any tangible message, but Maurice, having dabbled in the

occult, recognized it immediately as a neural astral communication, and he paid close attention. He learned that there was a conservative force in the universe which was terrified of the chaos of creativity. His goal was to put an end to creative impulses--that sent a shiver down Maurice's spine--because he was terrified that a bad mistake might happen if too much creative energy was unleashed. There was, however, another force in favor of the creative spirit, and it needed help to survive. Maurice took this information, and remaining in the disguise he had selected, settled in to Union Square Park to observe and plan.

It didn't take long to spot the ministers. They looked exactly like he had looked before going into hiding. Nicely tailored suits, briefcases and the ever popular *Wall Street Journal*. After awhile, Maurice became aware of the not quite human others. They were taller and walked like they weren't used to it. The ministers behaved deferentially toward them, and they accepted it with quiet regal grace.

After a short time it became apparent to Maurice that he needed some accomplices, but he had to be careful to find people who were neutral politically. Too far to the left and they might be marked for being too creative. Too far to the right and they were either working for the Prime Ministers directly, or they would consider Maurice certifiable for his proposal and inadvertently alert the Prime Ministers to his presence. An absolute neutral with no ambition would be of no interest to the Prime Ministers because they were exactly what the Abolonia wanted everyone to be like, and if it's not broken . . .

The problem was that there were very few, if any, absolute neutrals in San Francisco. He first contacted his old circus friends, Rosie and Bert Stoyanovich, who were living quietly in a North Beach flat. They readily helped him decide on the initial phase of the plan, and all three of them went down to Union Square to

investigate.

Bert gave Maurice his juggling balls, and Maurice tried a few patterns. It was like riding a bicycle, and Maurice attracted a fairly large group of people. As soon as he realized the impact he was making, he stopped and the crowd dispersed. A good juggler would look too creative and wouldn't work. Maurice had to be inconspicuous but not invisible, gregarious but not creative. He wanted to be attractive to the right person without raising the eyebrows of the ministers. It seemed logical at the time for him to pose as a vagrant street performer.

It was a lot harder than he thought it would be. Rosie and Bert let him stay with them in their tiny flat, which seemed to get smaller every day that Maurice came home without the messiah he was looking for. Rosie worked hard at gathering together a network of people who were as desperately afraid of the shadow of apathy as were the three of them. And then one afternoon Maurice was working the noontime crowd when he noticed Sam for the first time despite the fact that Sam blended so perfectly into the scenery that Maurice suspected he had been there all along. Sam could walk into the middle of an Abolonic convention and no one would notice him as a stranger. He was perfect! But there had been no further communications from the Juggler, and Maurice was unsure how to proceed next.

He knew he needed to talk to Fiona, but at the moment there seemed little possibility of that because she was under such tight supervision. He tried to invade her thoughts with his, but he couldn't find her patterns anywhere. He hoped that wasn't because they were controlling her, but he couldn't be sure, so for the moment, he was stuck. Finally, he decided to go get his case from Sam, and hope that he was ready. He took Sam's note out of his pocket and left his post across the street from Fiona's window to the thinning night.

Barbara woke to the sounds and smells of breakfast cooking. Not giving her dreams and sleep a chance to linger like the fog outside, she jumped out of bed immediately to find out what Sam was doing making breakfast. In twenty-five years of marriage, Barbara could only think of two times Sam had ventured into the kitchen on his own. The first was when she came home after giving birth to Tommy, and the second was when Fisher was born.

She didn't even take the time to put her robe on before she went to investigate this new development in their lives. She found Sam sitting at the kitchen table, huddling over a clutter of paper with notes scribbled in all directions and a cup of coffee which Barbara identified quickly as the the source of the aroma that woke her up. At least that made her feel like things hadn't changed as much as she first thought except that Sam didn't drink coffee all that often. She was standing in the doorway for several minutes before Sam realized she was there. Then he acknowledged her with nothing more than a slight wave and mumbled something that sounded like, "Gmorn," without ever shifting his entire focus away from what he was doing.

Barbara ventured into the room and tried to look over Sam's shoulder, but he hunched over his work so protectively that she soon gave up and went to put on her robe so she could fix breakfast. Back in their bedroom, Barbara took stock of her marriage to Sam. She was in her second year at Mills when she met Sam. He was a senior in accounting at Cal and the most exciting man she had ever met. Not that she'd met that many, but he had travelled, and he seemed very worldly to her. Two years later, Barbara emerged from Trinity Methodist as Mrs. Samuel Jones, devoted wife and homemaker, her dreams of

anthropology exchanged for dreams of china and diapers. For the most part their life together seemed always to be okay: they had successfully raised two sons, they lived in a rent controlled apartment, they never fought, laughed, cried. Sam was more than generous with her allowance, and he was never abusive, so Barbara had to admit that theirs was a successful marriage. But then she thought about last night, and all those years of tedium and just getting through the day became intensely unappealing.

Even though she hoped that Sam would be able to keep his job at Industrial Indemnity, she couldn't bear the thought of watching Sam sink into apathy again. She couldn't bear the thought of slipping away herself. No, Sam was right when he said things had to change, and Barbara resolved to make sure that they did. She put her robe on, ran a comb through her hair, and before she left the room, sprayed a little perfume behind her ear.

"Sam, I was just thinking . . ."

"Barbara, I was . . ."

After a few more false starts, Barbara told Sam she fully supported his decision to stay with his company only if there were big changes.

"But, Barbara," Sam countered when she was finished, "I get what happened yesterday, and they want me to leave so they won't have to pay out my pension. Hell they probably lost it on some stupid investment anyway. I've been thinking about this very seriously, and the more I thought, the madder I got. This Murray, do you know who that SOB really is?"

Barbara, surprised by Sam's language, shook her head in disbelief. This was not the Sam she had known for twenty-five years. That man never came home last night. She quivered at that thought--if the man sitting at the kitchen

table wasn't Sam, who was he? And Barbara slept with him last night! And they made passionate love! Barbara should have known better, but he really did look like the Sam she remembered leaving the house yesterday morning, but he didn't talk, walk, act like the Sam she remembered, and that meant that she slept with a stranger last night.

"Sam! You aren't acting like yourself. In fact I don't know who you are anymore, but I'm not going to put up with it!"

Sam looked up from his clutter of papers and stared at Barbara. Then he laughed, and the more he laughed the more irate Barbara became, until finally she couldn't stand it any longer and stormed to the bedroom and closed the door. Before Sam could follow her, the doorbell rang. He struggled to contain himself and was still chuckling softly when he opened the door. It was Murray.

15

When Fiona and Je got back to the hotel, they noticed nothing unusual, but then their guards were hardly likely to be little green men from Mars; the Prime Ministers liked everyone to look as much a part of the scenery as possible. This not only created a quiet, passive atmosphere, it made it difficult for Fiona and Je to discover who their jailers were, thereby making escape or even discussion nearly impossible.

For the first few days they stayed close to their rooms and amused

themselves by making love, but they avoided discussing anything for fear that they might unwittingly communicate a sense of their growing frustration with the Abolonia's creative vision or any of their plans to escape their luxurious prison.

After spending the first afternoon with little on their minds but lust, Je retired to his room and began meditating with an intensity that surprised Fiona. She knew his abilities were strong but she always thought she could get through to him if she needed to, but when she called him to see if he wanted to go to dine with her she found him unresponsively sitting in the middle of his room in the lotus position looking like he had not moved in years. She even went so far as to touch him, but he didn't even twitch. She finally gave up and went to the dining room alone.

For her part, Fiona managed to entertain herself with steamy novels she found in the hotel giftshop. They were not to her normal standard of literary preference, but the sex scenes provided lots of alpha blockers when she found her imagination drifting into the unsafe waters of escape. She also managed to identify a tall, somber man as her personal guard. He appeared, at first, to be no more than a guest at the hotel, but it didn't take Fiona long to realize that he was always around. If she went to the coffee shop for a snack, he was there. Her trips to the gift shop always seemed to coincide with his need for a magazine. She also suspected a couple of the bell boys, but they weren't as easy to identify as her guard.

After three days, Je emerged from his room and accompanied Fiona to breakfast. They sat facing one another and ate in total silence. Fiona's knowledge of her friend told her that he had a plan, and that she had to be extremely careful not to betray him. Finally he looked Fiona straight in the eyes and asked

about the weather.

"Fine. It's been fine. Not too hot. Not too foggy." Fiona couldn't easily figure out what Je was getting at and she didn't want to try too hard in case her thought patterns might be detected and alert the guards.

"Yes. It's been foggy. That's typical for this time of year I'm told. But Fiona, how's the weather?"

Then it occurred to her what Je was doing. After the first summer they spent together, Je had to return to a changed China. His future was very uncertain and it looked like they might never see one another again. Before he left Je devised a complicated code that would enable any letters they wrote to pass the censors' scrutiny. He was using that code now and Fiona struggled to remember what it meant after all these years. Weather meant climate could be emotional, political, or intellectual. Fog meant uncertainty, diffusion, or danger. Fiona quickly looked around the room and noticed several unremarkable people watching her.

"It's going to get hot this afternoon, I'm told. The weather report said we're in for a heat wave." Fiona hoped her review hadn't given too much away.

"I see. Well, I guess we're due for a heat wave. It is summer after all. Perhaps we should return to our rooms where it is cooler."

Je signed the tag, and they got up to go back to their rooms. Fiona's tall, somber gentleman also stood up as did a fretful looking woman in her mid sixties. Fiona figured this to be Je's personal guard. Not surprisingly they all got in the same elevator car. They rode to the tenth floor where, as expected, they all got off. Once Fiona and Je got to their rooms, the two strangers pushed both of them into Fiona's room and followed them in, bolting the door behind them.

Je assumed attack position and might have done some serious damage if the two strangers hadn't burst into laughter.

"The weather? Couldn't you have been a little more inventive with a code than the weather?" The man Fiona had always thought of as somber looked anything but. His countenance had changed completely.

"But my dear, didn't you know we're having a heat wave? A serious heat wave." The "fretful woman" had exchanged her frets for giggles. "We're sorry," she added through her laughter, "but we were told that you were good at this, and that we probably wouldn't have to do anything except stay a little after you left to make sure you weren't followed. Mr. DuPone said . . ."

"You know Maurice?" Fiona was stunned. Maurice wasn't a spy. He wasn't smart enough. "How do you know Maurice?"

Sensing that the immediate threat of danger was past, Je retreated to the bed, assumed the lotus position, and meditated fiercely. His company, Wang Communications, had taken over DuPone Industries with Fiona's help because the Prime Ministers wanted to gain control of all international communication networks.

At the time, it seemed like an inevitable, if logical step. The Prime Ministers had approached Je with solid facts about the depleting ozone layer, the green-house effect and the nuclear proliferation. They explained to him that according to their leader all this happened because people had become too unpredictable. That a design flaw caused the earth, his most prized creation, to have life capable of destroying itself.

At first Je was convinced that the Prime Ministers were nothing more than certifiably mad geniuses who had broken under China's strict censorship, but the

Prime Ministers convinced him otherwise. They also told Je of the earlier efforts and the plan to prevent the necessity of total annihilation. Je agreed to work with them because he had lived with censorship and homogeneity and found it preferable to extinction. Slowly, his company began hostile take-overs of the other international communications giants.

Therefore, it made no sense at all that Maurice DuPone would have any interest in helping him and Fiona escape. Unless these two friends of Maurice's were going to help them escape the Prime Ministers, so Maurice could exact some kind of revenge. Je finally decided that Maurice's defenses were no match to his own martial arts skills and that anything was preferable to staying in the hotel another night.

"... we were working together in the circus." The man was speaking; at the mention of the word "circus", Je felt more relaxed.

"What circus were you with? I don't know if Fiona has told you, but she and I met when I was touring the United States with the Chinese National Acrobatic Troop before the revolution." Je felt, for the first time since he had been on tour, that he didn't have to be careful about his words.

"Kiev. I was just explaining to Fiona that we met Maurice as a goodwill ambassador when we toured this country, and he was such a natural that we almost took him home with us." The woman looked at her watch and gestured that it was time. "Sorry, I could talk about the circus forever, but Rosie is right - we better get ready. I'm Bert, by the way, and that's Rosie, my bride."

Rosie smiled sweetly, and opened her knitting bag to display four masks of chilling blandness.

Je exploded. "That's it? That's the way we're going to leave here

undetected? You guys are nuttier than I thought! Just how in the world do you figure that those masks are going to work?"

"Trust us. Maurice has had a lot of experience dealing with the Abolonia, and he knows."

Fiona and Je shrugged in an oh well gesture, put the masks on and left the room with Rosie and Bert. To their amazement, they were soon walking briskly toward Union Square and a meeting with Maurice.

16

Sam swung at Murray with a right hook, and Murray blocked it by backing Sam into the apartment.

"You . . . " Sam struggled to push Murray out the door. "You son of a bitch." He felt the sweat run down his collar. Murray grabbed him and forced him into a kitchen chair.

"Let me go!"

"Sam?" Barbara came out of the bedroom and rushed to Sam's defense. "What are you doing to my husband!" She beat her fists against Murray's back. "Let go of him!"

"Forget him, call 911." Sam said between gasps.

Barbara stopped pounding Murray and went to the phone. "Hello, I'd like to report . . ."

Murray pushed Sam into the chair and yanked the telephone out of the wall before he had to deal with Sam's full weight on his back.

"You son of a bitch! I know who you are, and if you think you can get me to leave Industrial Indemnity this close to my pension you got another thing coming." Sam wrapped his arms around Murray's neck. "They may have taken me for some kind of stupid flunky, not worth the time, but they obviously don't know Sam Jones very well."

Murray, stooped over by Sam's weight and his own efforts to restrain Barbara, needed to get control of the situation pretty quickly. Sam posed no real threat to his safety. But Barbara yowled like a Banshee. If Murray didn't succeed in making her shut up someone in the building would call the cops and wreck everything. He squeezed the muscles at the base of Barbara's skull, and she slumped to the floor.

Sam renewed his effort to hurt Murray, whom he now hated more than he had ever hated anyone. If he had more skill, Sam would have thought nothing of murdering Murray. But after dealing with Barbara, Murray focused on Sam. He didn't want to hurt Sam, but Sam was so violent that Murray needed all his wits not to kill him inadvertently.

"Now calm down," Murray talked as he would to a wounded animal, "easy. Everything is going to be okay."

Eventually, Sam responded to Murray's voice and his eyes began to indicate a human presence. Then he noticed Barbara lying on the floor and began to work himself to a frenzied level once more, but before he could unleash himself on Murray, Murray restrained him and soothed him gradually back to normal, at which point Sam got Murray's duffel from the guest room.

"There, now please leave. Or I'll have to call the police."

Murray shook his head and sat down at the kitchen table. "Again with the orders. Like I said yesterday you're either flippy or comatose. Bad combination, can't you ever be normal?"

Barbara groaned and sat up rubbing her head. "Sam? What's going on? Who is that man?"

"Sorry maam, I'm Maurice DuPone, at your service."

"Like the telephone company DuPone? You've got to be kidding! Sam who is he?"

Sam couldn't speak. Too much had happened in the last twenty-four hours, and Murray's name tipped the scale. Maurice DuPone was one of Sam's biggest accounts, and the rumor mill at Industrial Indemnity had it that DuPone was behind the merger. But why was he dressed like a clown and living like a bag lady? And why was he sitting at Sam's kitchen table? None of this computed, and Sam slumped into a chair mumbling vaguely about jugglers and MIG fighters.

"I'm sorry, but I seem to have that effect on your husband." Maurice smiled and made Barbara feel more at ease.

"Well, can I get you a cup of coffee or something? I don't know what's gotten into Sam. Too much excitement I guess." Barbara didn't wait for Maurice to reply before she gave him a cup of steaming coffee. "I guess you're probably more used to that gourmet coffee they make downtown, but this is just regular grocery store coffee from a can. Hope you don't mind."

"No, this is fine. To tell the truth, the fancy coffee's too rich for me, so I prefer this."

Barbara shook Sam's shoulder. "Sam! Sam, don't be rude. Mr. DuPone is here for . . . Why are you here?"

"Well, in truth I doubt if you'll believe me, but I need Sam's help. I met him in the park yesterday."

Just then Barbara seemed to notice Maurice's clothing. She abruptly took the coffee cup away, and glared at him. "Now how do you expect me to believe that you are this richy rich guy who owns a big fancy company when you hang out in the park and dress like those hippies used to? Who are you really? And don't give me any crap about it!"

Sam looked at Barbara with alarm. His senses were returning, and he realized that whoever was sitting at the table wasn't going to mellow with anger. If he really was Maurice DuPone, then he really could help Sam save his job, and if he was really only a stooge hired to make Sam leave the company, he might be able to tell Sam the full story, that is if he liked Sam well enough to want to bother. Either way Sam and Barbara had to kiss major ass. "Barbara! This is our guest! Mr. DuPone, you'll have to excuse my wife. She gets a little testy sometimes, but she doesn't mean it, do you sweetheart?"

"But Sam, we don't know . . ."

"Of course we do darling. This is Mr. Maurice DuPone. I'm sure he has a very good reason for his costume, and if we give him a chance, I bet he will explain all we need to know."

Barbara finally took Sam's lead, and she sank back into one of the chairs and sat in sullen silence. She thought that Sam must know what he was doing, but she was damned if she could figure it out. But she wouldn't interfere if that was what he wanted.

"Thanks Sam. I do have a good reason and if you'll have a little patience with me, I'll try to make it make sense." Maurice then related everything he knew about the Abolonia and about his involvement with him. When he got to the part about Margaret, Barbara left the room in disgust mumbling something about "Hard Copy."

"The point of fact is, Sam, that I have been in contact with another consciousness. There is a way out of this, but we all have to work together or we face total destruction. Can I count on your support?"

Sam studied Murray's, Maurice's face for signs of a hoax. He quickly satisfied himself that if it was a hoax, Maurice was unaware of it. But the thought of something like Maurice's story being true was absurd. Sure, the environment was in terrible shape, and nuclear obliteration was a distinct possibility, but being extinguished by some force that had created the universe? That sounded a little too much like the second coming stories his mother had fed him when he was growing up. Sam never questioned that the sky was falling; he just wasn't sure it was falling yet, and he wasn't sure that some jolly green giant was making it fall. Finally his curiosity or his need to brown nose for the sake of his job or the spirit of adventure--he was never quite sure--gave him the impetus to join whatever plan Maurice had cooked up.

"Good. Do you think we can get Barbara to consider it?"

Sam knew that while Barbara might go along with it initially, she would be the first to bail if things got tense. "We could ask."

At first Barbara refused to have anything to do with "a wild goose chase for space monsters." And she promised to divorce Sam if he left with "the lunatic in the clown suit." Eventually she relented and gave Sam permission to go with

Maurice if he promised to be home in time for dinner and not do anything life threatening. Sam and Maurice felt like a couple of kids on the last day of school when they finally left the apartment to go down to Union Square to meet the others.

17

Union Square reminded Fiona of a sixties reunion. She and Je had worn their nylon jogging suits when they left the Palace with Rosie and Bert, and now Fiona felt out of place, a feeling novel to her. As soon as they entered the square, Je noticed some of his friends from the circus and joined them in a tumbling routine, leaving Fiona to her own devices. She looked for Maurice, but he either wasn't there yet or he was so well adapted to the costuming of this strange army that she couldn't find him. Rosie and Bert, she noticed, had moved a little bit away from her, but they watched her as if she might do something she shouldn't. She went to join them for lack of better companionship.

"Where's Maurice?"

"Oh, he's not here yet. He's gone to get our leader, the Juggler." Rosie's eyes twinkled when she mentioned the Juggler, and Fiona wondered whom she meant. She assumed that the leader of this group was Maurice. "They should be here any minute."

Rosie watched in the direction of the Taylor Street entrance and didn't say

anything else. Fiona realized that Maurice must have been so angry with her that he must have told Bert and Rosie terrible things about her. They must consider her to be a contemptible witch who was only interested in climbing the corporate ladder. Even if they knew about the Prime Ministers and their involvement with the take-over, they could still distrust her for aligning herself on the side of order. Fiona wanted less and less to be here and wondered where in the Hell Maurice was so she could find out what he wanted and go home. She was PMSing like crazy, and all these strange people weren't helping her mood. She left the bench where Bert and Rosie watched the pomp and ceremony with something approaching rapture and went to get a drink of water from the fountain.

"Great, huh?" A clown wearing grubby flannel pants and an equally grubby sport coat with a plastic flower in the lapel appeared next to her.

"What?" Fiona didn't want to talk anymore so she didn't make eye contact hoping the clown would leave her alone.

"This! I mean it's really great what's happening here. Don't you agree Fiona?"

At the mention of her name, Fiona jumped and looked at the person next to her. It was Maurice. "How? . . . Where? . . . Why?"

Maurice hugged, her which she didn't find at all objectionable. "It's a long story. Remind me to tell you sometime."

Fiona felt like clobbering him, and she was just about to when an audible hush fell on the crowd. "Maur . . ."

Maurice put his hand to his lips in a gesture of silence and pointed to the far corner of the square. There Fiona noticed a parade of some sort beginning.

A small, kind of mousey looking man in a plain brown suit was being led to the center of the park where a hastily constructed stage had been built. The man got up on the stage and everyone cheered.

This went on for some time, and Fiona began to feel bored; she couldn't understand what all the fuss was about; after all, it wasn't like this guy was famous or she would have recognized him. She got up to leave, but Maurice held her. "Let me go."

"You owe it to me to stay. In fact I think you owe me quite a bit."

Fiona cringed. He was right, she did owe him, but what was the point of this? "Okay. Okay. But tell me this: What in the Hell is going on here, and who is that guy speaking?"

" . . . the end of the world." There were more cheers and Fiona struggled to comprehend what he was saying. The end of the world? The Prime Ministers never said anything about the end of the world, only that the Abolonia wanted to fix it by making everyone the same, so there wouldn't be hatred. She knew that the changes would be not all that great, but anything was better than the alternative.

"No. You've got it all wrong." The sound of her own voice surprised her. Maurice gestured that they should move closer so they could hear better.

Sam, from his place on the stage, looked small and insignificant, hardly a leader. But the people seemed to recognize him as one, which puzzled Fiona even more when she got closer to the stage. This "leader" was the sorriest excuse for a leader that she had ever seen. His head was too small and his ears were too big. His presence didn't match his position of authority, and his voice was thin and just a little reedy. On top of that, his polyester suit reflected the

sunlight to the point of glowing. Some leader, he couldn't even give a decent speech.

The crowd didn't share Fiona's opinion of Sam. She assumed that they'd all been carefully chosen and briefed before this charade began, but the more she watched Sam, the more she was taken in by something in his demeanor that suggested a life beyond the polyester.

"Where do I sign up?"

Maurice smiled and hugged Fiona warmly. "I knew you weren't really with them. The others will be delighted."

Sam was speaking again. "This is bigger than the Russians. They won't let you think about the Russians. They won't let you think about anything." Silence fell over the crowd.

In the silence, Fiona thought she saw a hint of panic cross his face, which was confirmed almost immediately by Sam's sudden dash off the stage and into the crowd. If he thought he could escape, he was very much mistaken. "Let me go! Can't you see that there's nothing I can do for you? I'm not a leader." By the time Maurice and Fiona made their way to Sam, he was being held by at least a half a dozen people. "Murray, tell them, tell them that I'm no leader! Don't pretend. It won't do any good anyway."

Maurice was able to calm Sam down enough to trust letting him go. "Sam . . . Sam, we've been through all of this. You're the leader, not because you're a slick politician-- this isn't even a political deal! So you don't have to talk fast or have all the answers. You know what you have to do."

Sam looked skeptical. "No I don't know anything. I don't know what's coming or going and I don't want to be in charge of it anyway."

"But think about it Sam! Without you it's going to be a lifetime of Industrial

Indemnities for all of us. Think about that."

"I could do it."

"Listen to yourself. Remember what we talked about. Remember last night. You could no more go back to that hell hole than fly to the moon. No strike that. You could fly to the moon a lot easier."

Sam wavered. The easy way would be to leave everything and everyone right now, go home to Barbara, pack and get as far as possible away from everyone. But a lifetime of imagining MIG fighters and marking time would be pretty hard.

"Yes, Sam, remember last night." It was Barbara. "I couldn't stop thinking after you left, and I knew I had to come down here. We've got to fight this, whatever it is because we can't go back to the life we were leading."

"But if we run away . . ."

"You can't run away from life."

"We could go . . ."

"Sam remember last night."

"I don't want to be this."

"You were chosen."

"No."

"Sam, I really love it when you juggle."

Sam looked at Barbara and saw the vital woman he had married. Her appearance reminded him of all the laughter they had shared over twenty-five years and he raised his hand to his nose wagged his fingers at the sky and got back on the stage where he took three small red balls out of his pocket and sent them skyward one after another.

Epilogue

Abolonia and she created a unique bright spark in the cosmos. When the Abolonia finally awakened from his nap and discovered what she had done, he was furious and tried to destroy her. The spark was wrong, it would cause a cancer to grow in his pattern, it must be destroyed. It was just this kind of chance occurrence that caused his ancestors to fail, and the Abolonia needed to rid his creation of the worm that would eventually wreck havoc on the pure elegance of his design.

Fortunately, the Juggler had managed to hide herself within the tangles of Abolonia's garment, and as she scurried to avoid his massive hands, she tickled him and he laughed until his sides ached, and he became distracted from his mission to destroy her creation. It wasn't long, but just long enough for her to warn her children and try to protect them as well as she could. The Abolonia had a weakness and the Juggler knew how to exploit it.

To this end, she blessed them with mirth, so they could laugh with abandon. She also gave them the ability to laugh at themselves, and she knew that this talent would eventually be the Abolonia's downfall because he took himself so very seriously. They had entirely enough intelligence on their own, so she carefully avoided adding any more because she didn't want to be faced with one day having to destroy them herself.

When all was in readiness, the Juggler held her breath and waited. The Abolonia sent agents to investigate and repair, and the Juggler hoped that her gifts would be enough. For awhile she was certain that she was winning, but then everything went sour and the Abolonia took over and began to make the changes required to prevent total destruction. Then something totally unexpected hap-

pened. The people began to laugh at their insignificance. In the face of utter annihilation they laughed like little children with the free spirit of abandon, and they laughed like adults, not cynical twitters, but the deep throaty laughter of understanding.

The Abolonia didn't know how to proceed, in fact was so confused by joy that he couldn't think for more than five heartbeats without changing his mind. All of this was extremely unsettling, so he did something that none of his ancestors had ever thought to do. He swallowed a massive dose of pride and asked a woman for advice.