



TX History

A Novella

By

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CHAPTER 1

Galveston, TX - 1929

Gerald Molo listened to the crash of the Gulf of Mexico rushing away from him; a great vacuum drawing the final moments of a dismal year into salty, humid oblivion. He sat in his '27 Ford, on the seawall, nearly 20 feet above the narrow beach, gritty and grey with moonlight. The man-made embankment stood to defy the elements, to protect the island's inhabitants – righteous and debauched alike – against hurricanes or other manifestations of nature's brutal forces. To Molo, it seemed like a futile effort. A storm of bad fortune had overcome his soul, and left a bare, eroded shore, bereft of hope.

He owned precious little besides the machine, a loaded Iver-Johnson on the passenger seat, and a portion of contraband rum. The latter he had obtained from the Bali Nights. Molo was parked down the boulevard from the bustling night club, regarding it with brooding contempt. It perched on groaning pylons, like great insect's legs, over the roiling, black water. It thrummed, over-stuffed with revelers, vibrating with clamor. Music and cheerful voices reverberated over the churning waves. They counted down to a new year, a new decade. A neon sign flashed "Hot Music – Cold Drinks", silhouetting Molo in crimson as he drained the little bottle of Cockspur, and tossed it to the ashy swath of sand below.

He could not abide the thought of a new year, or even a new hour. Each minute brought nothing so much as a fresh opportunity to fail. He considered his life; brief, yet

already sullied by despair and misery. He had imposed a choice on himself. This broken young man had committed himself to decide, this very night, whether to continue his woeful existence – or not. The waves ebbed once more.

He chose.



Portillo, TX – Present

I am Kyle Blyte. My stepdad Darrell owns Contemporary Paint & Body, on Center Street. I stand in front of the modest establishment, a double-Quonset with four garage doors, a small office, a filthy john. It looks like two soup cans pushed together, or a giant pair of robot knockers. A failing neon sign blinks *temporary Body*. Appropriate, I suppose. A car dies, turns to rust, and the driver moves on. Ashes to elbows. We help keep the car and driver together, like prolonging a bad marriage.

A block down, across the street, there is a loudspeaker mounted on a pole. It looks like a beehive, and sounds like a horde of crispy insects attempting human speech. The weekly homily of the South Coast Safety Committee begins:

"In the event of crisis, heed these words. There is a plan for all to be saved."

"aved-aved-aved," responds the echo.

Each Thursday, the public announcement system is tested, the same message. There is more, but I become focused on the Air Today plant, at the end of Center Street, across the freeway. A flare is burning high into the purple sky, from a tall stack. It makes

the whole place look like a humongous dragon, reclining on its glittering mound of booty, blowing off some plumage just because he feels like it. Or maybe he can't help himself. The truth is, it's the plant burning off waste product. Seems like it could use some privacy for that. The sun is setting, and the bright pillar makes everything down to 15th street all campfire-colored.

Danny Momus is late. I called his beeper 30 minutes ago. He's a bud, we're in Spanish together right now. We have *un asunto*, a trade, to discuss. He finally arrives in his '86 Mazda. It's a few years old, but it still looks pretty tight. I guide him through Door #3 and roll it closed.

"You're late, Nemo."

"Yeah, sorry -"

"*En Ethpañol!*" I goad, in the Profesor Dawson voice.

"*Lo siento*," he replies with unusual competence. That phrase, he knows.

"*Pinche'spléndido!*" I roar in my basso AM-radio-announcer voice. This usually evokes the subtlest twitch at the corner of *El Capitan's* pout-cleft, but he exhibits no reaction. Less so than usual.

"So, J. Danforth, what you got for me?" I say, getting *manos a la obra*, and literally rubbing my hands together.

He steps out of his mini-truck in that awkwardly practiced way, almost concealing the clear fact that he is too tall for this stylishly petite conveyance. He rises to his full height – slouching height – but still a pounder of Tecate over me.

"I've received a message," Nemo says.

I wait for more, but that appears to be the full *comunicación*. In the silence, I perceive that he's serious. More so than usual. The air compressor kicks on, clearing its throat. Just as I attempt to advance the conversation, with befitting gravity, he pushes a crumpled sheet of paper at me. It's last week's Spanish exam, an *F* in Dawson's *baligrafo rojo* slashed across the top of the page, like he's some kind of dickhead Zorro.

"Hmm, I believe it says that you are failing *Ethpañol*."

Nemo flicks the paper, grunting with agitation.

"*El ocho lado*"

"*El otro lado*" I correct him, finally understanding, flipping the page over, "you said 'eight', *bobo*."

The reverse bears a crude sketch, something like a sideways bicycle fork, with a couple of florid accents. He doesn't wait for me to ask.

"Last weekend, I was real DeMoLished. I saw this...it came to me. Like a message."

"Mensaje del sueño?"

"Uh, *si*."

"*Una visión EXTRAÑA?*"

"Yes, it was very – *muy extrana!*"

I crack up at him pronouncing it like *Montana*.

"Look, I'm not here for like, frickin' tutelage right now, just let me tell you this!"

"You got *extraña*, that's on the quiz next week."

Nemo seethes at me, and I raise my hands.

"*Perdón, Capitan.*"

He seethes a little more, then continues.

"There is a stream. It diverges, here."

Danny points at the forked part, a thinner line splitting from the broad primary one. He indicates the thicker line.

"This stream has flowed, and will flow. It persists. This is where we are."

He points now to the lower line.

"This stream is brought into existence, in parallel, a reflection. Some people who are here, with us, are there as well. The room is the same, but the furniture is arranged differently. This line goes on, but it must end."

The thinner fork terminates with careful pencil shading, fading to the white of the paper.

I trace a yet thinner curved line, "And this one?"

"A projection of will. A needle of pure volition, stabbing backward. It is the cause, and the divergence is its effect. The snake bites its tail. The effect is recursive, but this line, it must end."

"Whoa," I say, raising my hand, "now you're repeating yourself."

Captain Nemo just got too deep for me. He needs to lay off the Dims. I give up on trying to understand the drawing, and instead begin to see it as negative space between strips of masking tape; a graceful filigree rendered with my airbrush. I consider its placement on the side of the Mazda. It's simple enough, a fair trade for what I've been promised.

"So you want this on your truck, like we talked about? One color only."

"Yeah, um, I have this."

Nemo brings out a baggie containing the agreed currency. His mom is some kind of New Age shrink. Her compressor and paint gun are fruity crystals and a little beauty called VDML. We call it Viddy, or *DeMoLition*, or a half dozen other cute names, because young folks are just so goddam clever. Nemo snags the stuff while he cleans Momma Momus's office, after hours.

"This is a little less than we talked about, *Capitan*," I say, shaking the baggie.

"This stuff might get scarce pretty soon, ya know? It's a fascist state, man," Nemo shrugs.

I accept the scant requital. *No hay problema*, it's not really my thing. In fact, I'll probably reserve most of it and try to slag it off later on some desperate Dim-heads, maybe even Nemo himself. He mistakes my contemplative pause for haggling, and brings out something else, which really gets my attention.

"I got the new Viddi Moliddi, it just came out. You can have it."

"*Pinche'stupendo!*" I exclaim, this time with the desired result. Nemo obliges me with the faintest reaction, the line above his chin angles slightly, like his jazzy little Mazda starting over a speed bump. I hand him a roll of tape.

"C'mon Nemo, help me mask these windows."

I jam the cassette into my boombox, and press play. The new album from the greatest pop duo in the world pumps out; it does not disappoint.



Portillo, TX - Sunset

"Gerald Molo first found success in the oil business with a great discovery in East Texas. The legend goes that he was shown the location in a dream, while sleeping in his car, on the Galveston Seawall."

RJ had heard this sentence read a dozen times. He had directed the voice-over recording session. He had captured the B-roll shot of the commemorative painting, in the lobby of MoloChem. The huge chemical refinery loomed over the end of Center Street. MoloChem's Safety Manager, Dennis Cantura, was reviewing the employee orientation program. RJ had been commissioned to produce the work, and with Dennis' approval, it was now complete.

They sat together in the dark editing room of Vid 'Em All, of which RJ was sole proprietor. He offered a complete range of video production services, at reasonable rates.

Dennis was silent as the video played. Several revisions had already been made, and RJ was certain this would be the final edit of *Wel-Chem to our Plant*. It was boilerplate orientation material - entry requirements, hazardous chemicals used on-site, protective equipment. It would be exhibited,

compulsorily, to day laborers half-dozing through its familiar contents.

"In the event of crisis, there is a plan for all to be saved" the narrator droned on.

Finally, the video ended. The Vid 'Em All logo appeared, and dissolved to black. RJ awaited the final verdict. Sweat prickled under his coppery mustache. Dennis swiveled his chair toward RJ, who rose to flip on the lights.

"Great work, consider yourself approved!" said Dennis.

"Consider yourself invoiced!" RJ replied, producing a neat dot matrix column printed on a sheet with perforation-stubbed edges. He held it just out of reach of his client. Dennis' eyebrows raised behind thick safety spectacles; his olive brow creased. RJ, standing, kept eye contact with Dennis, still seated - a power position. He paused for drama, ensuring Dennis saw the amount, then he brought his other hand to the corner of the document, and, with a flourish, tore it neatly in half.

Dennis understood immediately the meaning of the performance. RJ intended to forego payment, in lieu of a greater consideration.

"A very generous gesture," he acknowledged, coolly deflecting RJ's attempt at bravado.

"I want in" RJ said, weakening, focusing not on Dennis's eyes, but on a glint on the edge of his shatter-resistant lenses.

They faced each other wordlessly, for a long tense moment. Dennis rose and extended his hand.

"I'll see you Sunday," he said, with a tone that offered much, but promised nothing.



Portillo, TX – Present

Heather Slown knocked on the oak door of *Momus Holistic Wellness*. The office was a garage apartment, with metal spiral stairs leading up to a small landing. An A/C unit sweated and hummed in a large window facing Highway 225. She waited, gazing listlessly at the reflection of a giant column of flame emitting from Air Today. The image distorted with the vibration of the condenser fan, and Heather imagined the entire works tumbling apart in the midst of some great tremor.

Diane Momus appeared, welcoming, "How does this day find you, Heather?"

They entered and were seated, conversed for a polite interval, and commenced with the evening's business.

"This work is like sculpture, Heather. You are a whole, beautiful person trapped inside a block of marble. We have been chipping away, freeing you from your past, your

fears and insecurities. The work is quite far along; we've progressed from broad and inelegant whacks to a high fidelity of detail. You may, however, be aware that one of my tools might be taken away soon."

Diane handed her an article clipped from a recent Portillo Observer.

"Yes, the DEA is pushing to place Vidimol in *Schedule 1*. I've been following the hearings."

"Of course, your vocation gives you a particular insight into this development. I wish you were Daniel's teacher, he might be making better marks." Diane said with a stiff chuckle. The comment did not register, as Heather intently scanned the article.

"They're talking about invoking an emergency ban," said Heather, half out loud.

"It could take effect in a matter of weeks."

"The process usually takes much longer," said Heather, alarmed, "the agency was only granted that power a few years ago. Our own Senator Boyd pushed for it."

"It's all over the nightclubs in Dallas, like candy. There's growing abuse among teens as well. Such a shame, it has the potential to help so many people," said Dr. Momus.

The drug was essential for her improvement, Heather could not deny that. She was troubled that something so beneficial would soon be forbidden, looked down on. She had partaken regularly for over a year, under professional supervision, of course. If she had to stop, would there be withdrawal effects? She was troubled by a budding compulsion to seek out Viddies on days between the sessions. She craved the marvelous feelings they gave her. Once she found a source, could she risk forming a habit? These flickers of curiosity were swiftly doused by doleful shame. Dwelling in the

shadow of undue shame was a significant component of her condition. When Dr. Momus gave her the treatment, it was like the lights getting turned on. There were no shadows. Every room, every corner could be investigated without fear.

The doctor continued, "What I practice, in the psychological realm, the art of medicine, is to take your projection of belief and reflect it back in a way that increases the possibility of healing. Vidimol is the mirror, and soon I might not be able to use it anymore. I have other methods, but your response has been strong. You are so close to being well."

She took Heather's hand.

"We need to prepare you for a special session. A larger dose. One last attempt while we still have this option. If it doesn't work, we can explore a different path, but I urge you to take this journey."

Heather was frightened by Dr. Momus's intensity. She knew the power of the drug, and feared the effect of its absence. She had trod the icy shore of oblivion, and wished not to return. Dr. Momus had guided her back with the help of her shining chemical beacon.

"Is it safe, the amount you intend to try?" Heather asked.

"Your usual dose is quite weak. When it's used recreationally, they start with at least twice that potency, often much more. The mortality rate, as far as it can be ascertained, is surprisingly low, the Senator's 'epidemic' be damned. All that said, you may not want to work the next day. Are you available next Friday?"

Heather, pensive, did not reply. Diane caught herself, tempered her zeal.

"If you agree, naturally, that this is the right course of action for you. I am confident you will be quite pleased with the results."

Heather remained silent, absent in her rumination. Diane gave her a moment, walking to the medicine cabinet. She was troubled to find the door unlocked. *How could I be so careless?*, Diane asked herself. She retrieved Heather's usual dose, and returned to her seat.

"The accelerated method has proven successful at the Sunbeam Concern. I'm sure they would be delighted to share the results of our experiment."

Heather winced at the last word. She did not care for the Doctor's affiliation with the Beamers. An *extra-scientific* research institution, mostly defrocked university faculty, the Sunbeam Concern had been the most vocal opponents to the current action on Capitol Hill. Dr. Momus was unorthodox, but worked within the bounds of sane and ethical alternative medicine, as Heather reckoned. The Sunbeam Concern operated from an enigmatic compound in the Chihuahuan Desert. They toiled, it was rumored, on the murky frontier of extreme pharmacology, and arcane psychospiritual theory. The Doctor's admiration for this cadre of hippie pseudo-physicians was disturbing, especially so at this juncture of her own treatment.

In a moment of terrible lucidity, Heather realized Dr. Momus, this devious aspirant, wouldn't hesitate to crack her head open like an egg on a greasy countertop, and for no better reason than to gain cachet with the insidious weirdoes of the Sunbeam Concern. This dark notion curdled into paranoia, dread born of deleterious self-aggrandizement.

Heather got ahold of herself. She had to trust Dr. Momus. She was willing to go down this path, to let Dr. Momus guide her, as she had all along, but the next session would be her last. She had to dislodge herself from Dr. Momus's orbit. At last, Heather emerged from her deliberation. She looked up at Dr. Momus, who bore a kind aspect in her eyes.

"I'll do it." said Heather.

"Wonderful!" said Dr. Momus.

As they proceeded with the evening's session, Dr. Momus modified her procedure, referring to a sheet of slick, curling fax paper bearing a letterhead formed around a stylized sun. A few extra steps were implemented, to make the next one less abrupt. She began, conversationally.

"Have you seen Rex this week, spoken to him?"

"No. He's been on my mind. Not that I miss him, so much, just that he's been really down. He hasn't found another job yet."

Heather and Rex were not seeing each other, not for several weeks. He had been a light in her world, like the treatment, chasing the shadows, though casting certain other ones. He was skeptical of the Doctor, calling her credentials dubious, her methods dangerous, her fees excessive. As a teacher, she could not deny the latter charge. Heather had not considered her livelihood in this matter. She was subject to drug testing at work. If Vidimol was criminalized, and she kept using, her career would be at stake. As the portion she had presently ingested gained influence, she had an insight. Empathy unfolded like the bloom of a luminous orchid. Rex's incredulity came from a place of concern for her. He did care for her. She needed to give him another

chance. If she could, for once, be fully present in her own life, she wondered how their relationship might evolve.

As for herself and Dr. Momus, and her wicked little mallet and chisel, this was the beginning of the end.



CHAPTER 2

[REDACTED] Texas – 1959

Agents Argus and Beausange stood on the sagging porch of a squat farmhouse, smoking and sweating. They had doffed their flannel suit jackets, rolled up their shirtsleeves, cursed their luck at receiving this assignment. Their exact location was known to a necessary few, as was the purpose of their visit. The landowner, one Calvin Haft, had been reported to exhibit a peculiar and potentially useful talent. The agents had come to investigate. Evening sunlight dwindled in a wash of gold, tarnished to an eerie green by an approaching weather system.

“Are you sure we should proceed?” Argus asked, adjusting his wire-frame glasses as he scanned the atmospheric violence on the horizon. “This storm is really cookin’. We’re in proximity to a number of potential *High Energy Events*.”

“High Energy Events,” Beausange acknowledged passively.

“Lightning, tornado, so forth. If the subject is under the influence, in the presence of a High Energy Event, the results can be – unpredictable. Remember that earthquake in Berkeley? One of those kids never returned.”

“Well, I’m not spending the night in this backwater, let’s just get on with it,” Beausange replied, crushing out his Camel.

These two, slipping past the screen door like afternoon shadows, entered the farmhouse, where a third public servant of lower rank waited with the Subject of

Interest. Agent Clark brought little to the proceedings beyond driving the car, and menacing silently. Subject Haft was seated at his kitchen table, though hardly at ease. He was a volunteer, for the record, but in fact had little choice to participate in the evening's activities.

Beausange began, addressing Haft, "On behalf of the U.S. Government, and the Clandestine Service, we appreciate your cooperation in this test."

Haft, stooped and balding with age, maintained a genial composure, but glanced around nervously, evaluating his predicament. Beausange sat opposite him, his rangy frame splayed casually across a small chair, but his sharp jaw set assertively. Clark was a stout, crew-cut gargoyle at the kitchen doorway. Argus stood at a counter, preparing what Haft anxiously assessed to be a medical syringe.

"I'm happy to – *cooperate*, as you say" Haft offered, weakly.

"But of course, Mr. Haft," said Beausange.

"People call me Cal." Haft's voice dwindled as he looked to Argus again, who drew a solution from a glass vial with a typewritten label:

vanadiumdichroicmethylliminate [VDML]

"Cal, it is reported you are possessed of a special ability, which has been deemed worthy of our attention." said Argus as he finished fixing the shot. He turned, faced the room, spread his arms.

"We simply wish to better understand your talent, to focus it and put it to productive use. You have demonstrated a significant ability to gain insight from objects, to intuit facts about an object's owner, circumstances in which it has been present."

“It is my gift, this is true,” said Cal, “I have helped locate stray children, livestock. I once helped a man, wrongly accused, walk free. I have helped many of my neighbors, I’m happy to do it. I don’t use my gift in the interest of avarice, or harming others. Only for good.”

“But of course, Cal,” said Beausange.

“This,” said Agent Argus, indicating the loaded syringe in his hand, “is a recently discovered chemical compound.” He bore it, unintentionally, in the attitude of flicking the bird.

“We intend to observe its effect on you, on your – *gift*, as you say. We would like you to investigate a test article. This item was recovered from the scene of a long unsolved crime.”

Beausange brought out a revolver, placing it carefully on the table. This noticeably discomfited Cal. Argus’ eyes stayed fixed on him as he continued.

“Easy, Cal. It’s not loaded. It’s been rusting in evidence storage; probably doesn’t even fire anymore. The man who owned it belonged to an influential family. That’s why this happened across our desk. The owner of this item was found dead, with it nearby. Presumably suicide, except that evidence indicates the presence of a second personage. The family was more comfortable burying the victim of an inexplicable murder – rather than a self-destructive derelict – so the case was filed as an unsolved homicide.”

“To preserve the family’s reputation, you understand,” added Agent Beausange.

“But of course,” said Cal.

Lightning flashed. Clark, counting to himself, but audible in the heavy silence, got to *three-Mississippi* when a report of thunder shook the house.

“The storm is moving this way, sir, and fast,” said Clark.

“Close the door and stand your post! Let’s finish this. We can be in Dallas by midnight,” ordered Beausange.

Cal was relieved to know these men meant to leave his home so soon, but he wondered in what state they intended to leave *him*. He clutched the arms of his chair.

As Clark elbowed the door into its warped frame, Argus caught one last glimpse of the brewing tumult. The house instantly became muted, stagnant, hermetic.

Accordingly, Argus modulated his instructions in a precise *sotto voce*.

“I’m going to administer this solution, Cal. Then, I want you to proceed in your usual fashion. Handle the gun, and tell us what you see.”

Argus planted the needle, deployed the plunger and removed the syringe in one deft movement. Beausange nudged the gun toward Cal, and he took it in his gnarled hands. He pored over it, and his gaze drifted into a fuzzy middle distance. His posture slackened, and he leaned forward on his elbows. Each finger, like a braid of whip leather, worked about the surface of the revolver, as one without sight might regard a strange artifact.

Cal experienced the usual glimmers of insight, sensory impressions like bursts of radio static. The gun’s owner was a man, a sad young man. Cal waited for more. The injection took hold swiftly, expanding his impression like a soap bubble, adding sharpness, depth, clarity. He marveled at the effect, the augmentation of his natural gift. *What if it could be like this every time?* Cal thought. *Fantastic!*

Focusing his attention, Cal realized he was fully immersed in an environment apart from his kitchen. He stood near a beach, atop an embankment, a paved road curving along its edge. *Could this be Galveston?* He'd only seen postcards. Sweat started about his wiry eyebrows in the humid, briny air. Music echoed from a nearby source, he tried to place the tune. It was *When You're Smiling*, performed in an unfamiliar instrumentation, with a raw feeling, as though it might have just been composed.

Cal became aware of a vehicle, an old Ford, its ragtop down, revealing the driver. The driver raised his hand – a greeting? No, the very pistol Cal had been holding, moments before, glinted in the driver's hand. Cal saw a second man. *Had he been there all along?*

He tried to yell, but made no sound.

An intense light appeared from beside the car, throwing a shadow on the beach below, highlighting foamy crests on brown water. Cal heard the thundering waves, then, emerging from that, the sound of a train.



Argus observed Cal intently. He seemed frightened and very far away, but still clutched the old revolver. Beausange waited, poised with a steno pad to record anything Cal might say. Clark remained by the door, which clapped against the jamb with the strengthening gusts. The storm rumbled and seethed, then, abruptly, all three agents

looked to the ceiling. An unmistakable roaring sound dinned outside. The agents looked at each other, then all about the tiny farmhouse, seeking a place of refuge.

“Stop Him!” yelled Cal.

Beausange reflexively brought his pencil and pad together, then they were blown apart, as was everything. A whirling column of howling destruction collided with the farmhouse. Its force surged beyond the realm of the Texas plain, and broken timbers, and the ruined bodies of the agents. The massive natural force of the tornado focused through the aperture of Cal's displaced consciousness, as he temporarily abided with the stranger in the car by the moonlit Gulf. The phenomenon projected through that moment, and into a space which could be observed only by one who hovers between the world of the living present, and the unknown infinite. One man alone occupied that space, and he saw.



Alton Barbeur's body lay in a coma ward in the Red River VA hospital. He had suffered severe head trauma in an unsuccessful tactical maneuver in Wonju. A scar parted the front of his hairline, a souvenir from the brink of demise. His soul dwelt in a place without time, or light, or any senses. There was thought, and a haze of memories from a life he wasn't sure was his own. All at once, he was bombarded by what he recalled to be a color. It was gold, and it surrounded him. A host of other

impressions overwhelmed him, and he struggled to sort out which was a smell, a strain of music, a hot breeze. The sheer force of it pushed him toward a place he had sought, but not been able to find.

Alton opened his eyes for the first time in eight years. A nurse working nearby was startled to hear a stirring from behind her. She spun around, disturbing a tray of supplies, knocking a freshly sanitized metal bedpan to the floor. It struck the floor at a peculiar angle, producing a chiming tone of unusual clarity and duration. It seemed to hang in the air, just above the floor, resonating, then landed on its flat side, with an unremarkable *clunk*.

Alton croaked at the nurse, "Paper! Paper!"

The nurse halted a moment, not understanding anything that was happening.

Alton swatted his hand against the bed and gasped his demand again, "paper!"

Regaining her presence of mind, the nurse thrust a blank medical chart pad, and pencil, into Alton's shaking hands. In a matter of minutes, he had filled the page with strange diagrams and indecipherable garble. Alton had returned to the living present, lodged back into corporeality by a force he would spend

the rest of his life trying to understand, and accede to. The nurse stared at the paper, then at Alton. He smiled.

"I've received a message."



Portillo, TX – Present

I am Kyle Blyte. I'm finishing up some Bondo work on a Chevette. Restoring the body to perfection, without blemish. I'm getting better at it, but even under the most practiced hand, in the end, it will still look like a Chevette. *No es mi culpa*, blame Detroit.

Danny Momus is due back to finish his masterpiece, per our agreement. He is *puntual* this time, and he proffers a slim, sad hamburger in orange wrapping, from a bag of a half-dozen. They are barely edible, but the price is right. I complete the final details, and make him clean the spray gun, to wring a bit more out of the bargain. I'm not sure how well the new paint job serves as a billboard for Nemo's *visión extraña*, but it's a handsome enough design, if I may say so. *El Capitan* graciously offers to let me ride bitch with him down Center Street, as he debuts the new enhancement to his bodacious mini-truck. Nemo activates the Rockford Fosgate, and Viddi Moliddi slams out. The lead single "Girl" spins non-stop now on Hot 93. I hear it from a passing car, as well. Everybody loves it, but I feel like it was written straight to me, it speaks to me; it makes me feel like somebody out there understands my condition. Vincent and Morris know what's up, they are for real.

We turn out of the parking lot and the flare at Air Today is still blowing. The dragon got some bad Sizzlin' Quick, *blarf*. What if Nemo is on to something with that crazy message? Maybe there's a hole between here and the Other Place, hidden in that chemical plant. That's why it's always fire and smoke and stink coming out of there. I see it in the rear-view mirror, rattling from the bass. We pass the new Sol-Mart that's opening next week, and Luncheon Lou's, and the pawn shop. "Girl" gets to the final chorus, it's genius:

Girl, girl, girl, g-g-g-girl.

Another mini-truck passes opposite us, across the median. It's Matt, from geometry class. He throws a peace sign to Nemo. *Respeto*.



CHAPTER 3

Galveston, TX - 1929

Alton Barbeur found himself sitting in a vehicle, which seemed at once antique and new. The seat creaked as he shifted in it, turning to discern his whereabouts. His perceptions occurred with slowness and stillness. He heard the movement of waves, stroked the wooden dashboard in front of him. He smelled saltwater and rum. His surroundings were cast in either bluish moonlight or red neon. Suddenly, all was lit up by a brilliant golden light, which originated at Alton's right, forcing him to look left, toward the water. He suddenly realized another man sat in the driver's seat. This stranger held a small pistol in his right hand, which he thrust upward into the humid air. The gun seemed to luminesce in its reflection of the mysterious radiance. The driver pulled the trigger, which Alton perceived across a full minute, or perhaps an hour. He pondered the meaning of it. A signal? An expression of jubilation? His eyes fixed on the movement of the finger, then the hammer of the revolver. It pivoted forward, deliberately as a pendulum, glinting in the penetrating light. As it finally came to rest, Alton heard the keen sound of a bell, elongated ludicrously in

time. This, too, may have endured for a minute or an hour, ringing out with a sweet, clear tone. Then, he awoke, the memory of the strange experience as distinct and permanent as the shrapnel scar on his head.

In the years that followed, this strange vision he had received, the night he emerged from his coma, guided his every action. After he completed his recovery, and left Red River VA, sharing this experience became his mission. His greatest desire was to re-create it, to let his life become illuminated by the light, and his thoughts tuned in harmony to the sound he heard in that moment of revelation.



Portillo, TX – Present

Heather Slown and Rex Janneter sat together in his apartment, watching TV on a Saturday night, sharing Kung Pao chicken, as they might have several weeks before. They had been giving each other some space, and Heather had initiated the *détente*, bearing dinner and a rental VHS of *Back to the Future Part II*. On this night, there was an extra sweet'n'sour. They dipped their eggrolls respectively, observing a discreteness of condiments. The meal conversation was awkwardly sparse, but they were both enjoying the company.

“You’re looking well,” said Rex understatedly, as the credits rolled to a strain of Silvestri. Heather hesitated to reciprocate. Rex had stopped shaving when he was laid off, and was cultivating a ginger horror across his jawline.

“It’s good to see you. Really good,” said Heather. They were each desperate to avoid an argument, to simply be together, for a little while, like they used to be.

Rex stopped the VCR, and *TVTO News at 10* was starting. It opened on a wide shot, with the anchor desk flanked by large cameras on automated pedestals. They glided, with smooth autonomy, across the soundstage floor, little LED’s blinking as they activated.

“We should watch something else,” said Heather, “this is just going to upset you.”

“It’s OK. I’ve moved on from *depression* to *acceptance*. People get jobs, people lose jobs. I lost my job to a robot. Welcome to the ’90s!”

Heather smiled at him, in spite of herself. Six weeks before, Rex’s job had been to move those cameras to those same marks, adjust angle and focus, respond to the director’s commands. It was a fairly robotic job, if he was honest with himself, but it was his, and he did it well. Technological progress and streamlined budgets had conspired to excuse him from the payroll of TVTO. Rex did not designate himself *unemployed*; rather, *working freelance for a little while*.

“Jerry the Floor Director is still there, I guess they haven’t invented a Robo-Prick.”

“Please, Rex, try to be positive.”

“I’m sorry, you know I’m joking. I’ve actually got some work lined up this week.”

He almost started to tell her about the wedding he was shooting the next day, but weddings and marriage were a conversational minefield at this point. Rex smiled at Heather, silently.

“That’s wonderful! See, you can build up some clientele, maybe make it as an independent operator.”

“I’ll never earn enough, that way. I can’t be living like this when I’m 40,” Rex said, raising his hands into the stale air of his modest abode.

“One day at a time, you have to be optimistic.”

“Don’t worry, be hoppy, mon,” said Rex. He refrained from slapping his chest and vocalizing abstractly.

“You know I’m right.”

“You sound like Dr. Momo. You still seeing her?”

“For a little while longer,” said Heather, “she’s helped me so much, you have to understand that.”

“She’d better, for what she charges. I should get some wind chimes and a mail-order degree and have a try at that racket.”

Heather did not reply. She knew Rex was just attacking Dr. Momus because he was unhappy with himself. He resented that she would share her personal damage with a *New Age quack* and not with him.

Rex knew immediately he should row back from insulting Dr. Momus. If there was to be fighting, he was not starting it.

“Hey, I – thanks for coming over, it’s really good to see you,” Rex said, mustering his sincerity, “I’m gonna get through this. Each day better than the next, right?”

“Turn it up,” Heather interrupted, pointing at the TV. Rex got up and adjusted the volume on his aging set, leaning over the cheap coffee table and takeout boxes. A depleted Lone Star fell with a clatter. Heather shushed him.

“Is your child getting DeMoLished?” blared investigative reporter Angela Thomas, with shrill sensationalism. “Coming up, VDML, a new drug epidemic, and the steps being taken on Capitol Hill to keep it from invading your home!”

Rex, having worked with Angela, was compelled to share a stinging *bon mot* about her unpleasant demeanor, but he thought better of it. He gazed, for a long moment, at Heather’s striking profile, and let his eyes fall closed.

“I’ve heard about this at school. This stuff is really getting around. It’s all over the nightclubs in Dallas. Like candy.”

“Mm-hmm,” Rex grunted.

TVTO’s Angela Thomas barked on, “The Office of Diversion Control has filed an emergency application in the Federal Register to place VDML in Schedule 1, the highest level of restriction on controlled substances.”

That’s it, thought Heather, *in 30 days I become a criminal, just like that. I have to stop.* She knew this was coming, but the certainty of it shook her.

She turned to Rex. He had dozed off; a soft snoring stirred his rusty mustache. *Convenient,* she thought. She was anxious about how they would part, after this uneasy reunion. Nobody got embarrassed this way. She retrieved Marty & Doc from the VCR, put the unfinished Chinese food in Rex’s dingy fridge, and quietly slipped out.

In his hypnagogic reverie, Rex envisioned her sliding far away from him, like one of the robot cameras moving to *Position 2*, a red *Active* lamp flashing in her mouth.



"I recall the work I did for Mr. Barbeur. He brought in an Iver-Johnson top-break revolver and requested some rather peculiar modifications. First, I removed the cylinder and replaced it with a thin hollow one, which produced a chiming bell-like tone when struck by the hammer. Second, I plated the entire piece in 12 karat gold, and installed pearl grips, with a custom sunburst inlay. The finished product was a thing of beauty, but no longer a weapon. Even so, I had to insist Mr. Barbeur refrain from 'firing' it - as it were - indoors, if only for appearances. He was squeezing away before I could allay his obvious delight with my handiwork. It sounded like a cuckoo clock at midnight!"

Burl Cotten

Owner, Hub City Gunsmith and Pawn

Lubbock, TX

***From Light Reading - The Newsletter of
The Receivers of the Shining Message***



Portillo, TX - Sunday Morning

RJ arrived at the Channel Breeze Shopping Center under a bright sun and a clear sky. He stepped out of his Econoline and adjusted his tie in the side mirror. RJ strode past the stylized *Vid 'Em All* logo, emblazoned on the van's side panel, toward the retail space which was presently home to *The Receivers of the Shining Message*. RJ came here, every Sunday, to attend the service. He felt like he stood apart from the world when he came here, entering a realm of peace and acceptance. A few congregants stood outside, chatting under the strip center's brightly colored awning.

Sis. Evelyn was holding a BB pistol, with little amber rhinestones hot-glued to it, a swatch of ivory satin wrapped around the handle. RJ paused, looking closer. A bicycle bell was affixed in such a way that it was rung by flicking the trigger. Sis. Evelyn *ding-dinged* it, and the Sisters standing around her clucked with delight. RJ nodded, smiled, shook a few hands, and entered the Receiver's Hall. The service was beginning shortly.

Prelude music and murmuring - of a respectful volume - filled the air. He took a seat on a folding chair, among several

rows, before a small dais and lectern. Behind that, a partition stood about 8 feet tall, with an opening restricted by a small ornamental gate. Beyond that, only selected members were admitted.

Regular attendance, and communion with his RSM neighbors, meant a great deal to RJ, but he desired to progress, to have a chance to receive a message for himself. To that end, he had made his entreaty to Bro. Dennis, who RJ now saw helping Bro. Alton into his seat on the dais. Even at his advanced age, Bro. Alton was bright and charismatic.

RJ kept his eyes on Bro. Dennis, attempting to elicit an acknowledgement. RJ finally got a genteel nod from Dennis, as the prelude music ceased. A pair of speakers, hung from the ceiling, crackled as Sis. Karen switched her Yamaha to a different sound patch, and started playing the hymn that began every service. RJ joined in unison with his brothers and sisters:

Exhort! Exhort!

The Golden Report

Rings true, with a clue from beyond.

If ye seek earnestly,

Then the Light ye shall see.

The Golden Report tolls for thee!



Portillo, TX – Present

I am Kyle Blyte. I'm about to watch Viddi Moliddi perform live on Arsenio. I am in the dogpound tonight. Actually, I don't really care about the first part of the show. I sit in bed, looking out the window. I can't see the Air Today plant from here, but I can tell that flare is still going. Its orange light flickers on a nearby water tower, making it a giant pumpkin. I wanna smash it with a bat, like it's the day after Halloween.

I can hear train brakes across the freeway, as a *Tough! Smart! Lawyer!* glares at me from the secondhand black-and-white TV sitting on my dresser.

Arsenio introduces the VM, holding up their album sleeve and pumping his be-ringed fist. I turn it up as Vin and Mo take the stage. Their clothes are outrageous. If I wore bicycle pants and a lady-blazer to school, I'd be laughed out. I might could pull off those buckled Postman's shoes. They dance and sing in perfect alignment. It's almost like two people are the same person – amazing. I will never I love a song more than this one. Wait. What's happening? The music sounds like a skipping record. Morris runs off the stage, but Vincent keeps dancing, adapting to the weird shuffle created by the fractured rhythm. It continues another minute, and the audience starts laughing and woofing. Suddenly, the show is interrupted by a *Gallery Furniture* ad.

"What?!" I cry out loud. I can't understand it.

My mother yells through the door, "it's late, go to bed!"

I turn off the TV, right at *Save You Money!* Are Viddi Moliddi some kind of phonies? I'll never believe it.



CHAPTER 4

The Tale of the Hatchet Man

There was a Man who became separated from his Shadow.

It followed him, sometimes near, sometimes far.

It followed him, far from their home, into the Wild Land.

It wandered away, and entered a Great Bear.

The Shadow felt joy within the Bear, in its purity

of conscience, the plainness of its needs.

This Great Bear, however, was the very thing the Man sought to destroy.

The Man and the Bear came together, at a swift, cold river.

With steel and thunder, he separated the Bear from its new Shadow.

The Man left the Wild Land, taking the hide of the noble beast, and abandoning his sad and forlorn Shadow.

It drifted over ice and bog and stubborn, scrubby grass.

After a time, the Shadow came upon a village.

Lonely and miserable, it wrought chaos and mischief upon the inhabitants of the village.

It gave wind to gossip, and obscured beauty.

It strangled hope, and amplified lies.

It cultivated misery, and hindered any good intention it could find.

A Wise Man in the village asked the Spirits how to relieve his people of this tormentor.

They instructed him to hew the shape of a man from fallen cedar, and invite the dark visitor to inhabit this form.

Then he should burn it, and the Shadow would be cast away as smoke, carried far from the village, on the winds.

The Shadow overheard this plan, and watched as the Wise Man took up his sturdy hatchet.

The Shadow waited patiently as the Wise Man worked.

He chopped rough shapes, then finer details of trunk and limb.

Finally, the Wise Man was certain the offending, vagrant presence would recognize its form.

The Shadow entered the wooden body at this perfect moment, just as the Wise Man made the final strokes of his hatchet.

A new man was formed from the union of Shadow and wood.

It leapt up and ran out of the village, with the Wise Man's fine old hatchet still in his knotty back.

The Wise Man grieved, for giving life and legs to this abomination, and for whoever would be afflicted next by its rueful anguish.

Also, he wept for the loss of his cherished hatchet.

Some say the Hatchet Man dwells among the trees - his brothers - waiting to frighten children with the fearsome tool of his creation.

Others say he made his way south, earning a Human Resources Certification from Bellevue College; then, embarking on a quest for revenge on the Man who left him behind.

But who can say for sure.

*From Folklore of the Indigenous People of the Pacific
Northwest*

By T. Franklin Jereau, Ph. D



The autumn breeze stirred, and the sun blazed, in Rusk County. The old man dreamt often of this moment. The sturdy wooden derrick pierced the blue sky and, in the image of the dream, he saw the well penetrate the earth also, a mirror reflection. They reached 1000 feet, 2000, 3000.

Finally, the black giant was awakened, and the ground shook. The dark bounty erupted into the sky, obscuring the sun, throwing a shadow across him. Then, he was stained by the inky prize itself, engulfed in blackness.



Val Verde, TX - Midday

Gerald Molo was awakened by his assistant, Welston. His presence had been requested. Presence was a subjective condition at this moment. He slouched crookedly on a worn Chesterfield, hovering between deathly sleep and sleepy consciousness. The old armchair seemed part of his body, a creaky frame stretched with sagging hide, soulless within, barely sustaining its appointed function of keeping the fading captain of industry from collapsing to the earth. Welston spoke.

"Sir, I've just been on the phone with MoloChem, the folks in Portillo."

Welston was careful to say *Por-TEE-oh*, even though many of its residents drawled *Por-TILL-uh*. The scrappy burg, located fortuitously on the Houston Ship Channel, was Molo's birthplace, and owed much to his investment.

"An event is being planned, a celebration of MoloChem's twentieth anniversary. They have invited you to be the guest of honor," reported Welston.

He felt the old man had understood the question, and would be typically deliberate with a response. Molo rarely left the ranch. He was a figurehead at the end of the conference table, a stern portrait on the wall.

Welston deduced from the sawdust-and-hide menagerie on the far wall that Molo had once been an avid sportsman. The parade of claws and antlers and glass eyes terminated with a tawny brown bear in savage posture, its immensity at once menacing and garish. Welston was curious about this abandoned pursuit, but any conversation approaching the subject of the dusty trophies was caustically deflected. Welston pondered them as he awaited Molo's reply.

By and by, the old man exhaled, with languor, pushing out every last particle of air, from his lungs, his body cavities, even the little space where his soul used to be.

Reversing this compression, he drew in a sharp breath, and muttered, "I will."

He would make this appearance in Portillo, if only to see it one more time before the end.



Portillo, TX - Afternoon

MoloChem Petrochemical was in the midst of bleak times. The company employed much of Portillo's blue-clad workaday populace. They had a keen interest in fostering good public relations, assuaging concern about pulmonary conditions, minor explosions and other troublesome minutia that petrochemical production entailed. Recent economic developments had attenuated market demand, making reduced production and layoffs inevitable. A celebration was being planned to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the company's founding. It was, in part, a smokescreen for the bad times to come, to keep the community lifted.

A specialist had been called in to oversee the impending cutbacks. A *Hatchet Man*; a ruthless, wooden man. Which is not to say he was stiff or unfriendly (he was both), but to the point, he was in fact carved from wood. A handsome cedar, most guessed, but none questioned. His credentials were solid, his resolve unyielding, and they were eager to let another take accountability for the tough choices the darkening business climate was soon to make necessary.

The Hatchet Man had traveled far over the years, learned to move aptly among men, found a vocation to suit his temperament. His surface had worn smooth, and still exuded a pleasant citrus waft. He was drawn slowly, but incessantly, south and east; by the murmur of instinct, and a dull compulsion to vengeance. He presently sat at a mud-colored desk, among several others, in an office area adjacent to a large warehouse. A cup of black coffee sat before him, long cold. Kenzie Dagel entered, distributing a Xeroxed memo.

"Hey there," said Kenzie, "you heard about our anniversary celebration we got comin' up?" She took his silence as a request for more information. "We got a whole carnival-type situation lined up: games, rides, such like. Plus, we're throwin' a laser light pyrotechnic extravaganza. It's gonna be a hoot 'n a holler. You like electronical music?"

Kenzie did not wait for him to answer. "I prefer Eddie Rabbitt, myself. We got this European fella, Rory O'Mega, gonna provide the accompaniment. They say the kids like him."

Kenzie judged, by his reaction, he was not familiar.

"Well, we wanna make this a real high energy event, and we're havin' a contest here in the office to name the celebration."

Kenzie laid the sheet on his desk.

"Also, we got a sign-up for the plannin' committee, if you're interested."

Kenzie leaned in close, lowering her voice to a husky, yet still loud, whisper.

"This stays in the building, but we just found out Mr. Gerald Molo hisself, the founder of our company, is comin' down to be the guest of honor!"

Kenzie giggled as she moved on to the next desk. Even if she had remained, observed his rugged face, she could never have detected the abrupt increase in interest.

He studied the memo, resolving to get on the planning committee. Seldomly did he understood the sinuous path he felt compelled to follow. Why had he ended up in this foul-smelling town on an artificial river? Now he knew. The time and the place were becoming clear. The news of Molo's return restored his sense of purpose. He would soon be reunited; he and the one he dwelt with in the beginning, his evictor. In a few weeks, he would have satisfaction.



Portillo, TX – Present

The Maas/Warwick wedding had gone off splendidly, and a procession of guests was now converging on the Maas home. The backyard, called “the grounds” by Trevor Jaks, the Event Coordinator, was a lovely and spacious venue. Elegant decorations were in place. Food was being prepared. The Desny Twins, sons of a prominent NASA engineer, performed Bach’s *Two-Part Invention #13* on a pair of Theremins, their smooth, pure tones blending in pleasing harmony.

Rex stood near the back fence with Doug Morton, a photographer, facing the house, and the smiling, well-dressed crowd. Doug had offered Rex the job, and he was grateful, although he rarely resorted to “event” work. He didn’t like the crowds. In his current emotional state, the crush of humanity was a shock. He aimed his camera like a prison guard in a watchtower.

Trevor approached, with a clipboard he rarely looked away from.

“Gentlemen, great work thus far!” he said. “Feel free to get some candid during the cocktail hour. Vendor meal will be provided in the guest cottage at 6:00, bride’n’dad dance at 7:30.”

Rex and Doug nodded affirmatively.

“Wonderful!” Trevor chirped, marching away as he stage-whispered into a walkie-talkie.

“Thanks for the gig,” said Rex

“I heard about TVTO. That’s a tough break, my man. You got cards? There’s some bigwigs here. You gotta network to get work.”

Rex shook his head. He was not thinking like a businessman. He hadn’t even ironed his Van Huesen. His beard was itchy. He needed to get serious.

“You got to express your identity, make sure people know who you are.”

Doug handed him one of his own cards, “go to Portillo Office Barn, they’ll take care of you.”

“Thanks,” said Rex, giving the card a polite, yet cursory glance.

“See you at dinner,” said Doug, heading off to circulate in the crowd.

The Desny Twins gracefully transitioned into *The Flower Duet*, their hands fluttering in perfect sychrony.

Rex was already in position to get some coverage of the guests’ arrival. He looked through the eyepiece, checking focus, exposure, battery status. As he drew back from the camera, Rex was startled to see one of the guests suddenly standing beside him. She wore a red lady-blazer, tapering outward imposingly at the shoulders. Her hair was swept up tightly at the back, like a glossy chestnut conch.

“I beg your pardon.”

“Granted.” said Rex, smiling weakly.

“Hope I’m not interrupting your work. I’m Lydia Scotch-Bonnet,” the woman said, extending her hand.

Rex shook her hand, intending to introduce himself, but Lydia continued.

“I hate to talk business at such an occasion, but I work for Air Today, and I believe we might have use for your services.”

“Certainly, please explain.”

“We have a training program, it’s on a film, not like a *movie-movie*, but the kind where you watch each frame, one at a time, like a slide.”

“A filmstrip?”

“Precisely. It’s so old, we no longer have the means to view it, but it bears vital information, about safety in our plant. It is imperative that our employees receive this message. Would it be possible to transfer this to videotape?”

“It’s quite simple, actually. Please, let me give you my pager number. I’d be happy to discuss the details with you.”

Rex took the wedding program out of his pocket and hastily wrote his number, tearing it off and handing the scrap to Lydia. *Office Barn tomorrow*, he thought.

“Thank you, Mr. Janneter, I’ll be in touch.”

“I look forward to hearing from you,” Rex said, too formally perhaps.

Rex let his tape roll, and considered this development. He couldn’t bill very much for the service, but it could lead to more work. He would need to obtain a projector. Would Heather have access to one at the high school? But of course! This gave him a pretense to call her, to sidestep her furtive departure the night before. He cursed himself for nodding off like that. Surely an awkward moment was avoided, it was best to play it cool. She would be impressed to know he had taken Air Today as a client. He imagined handing her a freshly minted business card, how they might laugh about it.

Office Barn tomorrow, Rex reminded himself.



CHAPTER 5

Galveston, TX – Afternoon

A dusty '69 Ford F-100 rolled to a stop on the seawall. Two passengers debarked from the bed, their hair tousled from the windy ride down I-45. Davis stuffed a flattened Jim Beam carton, with "Galveston or Bust" printed on it in smudgy china marker, into a trash can. O'Neal stepped to the driver's window, addressing their benefactor.

"Thanks mister!" O'Neal said, whacking his palm twice on the roof.

"Via con Dios," said the driver, waving as he rolled forward onto the boulevard.

They both stood for a while, looking out at the beach below. Galveston was the homely sister of other Gulf shores, not fine and white like Pensacola or Tampico, but coarse and bland; an apathetic tone which cared not if it was brown, yellow or vaguely green. It baked dully in the waning sun, like a commissary steam tray of dressing, and the brown water like gravy, lapping turgidly. They stared out for a long time, saying nothing. Davis said nothing most of the time. O'Neal finally breached the silence.

"Now...we done split the money, and we agreed that once we got here, that's it."

"That is it." said Davis.

A gull cawed.

"You got a crossed wire, man. You're a cracked machine," said O'Neal.

Davis squinted out at the Gulf, silent.

“No good’ll come o’ that,” said O’Neal, “and I ain’t gonna be a party to no good.”

Davis nodded efficiently. The waves writhed and hissed, a rippling nest of snakes. O’Neal extended his hand. Davis, disrupting his intent gaze, replied with his own. They shook stiffly.

“Well, that’s it, buddy,” said O’Neal, “like the dude said, *via con Dios*.”

“I’ll find someone to go with,” said Davis, facing the shore again.

O’Neal walked quickly away, praying he would never see Davis again.

Davis stood unmoving, staring for a long while; then he sat down on a bench and stared some more. The sun dipped low. The movement of the waves kept hissing. Long black snakes twisted around each other, crawled up the beach, up the slope of the seawall. They crossed the threshold to street level, wriggled across the sidewalk, up Davis’ legs, into his ears, entering there. The snakes coiled and thrashed in his belly, echoing inside him.

Another sound interrupted this; a briefer hiss, the sniffing of a child. Davis looked up to see she moved slowly his way, on the sidewalk.

“You lost, little girl?” Davis asked.

As he rose, his pale shadow fell across her.



Portillo, TX – Present

REX JANNETER – CAMERAMAN would be official now, according to 500 iterations in embossed Caslon. He had placed his order at the Portillo Office Barn; the cards would be ready in two days. For several weeks he had not left his apartment before *The Price is Right* was over – and most days not at all – but this sunny Monday morning, he was propelled by an uncharacteristic vigor. The wedding shoot had actually been pretty fun, and Doug gave him his split of the job in cash, at the end of the night. Additionally, Lydia Scotch-Bonnet had called his beeper, and wanted to see him that very day. Rex entered the Air Today parking lot and pulled his Crown Vic into a designated VISITOR space.

He approached the guard shack, and knocked on the top half of a Dutch door. The square panel opened inward and Thibodeaux Parer stepped forward. “I am Tib,” he said, sticking out his blue-sleeved arm. His Cajun accent was obvious even in those three syllables.

“Uh, hi, I’m Rex Janneter.” *CAMERAMAN*, he imagined one of his as-yet-unprinted business cards smartly completing the introduction. They shook hands heartily. “Your business, sir?”

“I’m seeing Miss Scotch-Bonnet. I’m here to receive -”

“Before you enter,” Tib cut in, “there are measures to be observed.”

“But of course, in the event of crisis -”

“There is a plan for all to be saved,” said Tib, spreading his hands to emphasize *aaalll*.

“The escape plan, yes, I see the poster.” Rex pointed to a schematic of the plant site, displayed on the wall. Red arrows illustrated paths of egress; green circles indicated points of assembly.

Tib, a head shorter than Rex, ducked, disappearing behind the bottom half of the Dutch door. He raised again, his arms full.

“Take these, they must be worn,” said Tib.

Rex hesitated, “are you sure? I’m just picking up -”

“None shall enter without them,” Tib said, with austerity.

Rex hesitated again, not sure which item to don first. Tib offered no further instruction, but merely smiled and proffered the stack of gear. Rex pulled on the safety goggles, tightening the elastic strap, then the yellow plastic hardhat, with “AT” stamped on the front. Next was a blue jumpsuit, wrapped in cellophane.

“Your size?” Tib asked.

“Never worn one,” said Rex. He opened the package and stepped clumsily into the fire-resistant garment, feeling unduly gauche about dressing in the open. He pulled on the sleeves and zipped up. It tugged a bit at the crotch, when he stood up straight, but it would suffice.

“One thing more.”

Rex looked up to see Tib holding a disposable razor and a travel-size can of Barbasol. “Truly, I’m just here to -”

“Regulations, sir. In case you should require a fresh-air mask.” Rex rubbed his furry, russeted chin, pondering the scrum of pipes and vessels and machinery standing beyond the entry gate.

Rex’s “Visitor” badge flapped against his blue, zippered chest. He had proceeded less than 100 yards beyond the gates of the facility. He could still see his car in the parking lot, and yet, all that fuss. A pungent garlicky odor pervaded the plant. On certain days, this smell spread halfway across the town. *The smell of money*, people liked to say. Rex stepped onto the covered slab porch of Building 8, and regarded himself in a pane of wire glass, set in the thick metal door. He looked better without the beard – more professional – without a doubt. He corrected his posture, then stooped just a little, for the fit of the jumpsuit.

Lydia met Rex at the door and brought him inside. She wore a similar jumpsuit, and her hair was styled identically to the night before. He wondered if the severe coif qualified, on its own, as head protection.

“Mr. Janneter, we’re delighted to be working with you.”

“Rex, please. Did you enjoy the wedding?”

“Oh, so beautiful, Rex, the Warwicks are dear friends of mine. Those kids are honeymooning in Barbados this week, can you believe it?”

Rex was not usually given to such chit-chat, but he abided. After Heather’s visit, and the wedding, he realized how cut off he had become from other people. Also, he hoped he might be forging a connection, business-wise.

The conversation gradually arrived at the purpose of his visit. Lydia opened a desk drawer and brought out a small plastic cylinder. Rex identified it immediately as a filmstrip container. The cap bore a yellowing label identifying a production company called Shine Films. "SHIN" was in a bold serif type, with the "E" represented by projected light rays. An A/V enthusiast since junior high, he had assisted many a teacher in threading up the old projectors. Lydia handed him the little canister, and he drew out a length of the film, inspecting it against the overhead fluorescents. His neck prickled with a powerful wave of nostalgia. He noted the title frame: *Dangerous Pressures*.

"So, you can do this for us?" Lydia asked, after a moment. "Absolutely," said Rex. They discussed his rate for the job, and Rex assured he could have it ready in two days. He left Air Today feeling better than he had in months. He drove too fast down 225, with his radio turned up way too loud.



Rex awoke Tuesday morning to a Texas-style tantrum of a thunderstorm. He didn't care. He was full of positive feeling, an atypical optimism. He opened his blinds and stood at the window, watching the cleansing rain. He felt inspired to follow suit. Heather had, in the course of a delicate phone conversation, agreed to secure a filmstrip projector from the Portillo High School library, and bring it by after work. The timing was a canny move on her part, too early for the conclave to segue into any kind of dinner-type situation. Still, after the previous stolid weeks, this was like going steady

again. Rex prepared for her visit, attacking his apartment with singular élan. He began with the living room, a stratified midden of food waste, neglected mail and sundry dreck.

He gathered his laundry, disturbed by how infrequently he had changed clothes of late, and shoved it in a closet. He next confronted the bathroom, disgusting himself afresh.

By the time he got to the kitchen, he was ravenous, but found his options limited. That he had half a box of spaghetti, and an unopened jar of Classico, among his meager provisions, Rex took as a most felicitous omen.

Setting a pot of water to boil, he carried out two large bags of stinking bachelor refuse. The storm had passed, and the air was cool and fresh; as much as it ever was, near the corridor of industry across the highway.

When Heather arrived, Rex was showered, and clad in a clean, but casual t-shirt. He did not want her to suspect anything more than a friendly favor was expected. A shirt with buttons, or collar, or collar-buttons, would have tipped his hand. Rex helped Heather haul in a filmstrip projector and collapsible screen.

"I had to make some space," said Rex, downplaying the improved state of his dwelling. His camera was already set up across the room. The projector would go there, and he would record the image directly off the screen.

"Look at the working man," she said, touching his clean-shaven cheek. The gesture was simple, but charged with a certain electricity they both directly retreated from.

"They made me do it, to enter the plant. Ya know, regulations," Rex shrugged.

"Whoa, just like *Urban Cowboy!*" said Heather.

“You bet,” drawled Rex, tipping an invisible black Stetson.

They laughed. Rex moved on to business, before Heather had a chance to take the lead.

“The old Dukane,” he said.

“There were a half dozen of them, crammed in the back of the A/V closet. Haven’t been used in years.”

“It’s the same one, look!” Rex showed Heather, on the back of the projector case, in tidy faded ball-point capitals: *RJ WAS HERE*.

“You must have been such a nerd back then,” Heather chided.

“Yeah, but hey, look at me now,” said Rex.

Again, they laughed.

“I was a totally different person back then,” said Rex.

“I had so many choices ahead of me.”

For the first time that day, he felt sad. A little birdshit of dread smacked on his windshield. *Time to work*. He heaved the projector.

“I got this, can you set up the screen?”

“Sure,” said Heather, crossing to the opposite end of the room.

They worked separately, silently. Heather unfolded the base, standing the frame upright. She rotated the main tube, and locked it into a perpendicular position. Rex set up the projector on two plastic dairy crates, stacked as a makeshift pedestal. He plugged it in, aimed it, switched it on.

A white cone of light emitted, striking Heather’s back. He admired her, as she stretched the projector screen into place, like hoisting a tiny mainsail. He imagined the

light penetrating her, displaying her insides on the white vinyl surface. Heather was translucent now, and he observed her heart, her lungs, her agile bones. He longed for this, to see her this way, for them to see each other this way - all revealed, nothing hidden. Within, he experienced this moment for a gorgeously languid interval. Heather turned toward him, a shimmering angel.

“Damn!” she hissed, shielding her eyes.

Rex snapped off the projector. The illusion spoiled, he extinguished the bridge of light which briefly connected them.

“Sorry,” Rex said, as Heather squinted. “Thanks so much for this.”

“Anytime. It’s good for you to be working, I’m glad for you.” She blinked, agitated.

“I should go now.”

“This won’t take very long, you sure you can’t stick around?” He knew how lame the next part would sound, but proceeded. “I made spaghetti!”

“I have a lot of papers to grade,” Heather said, rubbing her eyes with one hand, waving her glasses at him with the other, “truly.”



"I remember the day Mr. Barbeur visited my store. He saw the sign in the window: *Everything Must Go!* I had decided to move on to another line of business, I was selling to the bare walls. He inquired about a coin-operated kiddie ride in front of the store, a miniature Model-T. It still worked fine, sorta oscillated up and down, like they do, and had a curly brass bulb horn, which the kids loved to toot. It could seat two children, or a single adult, a limber one I suppose, which I got the impression he had in mind to try, but *jedem das seine*, you know. A spirited discussion ensued, regarding the price, and he was very persuasive. I practically let him walk away with the machine, plus a case of Krylon Gold Metallic. He was such a character, I couldn't help but truckle. Whether he intended to use those together, I have no idea."

Uda Schiffer

Former Proprietor - Happy General Mercantile

Pflugerville, TX

**From *Light Reading - The Newsletter of The Receivers of the
Shining Message***



Portillo, TX - Day of Rest

RJ had reached the end of another typical week, and sought his usual spiritual repose at the Receiver's Hall. A small crowd stood in front of the entrance this morning, which was unusual. Once again, Sis. Evelyn was displaying her rhinestone-adorned BB gun, dinging the bike bell. Joining her, Sis. Donna had mated a starter pistol and a desk bell with aluminum tape, all lacquered with gold fingernail polish. Sis. Jocelyn had embellished a squirting plastic Colt with a dense application of champagne glitter, and three large jingle bells. Shiny little flecks fell away as she shook it, along with the other ladies, in their strange demonstration. Sis. Sue joined in as well, having taken a handbell, tuned to F, and attached a sort of grip, wrapping the whole thing in butter-yellow ribbon, with ornate twists and braids. Each person who approached stopped to observe the festive babel, and a considerable assembly was forming. RJ approached, and stood a minute observing this, when a hush fell on the bystanders. Bro. Alton himself appeared in the group.

"Good morning ladies," he said in his faltering rasp. The quartet ceased their dinging and clanging and jingling.

"We made our own Instruments!" said Sis. Evelyn, brandishing her handiwork.

The other three sensed something from Bro. Alton, and kept their trinkets obscured in their hands. Bro. Alton gestured for them to step closer to him, smiling, and continued speaking, in a lowered voice. RJ and the rest filed into the building, taking their seats as usual. He knew Bro. Alton, in his gently eloquent way, would address the ladies firmly, but with respect.

Perhaps he would express his appreciation of their fervor, then remind them of the proper way they had been taught to gain instruction, and to prepare themselves for the time they each were chosen to receive it. Patience and humility, above all.

RJ had felt a little foolish himself, with his rash attempt to compel Bro. Dennis. RJ looked at the floor when he and Bro. Alton finally stood on the dais, before the smiling congregation.

The four sisters took their places as everyone rose for the opening hymn. Bro. Jeff shared a stirring account of how he joined the Receivers, and the solace he was blessed with, after spending years grieving the murder of his young daughter. The story had become something of a folktale, a caution to children about straying from their parents.

Bro. Alton spoke briefly about purity of instruction, admonishing the gathered faithful to seek enlightenment only from the one true source. RJ admired his manner of addressing them, with love and concern evident in every word.

Next, Sis. Denise took her turn, entering the gate, as the congregation observed a meditative silence. A sequence of questions occurred, indistinct behind the partition, then a bright light, the whirring sound of something electric, and finally, the Golden Report, that sweet tolling of the bell. At that point, Sis. Denise would be imparted with her message, a personal revelation to guide her in her life's path.

Sis. Denise stepped back through the gate. The congregation stood and applauded. Another hymn was sung, a benediction offered, and the brothers and sisters turned to leave as Sis. Karen played an uplifting postlude.

Bro. Dennis approached RJ, and took him aside. As they shook hands, RJ realized he was being passed a coin, gold with a stylized sunburst imprinted on the face.

"Me? Next Week?" RJ asked, in awe.

"Yes, my brother. Your turn at last," Dennis said, smiling at him.

"Stay in the light," each said to the other.



CHAPTER 6

Galveston, TX – Midnight

“Head trauma?”

Larry was incredulous, to say the least.

“OK, *severe* head trauma!”

Frank was exasperated, to say the least.

They stood together before one of the most puzzling discoveries of their long careers in criminal investigation. A report had to be filed, and the suitable language eluded them. Larry relented and bore down on his metal clipboard, with the tension of frustration, and to ensure the “s” imprinted on all three layers of the carbon-copy Galveston Police Department Incident Report. They stood at either side of the body in question, which lay in the doorway of a ladies restroom, on the Seawall.

Larry read back, “Deceased found face-down, exhibiting severe -”

“Prone,” Frank interjected. “Face-down ain’t proper. Besides, he ain’t got no goddam face.”

He pulled off his Resistol and rubbed his forehead, exhaling sharply.

“It was just the little girl here. It wudn’t a crowbar, nor a baseball bat. Ain’t no way it was a gunshot.”

“The little girl in the hospital, ah...” Larry consulted the report “Slown, Heather, age 7 – she described a bright light.”

“Her eyes were closed the whole time, DOA’s blood was on the ‘lids. She heard barely anything but her own screamin’”

“Well there ya go, the shock of the altercation,” said Larry. “Maybe she don’t know what a gun sounds like. Hell, ya seen how terrified she was.”

Frank replaced his cover, nodding in agreement, and took a deep, cooling breath.

“We know our DOA here, name o’ Davis, accosted this girl. He followed her here, or maybe cornered her. We can only speculate *re:* his intention. But you look at the wall, there; she was scared before it happened.”

A spray of gore stained the tile wall, except for a small, cowering silhouette. A uniform aspersion spattered most of the surfaces in the dim chamber: blood dried and oxidized to a shit-brown. Frank perused the restroom once again.

“What the hell did this?” he asked aloud, shaking his head.

“It ain’t like a blunt weapon or a slug or even a load o’ shot. They’d be more – directional, ya follow?” Larry gestured with the clipboard, flinging his free hand toward the wall.

Frank nodded his agreement, rubbing his chin raptly. “Exactly. This calamity went in every direction,” he said, stretching his hands out.

“This asshole got nothin’ but a stump on his shoulders, and the rest paintin’ the walls of this public lavatory.”

A contemplative silence fell. The crashing waves mixed with the murmur of the press, gathering beyond the crime scene tape.

Larry spoke tentatively, "It's almost like – like if you took a grenade, or quarter stick o' dynamite -"

"There ain't no powder marks, Larry! Powder burns! On his goddam neck stump!"

A gull cawed.

"So. We'll just go with 'severe head trauma', then?"



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – Santa Monica, CA

In the light of the admission of pop duo Viddi Moliddi, that they did not perform their own vocals on last year's smash album *Believe Me*, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences has revoked the Best New Artist award, bestowed on them earlier this year. The academy reached the decision after a telephone poll of its 34 trustees. Warren Nemec, the president of the academy, says the trustees "were just livid about the situation."

Representatives of Vincent DiBattere and Morris Liddy said the duo will return the Grammy trophy, but have no further comment at this time.



Portillo, TX – Present

Rex cruised down Highway 225, toward the Air Today plant, his assignment completed. All the morning radio talk was about the Viddi Moliddi scandal. Uninterested in the group or its tragedy, Rex changed the station. A hilarious prank call was in progress.

“How big a boy are you?” the voice drawled, with mock intimidation.

Rex snorted a laugh as he shut off the Crown Vic. He sat a moment, admiring the complexity of the works beyond the fence. Up close, all the pipes and conduits looked chaotic, but every part had a distinct function, served a specific purpose. Someone had had to figure all that out. The end result was just short of magic, or alchemy: transforming matter to suit the will of man. Rex had barely passed chemistry class, in high school.

He had come prepared this morning, already zipped into the blue jumpsuit. He had recorded *Dangerous Pressures* onto a VHS tape, per his assignment, and was ready to deliver it. Furthermore, he intended to press Lydia Scotch-Bonnet about future work, to see what other opportunities Air Today might have for him. He was eager to hand out his first new business card. The Office Barn had indeed taken care of him. Rex put the filmstrip, the VHS, and his goggles inside the hardhat and carried them to the guard shack. He rapped on the Dutch door. As before, Tib appeared and greeted him, a Creole elf in a fairy tale cobbler’s shop.

“I have a delivery for Miss Scotch-Bonnet,” said Rex, setting the VHS and the filmstrip before Tib.

“I will take that, on Miss Lydia’s behalf. I am to give you this.” Tib handed Rex a mechanically printed check, for the agreed amount.

“But, I – is she not available?” Rex was anticipating a conversation with Lydia, not a simple drop-off.

Tib picked up the little plastic canister and held it over the hardhat in Rex’s hand.

“Take this, brother, may it serve you well,” he said, dropping it with a rattle.

Rex looked down at it, bewildered. He reached in his pocket and brought out a business card, laying it unavailingly on top of the VHS tape.

“Thanks,” Rex said, turning to walk back to his car.

Rex drove down Center Street, windows down, radio off. The wind blowing through, and the sound of traffic, blended to a white noise, like a soothing mother’s *shhh*. Disappointment had lit on him like a hoarse crow, and may well have prevailed, but Rex had plans this morning.

He drove a little farther to the site of the brand new Sol-Mart. It was grand opening day, and Rex had planned to shoot the ribbon cutting, then offer the footage to TVTO. This was called “stringer” footage, in the parlance of his profession. He planned to invest in a police scanner, when he got a little more money together, to pursue this on a regular basis. He could rush to accidents and fires and other news-worthy incidents to capture valuable footage, then sell it. He would roll that into a better camera, then there were even greater possibilities. Rex had a lot of free time to formulate such strategies.

The parking lot was nearly filled. Rex found a spot near the street. He stood at the trunk of the Crown Vic, peeling out of the Air Today jumpsuit – worn over street clothes – as discreetly as he could manage. He shoved it into the trunk, wondering if he would ever get to walk in the plant again. Rex re-played the scenario in his mind, this time insisting on speaking to Lydia, confidently eliciting a new assignment from her, parting with smiles and promises.

Striving for optimism, Rex reckoned he now had more time to get a good position by the store's entrance. He extended the Manfrotto, and secured his JVC GY-X1 atop it. The camera recorded on inexpensive Super-VHS cassettes, a recent innovation, and provided image quality comparable to much costlier units. Rex installed a fresh tape, closed the trunk, and trekked forward. He began with some B-roll of the store's sign: plain block letters, except for the "O", a stylized sun.

Moving closer to the entrance, Rex saw Stig Slavin, one of the best shooters in town, and his former comrade at TVTO. Stig's presence meant they would not be interested in his footage, but Rex was keen to chat with him.

"Slow news day?" Rex asked, patting Stig's shoulder.

"Hey, the Jann-Man!" he said, shaking Rex's hand. "Actually, there're some pretty important dudes up there." He pointed to the area where the ribbon-cutting was being staged.

"The mayor, reps from Sol-Mart and Air Today, Senator Boyd, some professor guy, bigwigs all."

Rex scanned the crowd, to see if he recognized anyone. The Portillo High School Marching Band filed through the crowd, predominantly housewives. Their marching was

more precise than their playing, as they bleated out a rousing arrangement of Faith No More's *Epic*.

Stig continued as he returned his eye to his viewfinder, "How you holding up?"

"Can't complain," said Rex. "Just shooting some stuff for my demo reel," he lied.

"You got a real opportunity there, J-man. You're your own boss, no 4AM crew calls, you don't have to deal with that prick Jerry. Sounds like such a deal," said Stig.

"How about the others?" Rex asked.

"Naguchi got on with an affiliate in San Antonio, Corning is temping with his uncle, some kind of bakery, he says it'll do for now."

PA speakers squealed feedback as a microphone was tapped.

"Hey, looks like they're about to start, let me give you this, in case you hear of anything."

Rex held out a business card. Stig pocketed it, nodded at Rex and went back to his camera.

"Sure thing. Keep dancin' buddy."

A half-dozen men assembled behind a broad, red vinyl ribbon. Bradford Goss, the mayor of Portillo, brandished a huge pair of scissors. He worked the blades open and shut, with a manic look in his eyes, excited by the size and power of the implement. Several brief comments were made to the crowd, each speaker thanked with polite applause. At last, the time came to sever the ribbon. A PHS band member supplied a drom roll. Rex observed, his lens zoomed in full telephoto. He was shocked to see that, in fact, the great shears could not cut at all, even as Goss animated them like the jaws

of a twitchy gator. The Sol-Mart representative assisted, covertly raising a tiny blade, slicing. The crowd cheered as the ribbon fell apart in two slack pieces.

As Rex replaced his gear into his trunk, a Lincoln stretch sedan, then a second one, rolled up behind him. The second pulled alongside the first; windows were lowered.

“Just follow us there,” Rex heard hollered from one car to the other. The second car pulled forward and took the lead.

Rex had a sudden inspiration. He slammed the trunk closed and clambered into his own car, tearing out of the parking lot to follow the two black limousines. These were very important men, vastly influential. If he could somehow *bump into them* wherever they were headed, he could pass on a business card. He had to keep his momentum going. He couldn't regress to his condition of the previous weeks. Depression and inactivity would ruin him, if he allowed them to take hold again.

Rex followed the two Lincolns across Portillo for about ten minutes. He identified their destination, and circled the block, for discretion. Coming back around, he entered the parking lot of the Mobius Strip, identified by a fluorescent-lit sign, with mismatched letters, announcing: Endl3ss Ladies.

“I never go these places,” Rex said to himself, surveying the entrance in his rearview mirror. He almost turned the key again and bailed out, but he rallied his nerve, and walked in.

The Mobius Strip was inhabited by a spare but diverse mix of gentlemen: plant drones, cubicle jockeys, NASA nerds. They came to enjoy the entertainment, have a beer, eat some chicken wings, steep in musky camaraderie. The lurid interior was a

beast's belly, purple with blacklight, veined in neon, undulating with strobes and mirror ball petechiae.

A dancer thrust and prowled on the stage, splashed in multi-colored spotlights. Rex made his way to the buffet line. He searched for the party of important men, finally spotting them in a large circular booth. He got some chicken wings and took a seat at a smaller, adjacent booth. Only some vinyl ferns separated him from their conversation.

Rex attempted to eavesdrop, but the music was too loud, originating from a young man and woman commanding an arsenal of musical plastic. Each moved their hands across various keys, knobs, buttons. One laid down a pounding rhythm, and the other layered on a jagged arpeggio. The relentless throb incited the dancer to whirl about and jerk mechanically, intermittently seizing in provocative attitudes.

A bored-looking waitress stepped in front of Rex, and spoke. In the pulsing din, he could only assume she was soliciting a drink order. Her face looked like the pit of a bisected peach, amid a wispy mound of blonde curls, stained orange by the stage lights.

"Shiner!" Rex bellowed.

She sauntered away, cottony curls bobbing.

Rex gnawed on a greasy chicken wing. If his plan didn't work, at least he was getting lunch. He stole a glance, through the faux fronds. The men seemed an odd combination. Rex wondered what pursuit they could have in common. He chewed and mused.

The waitress re-appeared, startling Rex from his introspection. He took the cold, sweaty bottle, dispatched her with a couple of wrinkled bills, and had a long pull off the

Shiner. As he had rummaged his pocket, Rex realized he still had the filmstrip on him. He brought out the little canister and extracted a couple feet of “Dangerous Pressures”, absent-mindedly examining the frames. His eye landed on an image of an iron valve wheel. *If turned under improper circumstances, great damage could result.* A strobe flashed the image of the spoked wheel into his eye, hypnotically.

The dancer’s routine ended, and the male musician thanked the patrons. He punched a button on a tape deck, starting Damn Yankee’s *High Enough*, at a slightly lower volume. Rex coiled the celluloid back into the plastic container and put it away. He leaned over, slyly resting on his elbow, trying to hear any fragment of the important men’s conversation. He heard the highest frequencies of their voices, his ear tuning them in, like a TV station from a town over.

Rex sat in his Crown Vic. He did not remember walking out of the club.

He heard a plot, a devious scheme being woven in the men’s voices.

He could not recall the details of what the men discussed.

Each man laid a thread in the loom of their conspiracy, identifying his own role, his own secret movement concealed by his respective prominence in the community.

Rex had no recollection of writing a note on a pink Mobius Strip napkin.

It was diabolical.

And yet, he held the folded square of paper, imprinted with his own hand.

He did not understand the words at first:

BLOW UP AIR TODAY



Heather's doorbell rang. She opened up, and Rex stood before her, the beige block of the Dukane straining one arm, and the portable screen bazooka-like on the opposite shoulder.

"Did it work?" she asked.

"Perfectly," he replied.

"Here," she said, taking the heavy gear from him, setting it inside the door, but remaining in the doorway.

"You smell like smoke."

"I was in the plant, delivering the goods," said Rex. "The smell of money!"

Heather knew it was cigarette smoke, but she let it pass. They faced each, silently, for an interval.

"I really owe you one, for getting the stuff from the school," said Rex. "Have dinner with me. Friday. Something nice – but casual. But, nice."

"I have an appointment Friday," Heather replied. She let him squirm a second. "But, how about tomorrow night, casual. Casa Rellenos."

Rex paused, thrilled, this was progress. "Great!" he said, his voice cracking. He coughed. "Good things are coming, I can feel it."

"You deserve it," Heather said. She looked lovely, in the fading evening light. He ached to be with her, the way they used to be.

"Seven o'clock, I'll be there," she said.

"Hey, I almost forgot." Rex pulled a fresh business card from his shirt pocket, handed it to her. Heather's eyes flicked over it, then fixed on his. She smiled at him.

“I’m legit now.”

“Air Today; tomorrow, the world.” Heather did not often attempt jokes.

They smiled at each other, letting a warm feeling hover between them. She leaned in and kissed him softly and briefly. He had been drinking. *At a bar? At least he’s getting out*, she thought.

Rex drove home the long way. He was giddy with the turn of events, but almost twenty-four hours stretched out before him, with no plans. He needed plans.



CHAPTER 7

“When I opened the door / I could not believe my eyes
I saw my friend in the air / Like an angel when it flies
Why did it happen? / Why did he have to go?
I cried a thousand tears that day / And now I’m on my own”

Vincent DiBaterre – *Just Me*, 1992

Entertainer Morris Liddy, of the pop duo Viddi Moliddi, was found hanged in his apartment late last night. Those close to Liddy say he was very distraught over recent developments in his professional life. Among his final words, in a letter found on the scene:

“I’m sorry we lied. Thanks for the love.”

The Portillo Observer – *Lifestyle* – E1



Portillo, TX – Present

I am Kyle Blyte. I need to be pure. I will become like the clouds, like a blank sheet of paper. Like snow, I guess. It never snows here. I attach the spray gun to the compressor hose. I load the paint cup with primer white. I aim the nozzle, and pull the trigger. It's coming out splotchy. I adjust the ratio of air pressure and fluid delivery. Now it is a fine, even coat. I turn the gun and spray. In this way, I am made clean.



Ms. Slown detected a strange air as she entered Portillo High School, Thursday morning. She had heard the news of Mo Liddy's death on the radio, accompanied by the new single, the title track, *Fade to White*. She wondered how this would affect the student body. Immediately she saw a scattering of white armbands. Several students wore their Viddi Moliddi concert shirts. She saw "R.I.P. Mo" or "FTW" written on a handmade button, in Sharpie on a white t-shirt, on a book cover, scrawled on knuckles in ballpoint. Heather remembered when Elvis died, she was a freshman. They had all felt such strong emotion for the fat stranger in his weird clothes. They *wanted* to be sad, to feel something that deeply. They simply awaited the opportunity, the trigger.

As Heather walked to her class, she prepared herself to say something to the kids. Upon entering room 323, she stopped cold. One of her students wore a rope tied into a noose, like a grotesque cravat, around his neck. He seemed to be covered in a smooth application of white paint. He sat, quiet and sullen, ignoring his peers' reaction to his odd display. He had obviously been crying, as some of the paint had rubbed off around his eyes and cheeks. Some of the students looked quickly from him to Ms. Slown, seeking a cue how to react.

After a moment, Heather collected herself.

"Kyle, may I speak to you in the hall, please," said Heather, and to the others, "class, please review the chapter on bicameral legislature."

The classmates Kyle passed leaned away from him, as if the paint might still be wet, or his unsound state of mind transferrable by insidious mites leaping from his skin. Heather pulled the door closed behind him, and they stood alone in the hallway. She took off her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose, waiting for the right words to come.

"Kyle," she began, "you're hurting, aren't you?"

Kyle nodded, his eyes drooping to the floor.

"You enjoy music. You enjoyed *his* music."

"It was mine. They made it for me."

"Were you upset about – the announcement?" Heather had noticed a difference in Kyle the whole week.

"Vincent said they sang it. Morris said they lied. I don't know which is true."

"The music, it made you *feel* something. That *feeling* was true."

“But it wasn’t true. I loved something that was fake. I got fooled.”

Heather tried to look Kyle in the eye, but he still averted.

“Once enough people believe something, once any person believes something deeply enough, the belief holds itself up. It stops mattering whether it’s true.”

Kyle processed that for a moment. “Morris is dead. That’s the truth.”

“Morris is no longer with us, because he had – problems. Personal problems.”

“He had *my* problems,” said Kyle, finally meeting her gaze. “Every beat was like, taking one of my problems away. He took them all away, he made me clean.”

Kyle held up the white-painted backs of his hands to her.

“You still have the music. It can still do that for you.”

“I’m afraid now. I have to do right. There’s nothing to make me clean. The music, it’s just a cassette, it’s just a piece of plastic, Ms. Slown.”

“You can’t go through life being afraid, Kyle,” said Heather. “Be just and fear not.”

He looked down again. Tears dribbled down his pallid cheeks. Heather carefully lifted the effigy of Mo Liddy’s hanging rope over Kyle’s head.

“Let me take this from you.”



"I met Bro. Alton when he hired me to do a job. I couldn't have imagined it would have such a special meaning. He wished to have a large mirror installed, in the place I now know as the Receiver's Hall. At the time I was unfamiliar with his calling, or the extraordinary purpose this simple piece of glass would serve. One hardly gets to know Bro. Alton that one does not make a new friend.

He introduced me to the others in the congregation, and my life has never been better. Like humble sand is made into brilliant glass, so have I been transformed. I have been improved by what I have been shown. Every time I have the wonderful experience of looking into that mirror, I am grateful that Bro. Alton called me all those years ago."

Jeff Slown

Installer, Portillo Glass & Mirror

Portillo, TX

***From Light Reading - The Newsletter of the Receivers of the
Shining Message***



Portillo, TX - Sabbath Morn

RJ dashed from his Econo, through a light rain whispering on the Channel Breeze Shopping Center. He halted under the awning, wiping his shoe soles and shaking off what water he could. The ladies were not chatting outside, this morning. He waited a moment, alone. The sound of the rain and the prelude music, muffled through the wall, relaxed him. He had a reason to be anxious. Today, he would finally get his turn to pass through the gate. The light would shine for him. He brought out the gold coin Bro. Dennis had given him the week prior, admiring it, then returned it securely to his pocket.

At the appropriate time in the service, RJ stood and walked forward to the ornamental gate. Bro. Harold waited there, smiling at him. He began the rite.

"Why have you come?"

"I am informed that, by this gate, is the way beyond." RJ held out the gold coin, with its sunburst adornment. "Are you willing to let me in?"

Bro. Harold replied, smiling broadly, "I am willing with all my heart."

He took the coin, and pushed the gate open, following Rex inside. They walked into dim, blue lighting. Rex had been taught the names of the solemn articles he would encounter next, but had never actually seen them.

"Has this a name?"

"This is The Vehicle"

"Why seek you carriage?"

"I wish to receive the Shining Message."

Bro. Harold nodded and motioned for him to seat himself. RJ did so, and looked to his left, seeing his reflection in a large, single mirrored pane.

"Who is he beside you?"

"I am beside myself."

"Has this a name?"

"This is the Instrument."

RJ took it in his hand, felt its heft, slipped his finger in the trigger guard.

"What is its sound?"

"The Golden Report."

Bro. Harold bent and made a movement with his hand. In the same instant, The Vehicle began a hypnotic motion, and a large spotlight with an amber gel was struck from high above RJ's right shoulder.

A few moments passed as they, together, were surrounded by the brilliant light. Bro. Harold, at a jarring volume, commanded, "Sound the Golden Report!"

RJ raised The Instrument straight into the air, and squeezed the trigger. The hammer snapped, producing a beautiful chiming tone. It resonated another thirty seconds. As it finally diminished, the light was cut off, and The Vehicle became still, once more. Bro. Harold offered a small wooden box, to which RJ returned The Instrument. He sat a minute more in the dim blue silence.

RJ and Bro. Harold walked together back through the gate. The congregation stood and applauded.

RJ forced a smile. He had received nothing.



A damp breeze stirred, and red neon blazed on the Galveston seawall. The old man dreamt often of this moment. He sat in the passenger seat of his beautiful Model-T. The light appeared, and he turned to see himself, in the moment of his revelation. The younger one twisted away from the light. It blazed across both of them, throwing a shadow onto the drab, narrow beach below the high embankment. Ashen sand turned burnished brass, delineating

inky black. Molo's eyes could not abide the brutal radiance, and were forced to study the stark form of his umbrage. It resembled the state he was in: panhandle, coast, Mexican border. His discarded Cockspur bottle peeked out of the shadow, signifying a location. Molo understood, knew the place. In this curious semblance of topography, the light was showing him his destination, the source of his imminent fortune.



Casa Rellenos - 8:15 PM

Heather sat alone, a tinny simulacrum of mariachi music grating in her ears. She looked at her watch, and drank the last sip of her third margarita. She considered calling Rex's pager, but waiting around a pay phone, for whatever excuse he would call back with, would only heap further indignity on her. She wanted to drive to Dr. Momus' office that instant and sail away on her mega-dose of DeMoLition. That treatment had been on her mind, vexing her with trepidation. The tequila helped dull the feeling, and burn off the residue of the fog of malaise clinging to her mournful students. They would move on. Maybe her troubles would seem as trivial as the departed pop star, with that final treatment. The spell would be broken, she would realize the songs were not that great after all; her hardships were not so life-shaking. One more day.



CHAPTER 8

TVTO MORNING REPORT

THE FIRST POR-TEE-OH STATE BANK BUILDING HAS BEEN A LOCAL LANDMARK FOR DECADES...BUT THE RECENT ECONOMIC DOWNTURN...AND SEVERE DAMAGE FROM HURRICANE EDNA...HAVE RENDERED THE HISTORIC STRUCTURE UNTENABLE.

DESPITE PROTESTS FROM VARIOUS GROUPS...THE BELOVED BUILDING WILL BE DEMOLISHED LATER TODAY.

THE FIFTEEN-STORY EDIFICE WAS BUILT IN NINETEEN-SIXTY-THREE, MODELED AFTER THE STYLE OF FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT. LONG KNOWN AS...THE TALL LADY OF PORTILLO...THIS STRIKING EXAMPLE OF MID-CENTURY ARCHITECTURE WILL CERTAINLY BE MISSED.



Portillo, TX – Present

Rex slept into the morning, still fully dressed. He had dozed off during a classic episode of the anthology series *Dark Frontiers*, wherein St. John's tooth is discovered to be embedded in a meteorite fallen from space, identical to one stored in a famous reliquary, its origin yet undiscovered when the two are united in a riotous paradox.

Soft yellow sunlight poured in, cresting over the back of the couch where Rex lay inert. From the TV, Bob Barker reminded him to help control the stray pet population. A glitzy synthesizer surrendered to a somber string pad.

A chiseled man with fluffy hair addressed a tan woman with even fluffier hair, "I wish you could just talk to me."

"I...I'm not ready Robert," she replied, turning to be captured by another camera, in a dramatic close-up. "Not yet."

Rex dreamed, returning to a moment the day before, Heather's kiss, the first one in so long. It re-played slowly, and the feeling had the color of sunset. As he withdrew, he looked down and saw, protruding from Heather's stomach, a shaft connected by five spokes to an iron ring, painted a slick red. He grasped the wheel, turning it, and this action caused Heather's head to tremble and chatter like a morbid wind-up toy. He did this twice more, confused and horrified.

Rex was brought abruptly to full consciousness by his buzzing pager. He turned over, holding the little LCD close to his bleary eyes. The sequence of digits on the readout was unfamiliar, but he endeavored to return the call. He fumbled his phone into use, tugging on the tangled cord, thumbing the number into the handset. The other end

trilled – once, twice. He cleared his throat, to ensure his first spoken words of the morning would not sound froggy.

“Flex? Flex?”

“Umm”

“I need a shooter. Stig said you were available. You shoot Beta?”

Rex snapped upright. He was being summoned for work. He rubbed his eyes.

“S-VHS, three-chip, superior resolution -”

“That’ll have to do, my other guy got sick. Can you be at the Portillo bank building in an hour?”

Rex could just barely see the top of the bank building from the stair landing in front of his apartment. It had been there as long as he could remember. He recalled visiting it as a child. The lobby was exquisitely decorated every December, a huge fir in the center ablaze with lights, motorized tableau of elves and reindeer, a stately nativity scene, and Santa Claus on Saturdays. Every May, seniors from Portillo or North Channel High would corrupt the decorative fountain in front, with laundry detergent or dye, or both. He recalled his mother’s windshield wipers swishing off green foam, blown into traffic at a red light.

The structure loomed larger as he drove down Center Street, the damage from Edna evident. Sections of brick had been sheared off. Decorative glass accents at the roof of the building – irreplaceable – had been destroyed. Invisible forces had worked on the Tall Lady as well: Black Monday, the S&L crisis. The building, and the adjacent, aging section of the city, were in decline.

The lot where the building stood in its final hour was encircled by a temporary safety barricade, and that by a bustling throng of spectators. Rex parked, several blocks away, and hustled forward with his gear. He marveled at the crowd. At its edge, two men sang and played *Un Puño de Tierra* on accordion and *bajo sexto*, one wearing a broad-brimmed cowboy hat, and the other having laid his on the ground for tips. Young and old alike, including children obviously kept home from school, were straining to get a last look, to witness history. Some held signs futilely protesting the demolition, others bore photos of themselves visiting or working at the doomed building, in days past.

Rex was dripping sweat by the time he got to the chain-link barrier. He told a security guard the name of his contact inside, David Halfort, who worked for the parent bank company, in a capacity Rex did not fully understand. David appeared, and gave Rex a hardhat and safety glasses. He escorted Rex to a position near the firing post. Several other cameramen and news crews were already in place, prepared to capture every angle. David explained the shot he needed Rex to record, encompassing a compact, black-haired woman in a hardhat, who would trigger the demolition sequence, and a wide angle of the building itself.

“This is Kelly Lim, of Santa Barbara Demolition,” David introduced, and rushed off to other business on the site.

“The engineers are doing a final check. We have about twenty minutes,” said Kelly.

“Thanks,” said Rex.

He proceeded with his preparation ritual, tripod, camera, tape, battery; the latter he hoped would hold out, as it was uncharged since the previous day. Rex, satisfied

with his arrangement, perused Kelly's control panel. The console was of heavy steel, powder-coated safety yellow. It appeared to be portable, intended to mate with a protective shell, and mounted on foldable legs. A bundle of wires snaked away from it, toward the doomed building. Kelly noticed his investigation.

"Take a good look; she won't be there in a few more minutes."

"If you do your job right," said Rex, lightly.

"A shame, so many hands it took to build her," said Kelly, admiring the style of the construction. "All the effort it took to raise this building is stored, in the structure. All it takes to release that energy is to kick the legs out from under it."

She made a horizontal slicing motion with the edge of her small, pale hand.

So much power in that tiny hand, thought Rex.

"It's a kind of sorcery, the application of will. I control the means to amplify and direct the sheer desire to destroy this building. Many men built it; a few want to tear it down; I alone will make it so."

Kelly held up a single, slim finger, and after a beat pointed it at Rex's chest.

"Time to work, Flex," she said, with eerie intensity.

Her pronunciation of his name baffled him, but there was no time. As he stepped back behind his camera, activating it, a klaxon began. Kelly counted down from ten, through a megaphone, her free hand poised over a red mushroom-like button.

"3-2-1-contact!"

The crowd roared - even those opposed to the act - relenting to the inevitability of the spectacle. A series of small puffs travelled down the face of the Tall Lady, each followed microseconds later by a sharp crack: a Foley track for that verse of Revelation,

the disintegrating tower a door, and He standing beyond, rapping. The building shuddered and collapsed from the top down, thundering as it fell. A cloud of white dust billowed out of the lower floors, which had been stripped out to prepare for this moment. As gravity reclaimed the mass of concrete and steel and glass, the sun was revealed behind it, throwing Rex's shot into unpleasant contrast. He raised his head from the viewfinder, and his eyes were stung by raw sunlight.

Rex was suddenly reminded to remember something. A notion of an inkling. A forgotten impulse, a neglected assignment. As the dust settled, and the crowd dispersed, Rex was seized by the realization he needed to wrest a recollection from the wrinkles of his unconscious mind. He would need to return to the place where he first had the thought; recreate the circumstances under which the idea first arrived. Rex stowed his gear and began the hike back to his car. As he passed, the *trovadores* crooned *Volver*.

Rex drove, searching his memory. He detoured through the Sol-Mart parking lot, and when he saw the sunburst "0", he stomped on the gas pedal.

Rex stepped once again through the entry of the Mobius Strip, a large mirrored octagon, which he surmised to be a hold-over from an earlier, more flamboyant decoration scheme. *I never go to these places*, Rex reminded himself.

A fine dusting of pulverized concrete covered him, glowing bright purplish-white under the blacklights, making him even more self-conscious. Rex tried to recall the details of his visit the day before. He got some chicken wings and sat at the same booth. He peeped through the fern to confirm the larger, adjacent booth was empty. The

bigwigs' strange whisperings came to his ears again, for a moment. A different waitress, this one with feathery brown hair, and a peppier disposition, stepped to his table.

"Shiner, please," said Rex.

Poison's *Unskinny Bop* faded out, and the duo from the day before took their place on a side stage, initiated their electric thump. A dancer emerged on the center catwalk – *the same? he couldn't tell*. She commenced with her angular, lunging movements.

The pert brunette returned. Rex went in his pocket for some loose bills, and realized he still had the filmstrip. He quickly exchanged the money for his bottle, and pulled out the sprocket-holed coil. He searched each frame, until he reached the image of the valve wheel. The moment was, at last, sufficiently reconstructed. A strobe flickered through the little square, entrancing him once again.

The lady musician repeated a phrase in a husky whisper, "the strangest of pleasures, the strangest of pleasures."

In Rex's ear, it twisted into a mantra, "Dangerous Pressures, Dangerous Pressures..."

He let the moment instruct him, the feeling compel him. He took a pen from his shirt pocket, along with one of his business cards. On the blank side, his hand moving almost automatically, he wrote the same four words, reclaimed from his murky remembrance of the day before:

BLOW UP AIR TODAY

He still did not understand it, but he intended to make sense of it. After a moment, Rex felt very strongly that he need no longer remain in this place. He gripped

the table, resisting an urge to bolt to the door. He sat a few more minutes, finished the Shiner, defleshed more chicken wings.

Idly, Rex flipped the card around in his fingers. Then, he was braced by a profound rage. The card – surely all of them – was misprinted. The phone number and title were correct, but his name read: *Flex* Janneter. How had this escaped his attention? All that effort to assert his identity, and nobody even noticed the mistake. Rex stalked out of the club and gunned the Crown Vic hatefully across Portillo to the Office Barn.



I am Kyle Blyte. My stepdad is super *enojado*. He gave me the afternoon off from the shop. Which is not to say I'm a proper employee, but he lets me do the work, to learn the trade. Today I am not welcome. I violated a trust. He put that in somewhat harsher words, but he could have come down a lot harder. Darrell's alright. I did waste a jar of primer. I was in a less than rational state this morning. The school nurse had to get some acetone from Mr. Goldman, the chemistry teacher, which went a long way to getting the paint off, but damn it burned. Most people thought I was *loco*. Some true fans admired my *alarde de ardor*.

I'm still having some intense feelings about the VM situation, which I turn over in the old *cabeza* as I wander down Center Street. There's some kind of law enforcement action in front of the office supply store. Two PPD black & whites are on the scene,

flashbars blazing red and blue. There's a guy with a red mustache, he's in handcuffs.
He keeps yelling *wrecks! wrecks!*

I know, pot-kettle-black, or whatever, but what a freak.



Portillo, TX - Afternoon

The MoloChem Anniversary Celebration Planning Committee was coming to order. A few of the convened quorum stood looking past the office windows into the adjoining warehouse. Rory O'Mega and his fellow performers occupied the space, working out the logistics of their upcoming production.

What few knew was that Rory had been signed for a fraction of his usual fees, to maintain his work visa. He had some trouble brewing back home, regarding a young, overly zealous fan, alleging certain pernicious indiscretions. Southeast Texas was not his first choice of locales, but he was happy to prolong his residence in the States. The arrangement had been facilitated by MoloChem's affiliation with O'Mega's uncle, the CFO of a Danish plastics concern.

Clyde Tate gawked through Venetian blinds. "They're manufacturing music, by electronic means, rather than with traditional instruments."

"Takes a very creative person, I suppose," replied Ray Holmes, likewise peeping.

"It takes a person who anticipates there's a market for that type of music. Like a pioneer. I gotta say, I admire a forward-thinking fella like that."

"They say the kids like it," said Ray.

"I prefer Eddie Rabbitt," said Kenzie, stepping up behind them. They all took a seat, joining a few others at a long table.

"Thanks so much for meeting today," Kenzie began.

"First item, we haven't had much feedback on the name contest, we have to think of something snappy to call this high energy event."

The stoic representative from HR had nothing to add, presently, nor did anyone else. Kenzie moved on.

"As y'all have seen, the preparations for the entertainment portion are under way." She passed around a photocopied page. "Here's a list of the midway vendors - rides, games, concessions. We've just secured a video service to record the anniversary presentation."

Kenzie laid down a business card reading:

Vid 'em All - Video Production Services for Every Occasion.

The Hatchet Man noted the address on the card. He had a matter of personal business to take there. He waited for Kenzie to offer any details about Molo's presence, the opportunity to be close to the old man; preferably, at arm's length.



Portillo, TX – Present

Rex slunk down the steps of the Portillo Police Department building, ashamed, furious with himself. He had been released without charges, but his car was a half-hour walk away. There was no way he would be on time to meet up with Heather. He had ruined his chance of reconciling with her, over a simple typo and a foolish overreaction. He had lain so deep in depressive torpor, for so long, that a display of anger such as he had unleashed at the service counter of the Office Barn felt like birthing a snarling, feral creature. In truth, fits of rage were common to him, when he was not enervated with emotional catatonia. This afternoon's outburst, however, was of unprecedented ferocity.

Rex fished his personal effects from a manila envelope, and halted at a pay phone. He had to leave her a message, at least. Rex pushed a quarter into the chrome face of the phone. It was a dinged-up old rotary model. He flicked the dial for each of the seven digits: *sweep, click-click-click*. He waited through a half-dozen rings, and

Heather's sweet voice inviting him to speak after the tone. Rex inhaled to speak, and just then the South Coast Safety Committee system test began, echoing around him.

He froze, perturbed, and finally uttered three words, "Heather, I'm sorry."

Rex waited a few more seconds, and gave up, slamming the handset down. The anger flickered again, and he slammed the handset twice more. He had been this angry when he got laid off, weeks before. Maybe, like the rotary dial, his emotions were destined to cycle through this same iteration: anger, depression, hope, disappointment.

Click, click, click, click.

He started walking back to his car, to drive home, to retreat to his empty apartment, and lonesome darkness.



CHAPTER 9

Site: Munsche Family Cemetery

Location: Portillo, TX

Established: 1886

This small plot was established by the Munsche family, who helped establish the towns of Deepwater and Genoa, later incorporated into the city of Portillo. It contains 17 graves dated from 1886-1947. Construction of Texas State Highway 225, begun in 1964, was altered specifically to preserve the site. It can be found between the north side of the highway and the feeder road, across from a plant site currently occupied by Air Today.

From The Atlas of Texas Historical Sites



Portillo, TX - Morning

RJ toiled at his editing workstation. His monitors displayed a scene of a machine shop mishap. An employee, with his arm tucked in his shirt, held the end of his empty sleeve

with a surgical tube concealed in it. RJ, out of frame, pumped red-dyed Karo while CARELESS WORKER wailed. If only one real injury was prevented by these theatrics, RJ felt like he was doing some good in the world.

A doorbell sounded, which signified a patron entering his retail space. RJ moved through the small office in a handful of steps, and opened a sliding window to the lobby.

"Welcome to Vid 'em All, how can I help y'all?"

Before his eyes registered the visitor, RJ noticed a videocassette laying on the counter between them. He picked it up, speaking as he inspected it.

"Duplication? You need a copy?"

RJ took his guest's silence for assent.

"That will be \$12.99, when you pick it up. I can have it by 4PM."

RJ was intrigued, noticing the cassette was the same brand and format he shot on. The label was scrawled with a single handwritten word: *URGENT!*

The doorbell rang again, and looking up, RJ saw that the lobby was empty. He thought he could smell mulch.

Desperately curious now, RJ carried the mysterious customer's cassette to his duplication rack. One row of VCR's was in use making a batch of the *WelChem* video. Free of charge,

of course. He was reminded of his disappointing ride. His faith was strong; he knew sometimes the light revealed nothing but an aspect of its own radiance. Perhaps he meant to reflect on the crassness of his offer to Bro. Dennis. He was a recent initiate to the Receivers; maybe he was simply being reconciled with his own impetuosity. Patience and humility above all.

RJ shoved the cassette into an available VCR and pushed *PLAY*. There was an interval of static, then the picture materialized. The recording depicted darkness, or nighttime. RJ heard the faint noise of traffic, a single pair of footsteps. Next, a louder whooshing sound, maybe an 18-wheeler, and the camera appeared to get knocked over, arcing past a street light, and resting on the ground. As the auto-focus adjusted, RJ tried to decipher a series of shapes. Headstones. He thrust his face against the glass of the TV, tilting his head to the side. The glare of passing headlights illuminated the frame for a second, then a voice spoke.

"Oh, this thing is on." The image flickered back to static. RJ mashed the *REW* button, then *PLAY*, then *//*, freezing the tape on one grainy frame. He could read a single name and its accompanying dates:

Gerald A. Molo

b.1907 - d.1929

How could this be? RJ had just been asked to document Molo's presence at the High Energy Event, two weeks hence. Why would his name be on a grave marker? At that moment, the duplication monitor showed the painting of Molo, the depiction of his revelatory dream. Molo, barely an adult, sat in an old car. The whole scene was rendered in golden tones. RJ had seen this dozens of times, but he suddenly regarded the image as fresh information, a code resolving into comprehensible text.



Portillo, TX – Present

Heather entered her apartment, drained, taut with apprehension about her appointment with Dr. Momus, just a few hours away. The turmoil in the pop music world over the past week had pushed the details of the DEA's action against VDML to sidebars and back pages. However, the media held in common, with Heather's adolescent pupils, an acute caprice, and the tale of the sad, dead singer was already fading, making room for the next sensation. The DEA deadline still loomed, and Heather would soon welcome the disputed chemical in her blood once more. *Only once more? Never again?* That would have to be her conviction, and with what consequences, she had yet to discover.

A tiny red light winked on Heather's telephone answering machine. She did not want to deal with Rex, presently. The weight of her other problems, and an agave-flavored headache, had tamped down her anger sufficiently to complete her work week. Alone, in the stillness of her apartment, the questions came back. *Why did he ditch me? What excuse could he possibly have?*

Heather activated the message playback, and Rex's voice emitted pitifully, "Heather, I'm sorry." *Beep*. Nothing more.

She had to give him the chance to apologize, to quantify the status of their barely-resurrected relationship. They were both, after all, going through some things. Heather picked up the phone and dialed Rex's pager number, then pressed 4, shorthand for an inverted *h*. She hung up and waited.

Her eyes landed on the projector and screen, which she had put off returning to Ms. Jenkins, in the library. Something was stuck to the bottom of the projector case. She knelt down and saw a pink paper napkin. Tilting back the heavy case, she tugged it free, a piece remaining, stuck to an exposed bit of adhesive where the plastic covering of the case had worn off.

One side of the napkin was printed with the logo of the Mobius Strip. *Rex never goes to those places*, she thought. The other side bore a strange message, in Rex's handwriting:

BLOW UP AIR TODAY

She did not comprehend its meaning, and she knew she could not endure the conversation that was to follow its discovery.



Rex sat alone in his dank apartment, on his drab, secondhand couch, in a tattered bathrobe. He had stayed in the tub a long time, thinking and soaking. Before that, he had lingered too long in black, dreamless sleep. He had privileged information, and a plan, and precious little to prevent him from tumbling over the precipice of self-obliterating folly. He had a calling.

Rex repeated the meditation he had refined the last couple days, opening the filmstrip. He scrolled to the image of the valve wheel. He emptied his mind of anything but that red circle, and his hands turning it, forcing its concomitant valve wide open.

Rex's pager vibrated on the side table, next to the phone. He didn't pick it up, but leaned over and read it, letting his head rest on the arm of the couch. He hugged his knees to his chest and took a few deep breaths. Stretching out, supine, he reached for the phone. He had Heather's number on speed dial, but he entered it manually, stalling, unsure what he was going to say. He toyed with the spiral handset cord as the answering machine came on, then the tone. Rex waited, in case she picked up, then proceeded, grateful to postpone the full confrontation.

"Hi Heather. I'm sorry I didn't make it last night. I can't tell you why, right now, like this, but I'm so sorry. I know you're seeing Dr. Momus tonight. I know that's important to you. Let her help you, get the good you need from her. Let's talk tomorrow. I'll tell you everything. You don't have to tell me everything, or anything at all, but I'll listen. Take care of yourself."

Rex hung up. He wondered why she didn't answer. Maybe to get back at him, maybe she just wanted to hear what he would say. He had a strange feeling that those words could be the last thing he ever said to her, and that would have to do.



I am Kyle Blyte. Nemo and I are tooling down Center Street in his dream machine. The stereo repeats *Fade to White* full blast, in tribute. We're gonna go hang at the Sol-Mart parking lot. That's the new spot. All the mini-truck guys park and show off for each other, and maybe even some girls, if there are any around. *El Capitan* is asking me about my freak-out the day before. Some of the white paint is still stubbornly crusted in the edges of my knuckles and fingernails.

"Ms. Slown was so cool about it. She gave me some good advice. The feeling is true. The music gives the feeling, and that's what I can hold on to."

Nemo nods, "word, she's one of my Mom's head-case patients. I saw her name on this calendar in the office."

"Wow, I can't believe she's in need of crystal-jangling. I wonder if she gets DeMoLished, like in a clinical capacity?"

"Most of them do. They use smaller doses for that," says Nemo, "like little Junior High party hits."

"I heard it can help people get their head straight. Ironic, I guess. It's weird that a teacher does that."

As I ponder this, I consider the bitch of a week I've been having. I could do with some unwinding myself. I excuse myself from the enclave of truck geeks and head for the *baño del Sol-Mart*. This place has only been open a couple days, and I'm sure they are already tired of us coming in just to piss and boost Cokes. I find an empty stall and take out the Dim baggie Nemo gave me last week. Friday night's as good a time as any. Just one.



Rex had waited for dark, he had waited for his battery to charge, and now he was getting in position. He pulled the Crown Vic off the feeder road, onto a tiny patch of gravel next to the Munsche Family Cemetery. From here, he had a perfect view of the Air Today plant. He sat on the trunk and meditated, holding the filmstrip up to the street light. He visualized the location of the valve wheel inside the plant. He imagined again, turning it, releasing a fatal pressure into the system. He went further, seeing himself tear off the wheel with superhuman flair, hurling it through the air, so no one could stop what he set in motion. Fortified by this mental image, he prepared his camera.

From this vantage, he would capture a stunning shot of the explosion. Everyone would want this footage, tonight, and every year hereafter; people would remember this night. They may never know the plot Rex had disrupted, the malevolent whisperings he had silenced. He wished he could know the complete, horrible details of the important men's scheme, but maybe it was too much for him to grasp. He knew, if he ruined one spoke of the wheel, the rest would falter.



Heather drove to the Momus residence, thinking about Rex's message. She would hear him out, but she deserved an explanation about the strange note, and why he was going to one of *those* places. Did she even know him at all? Maybe it was just part of his process. Maybe they would both come back around the circle, to being two normal people. Then, they could face each other in honesty, with bare, genuine feelings. They had been there before. Maybe they had not been ready for how far they had gotten. Maybe they had both been afraid.

Heather arrived, and walked to the back of the house. She gripped the handrail at the foot of the metal staircase, ascending to Dr. Momus' office door. She looked up, hesitating. *One more time up these steps.*



CHAPTER 10

“All men are hunters of something, and all men come home to die.”

From *Grizzlies Don't Come Easy!* by Ralph W. Young



The sun diffused through hueless afternoon overcast. A cold breeze stung the old man's cheek. He dreamt often of this moment. He crouched, with his guide, in a stand of alder bush and devil thorn. He watched, via telescopic sight, as a magnificent brown grizzly dipped its jowl in the silvery blur of a river's swift current.

Bracing his Weatherby against his shoulder, taking final aim, he saw a different figure rise up on the riverbank. Through the crosshairs, he saw himself staring back, standing where the grizzly had been, a salmon flopping wetly in his human teeth. Molo's comrade was not privy to the absurd manifestation of existential defect, the portentous twin. He stared and stared. The glittering fish flopped and flopped.

It occurred for just a second, but afflicted Molo like a hellish hour.

Terrified, he squeezed off a .300 round, with startling efficacy. The report stung his ear. For a moment, he could hear the Gulf crescendo against indifferent sand. He lowered the weapon from his smarting shoulder to see merely a bear, collapsed in a furry, sorrel heap, the ultimate trophy of his hunting career.



Portillo, TX - Friday Night

Gerald Molo had come back around the circle. He had come into the world in a clapboard house in Portillo, very near the place he was now arriving. He had grown up through humid summers and lean years, leaving home at a young age to find his fortune, and just as quickly lose it. He came back stronger, parlaying his east Texas oil discovery into a veritable empire. The failure of a venture in Alaska's North Slope had incited diversification into less glamorous venues in the subsequent decades. MoloChem was among these modest, but profitable, enterprises.

Molo was borne to the Portillo Fairgrounds under the cackling chop of helicopter rotors. The impudent drone invaded his fitful dozing, transmuted to the sound of a flopping salmon.

He regretted coming. An unseasonably cold afternoon harassed him as the open-top town car crawled through the parade. The folding chairs on the grandstand were uncomfortable. A sulfurous miasma emanated from the belching MoloChem plant that nourished the town, and smothered it, all at once. The *Smell of Money* assailed his nostrils. Likewise, his ears were abraded by the teeming crowd, the braying brass, the keening terror-delight of carnival atmosphere.

His eyes were next for punishment, as searchlights blazed and whirled in anticipation of the fireworks and laser extravaganza. This vexation was merely prelude for true suffering - the hot, undiluted wrath of a pensive figure, who had ensured himself a seat behind the venerable founder.



RJ stood at his position, next to the audio mixing console on a production platform, surrounded by the gathering citizenry. His camera was trained on the grandstand, and the aged guest of honor. A pale shroud of fog was settling over the multitude,

augmenting the vast and complex array of lights installed for the *MoloChem High Energy Event*. It was as if the entire population of Portillo, together here, united as single giant organism, which clamored for lasers.

Kevin, the sound engineer, was explaining the details of the show to RJ, as they waited for the grand finale to begin.

"I run the audio here, the lights are controlled over there, and the pyro guys are way back there," said Kevin, gesturing, and flicking ash off his Newport simultaneously.

"That's a big board," said RJ, observing the mixer, "how many channels for the band?"

Kevin looked around, and leaned in conspiratorially.

"The band's not really playing, it's horseshit, an act. It's all coming from here", Kevin said on a low voice, pointing his nearly spent cigarette at a reel-to-reel tape machine.

"The humidity was playin' hell with their equipment. That's what they said anyway. I got the easiest job here tonight."

He put his hand to a headset he wore and nodded.

"Here we go!"

Kevin pressed a button on the tape deck, and moved a single fader on the board. The reels turned, and he settled back against an upended equipment case. He shrugged at RJ with a goofy smile, drawing a final drag. A synthesizer note droned,

and a spotlight appeared on Rory O'Mega, who wore a flamboyant oversized cowboy hat only someone as cool as him could get away with. The crowd cheered; the show was under way.

RJ waited a few minutes, and climbed a short ladder down into the crowd, leaving his camera behind. He would not need it after tonight. With effort, he made his way through the enthralled mass, toward the parking lot.

The bearer of the strange videotape, abandoned in his lobby, had never returned. The image of Molo's grave marker had infected him. He became convinced that this was his message. Somehow it was true, even though the man himself sat framed in the viewfinder of his camera. He would prove this, by returning to the Receiver's Hall, and performing the rite again, alone. Bro. Alton had gotten it wrong, in one small detail, and RJ intended to verify his revelation, while the town was distracted by the spectacle.



The strange synthetic music increased in volume and complexity. Likewise, the light show was building; more lights, more motion. Molo would have dozed off, if he were not so irritated. The first Crosette bombardment crackled in the

Prussian Blue twilight; an alchemy of gunpowder and magnesium, iron and cyanide.

A searchlight swung across Molo's face, throwing his shadow on the crowd below. His head twisted away reflexively. He studied the absence of light before him, but could discern no shape. The rigid form looming behind him did not gaze up to the exhibition, nor squint away from the rude beam of the searchlight. He stared ahead, eyes as steely as wood could be. A cluster of Peonies thundered overhead, illuminating the crowd and eliciting cheers and raised hands; all attention was skyward.

In RJ's orphaned camera, Molo could be seen to join the crowd, effecting an ecstatic rictus, frail arms waving with atypical enthusiasm, but in truth, he vainly clawed towards his age-humped back. The Hatchet Man had taken his moment. His reliable steel cleft rib and vertebra, corrupting a withered lung. Waiting for the next demi-climax, the awed crowd took ease, lowered their hands. Molo's stayed up, arching back to that spot he could not reach.

A bank of lasers fanned out in ethereal green, synchronized to Rory O'Mega's pre-recorded accompaniment. He moved his hands over an elaborately staged organ, with neon manuals, but it made no sound. The MoloChem logo strobed on the side of a storage

vessel, in vibrating red. All were distracted from the vicious vengeance, the futile flailing.

The Hatchet Man found himself unsure how to complete the act; whether to strike again or wait for the certain failure of traumatized systems. He contemplated the jagged defacement he'd wrought as an opening, not to let out the coursing blood and gurgling breath, but to allow him back *in*, to that place he was forced from, so long ago. Nostalgia washed over pain. He thrust forward, gently reuniting with the old man, nestling in that fleshy pit. The immaterial permeated the corporeal. The visceral enfolded the vaporous. They reveled in this brief interval of communion, the bliss of wholeness. The column of cedar, now inanimate, toppled on them, driving the blade deeper. The commotion and music surrounding them softly diffused into crashing waves, and a shadowy refrain of *When You're Smiling*. Molo's breath ebbed like the brackish tide, and ceased.



RJ approached the Channel Breeze Shopping Center. The city was empty. He had left everyone behind at the fairground. He could see the fireworks erupting in his rearview mirror, amplified by the fog, which had gathered to an astonishing

density. RJ entered the Channel Breeze parking lot, and he did not slow down. The Econoline burst through the facade of the Receiver's Hall, a massive self-propelled brick. Folding chairs scattered as the van skidded to a halt. RJ shoved his door open, scattering more chairs, kicking them aside to make a path to the little gate. He stopped, frozen with doubt, looked back, observing the violence of his entry, and realized he was committed to completing his blasphemy.

The fog followed him into the building. It seemed to transmit the light and sound from the fairground, pulsing and droning. RJ pushed the gate aside, violating the sacred space. Guilt and fear tore at him like the fangs of some vengeful beast. He pressed on, spotting the box in which the Instrument was stored, below a set of switches. He flipped them all, and the golden light shone from above, spreading through the amassing mist, like a sunrise.

Seeing the Vehicle illuminated, RJ realized the gold coin was in the hands of some other congregant, one who would never return to this place. All would reach its end this night. Stepping back to his van, he bent in and rummaged the ashtray for a quarter.

RJ opened the box and took up the gilt gun. He climbed into the miniature Ford, leaned over awkwardly, and deposited the

quarter in a slot in its side. RJ saw himself in the big mirror, bobbing with the motion of the car. The whir of the motor was almost drowned out by the strangely present ambience of the distant celebration.

Here, RJ made the critical diversion. He raised the Instrument, his arm not straight but bending. He took one last look in the mirror, closed his eyes, and pressed the barrel to his temple. He squeezed the trigger, and as the hammer struck the bell, it reverberated in his skull, like a tuning fork placed against a fiddle. The Golden Report registered in all his senses at once. The amber light penetrated his eyelids, intensifying in brightness and purity, until he was immersed in white. RJ was no longer in this world, and his world had ceased to be.



Portillo, TX – Present

Rex surveyed the Air Today plant, from his post across the freeway, summoning his courage and conviction. *Time to work.* He opened the trunk of the Crown Vic, and gathered his protective equipment. A bright light flashed, as if headlights were very close, and he heard a loud whooshing sound, then a clatter. Rex spun, seeing no

vehicle, but his tripod lay on its side. Also, he saw a man kneeling next to it, setting the rig upright. "Oh, this thing is on," he said, touching the *REC* button to stop it.

Rex scrutinized this interloper, noticing his familiar red mustache.

RJ traced the inscription on Gerald Molo's grave marker, nodding solemnly.

Rex and RJ faced each other. In place of what should have been surprise, or terror, there was simply a silent understanding; a surrender to an inscrutable greater force, as one submits to weary slumber. Rex held up the safety gear, and his new companion took it, smiling at him. Rex helped him put on the jumpsuit, hardhat, goggles. They stood together under the street light, Rex holding up the image of the valve wheel, instructing, ensuring the goal was clear.

"I will go, you stay with the camera."

"So I guess I'll be shooting myself."

They nodded at each other, shook hands, and Rex pointed across the freeway.

"The rest is silence."

"O,o,o,o."



CHAPTER 11

FROM THE OFFICE OF [REDACTED]

LANGELY, VA

1960

Following the loss of agents [REDACTED], [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], in addition to Subject [REDACTED], in the course of field operations in [REDACTED], TX, Project [REDACTED] has been terminated, effective immediately. Findings of this investigation were largely inconclusive. This was to be expected, given the unconventional nature of its focus. The use of *vanadiumdichroicmethyllimate* (hereafter, VDML) to augment human perception, for the purpose of intelligence and reconnaissance, produced one notable conclusion. The discovery of an unforeseen side effect may merit further study.

The application of VDML, in the presence of certain *High Energy Events* (see appendix B), intensifies its effects in vastly potent and unpredictable ways. Subjects reported experiences characterized as “leaving one’s body”, “spiritual transport (space and time)”, “amplification of existing parapsychological traits: telekinesis, precognition, etc.” The nature and extent of these aberrations is difficult to quantify.

In the interest of producing repeatable results, Subject [REDACTED] was placed aboard the submarine USS [REDACTED], and tested in proximity to the nuclear engines. Subject demonstrated markedly different reactions from earlier tests in a “neutral” setting, including alleged contact with “a boy from the future” who the Subject believed was using VDML, or similar substance, in his respective temporal coordinate.

Potential use of VDML, perhaps in combination with a controllable external energy source, as a means of covert communication or surveillance, is recommended for future investigation, at such time as availability and safety of sufficient energy sources allows.



Portillo, TX – Present

A stranger joined a small group of blue-clad workers filing into the Air Today employee entrance. RJ passed through the gate, unnoticed. He proceeded toward the center of the great facility, passing the ammonia cracker, the evaporation tower. He stopped at the base of a flare stack, gazing at the flame, like an embryo of the inferno he was about to unleash screaming in the Portillo sky. He turned at a battery of boilers and walked on beyond a reaction vessel that looked like a four-story coffee thermos. Finally, RJ spotted his target, a large red valve wheel. He smashed the glass cover of a nearby fire alarm, and pulled the lever. He waited, listening to the sounds of a plan

taking effect: sirens blaring, voices bawling with curt concision, the tattoo of safety shoes retreating to exits.



Heather stood at the oak door, reached to knock, but Dr. Momus opened first, smiling at her.

“Tonight, Heather, your life will change.”

The doctor’s glowing optimism vibrated against Heather’s anxiety, keeping either from moving.

Finally, Heather stepped inside with a strange, nervous giggle. They each were seated as usual, but there was an uneasy quiet in place of their typical pleasantries.

“Shall we begin?” Dr. Momus asked.

“I’m ready,” replied Heather.

The doctor handed her a glass of water, and a paper cup with three capsules. There was usually one, and it was a different color. Heather stared at them; tipping the little cup and watching them roll back and forth. She opened her mouth and threw them in, then the water. Dr. Momus took the empty cups, and touched her lightly on the shoulder, indicating she should lay back.

“Heather, I want you to breathe deeply,” she said, lowering her voice. “You’re feeling very relaxed.”

“Yes.” Heather was ready to submit. Regardless of the doctor’s intentions, she was poised at the point of no return, about to slide into a new realm.

Dr. Momus proceeded through the hypnosis routine. "You are tired, so very tired. Soon you will be asleep."

She continued, and Heather obeyed, letting every inch of her reclining body go slack, unmooring the bobbing craft of her unconscious, paying out the rope.

"Now, Heather, you are asleep. You can go wherever you want, and do whatever you please. In our journey so far, I have attempted to guide you toward a critical event in your past. We investigated the effects of this trauma, the ripples it has cast into your life, and your development, from a child into an adult woman. Tonight, the goal is to take you back to that very place, that specific moment, to transport you to that event in your memory."

Dr. Momus continued in this fashion, until she was sure Heather had reached her destination.

"How old are you now, Heather?"

"I'm seven. Seven-and-a-half."

"Where are you? Where have we arrived?"

"The wall, by the beach. Daddy calls it the seawall, but it's not a sea, it's the Golf of Mexicans."

Heather was fully under the influence, carried to a specific point in time and space. She hovered into the summer of her eighth year, floating over the Galveston seawall. She saw the room, and the man at the entrance. He filled the doorway, moving closer to the little girl, who was also Heather. The mechanisms that had helped her block this moment, the veils that concealed it, were stripped away. The scene was illuminated now. Heather could see it with unprecedented clarity.



RJ laid his hands on the red wheel. He turned, turned again, as hard as he could, until the wheel would turn no more. The pressure built in the pipes and vessels that rose into the air above him. A defect had been created. A destructive energy had been invoked, inducing a perilous chain reaction. RJ tarried, hearing no voices or footsteps, only the shrill of the warning sirens. He stood alone, the only man left in the plant. By and by, a critical failure occurred. An explosion ripped through the plant, blooming radiantly above it. The valve shaft rocketed through RJ's chest. His task accomplished, he collapsed to the rumbling pavement, his perforated form engulfed in flames.



I am tripping balls. What the hell did Nemo give me? I can see myself slumped over, in the restroom stall. I hope this ends before somebody finds me – embarrassing. Will it end? Am I dead? Dead from a Dirty Dim Dose? Damn.

I'm rising above the Sol-Mart. *¡Una visión EXTRAÑA!* Something is happening at the end of Center Street. The dragon has escaped from Air Today. It stretches its wings, glittering with red and yellow scales. It rises into the black sky, emitting a gold light, or maybe just reflecting it.

The dragon's treasure is spilling out; diamonds, rubies...what are the blue ones called? The red and blue ones twinkle the most. They're not spilling out, they're gathering, drawing towards the dragon. It rises, it fades now, into the night. There's

something following it, like a smell. Fear, surprise, confusion, they smell bad, not like the usual way it smells bad around here. Nemo's driving away. Not cool, man. Oh, he's worried about his dad. He feels bad that he ditched me. My mom's probably worried about me.

A little bird approaches. It's the TVTO helicopter. They missed the dragon. I'm going back down now. Settling back in the stall. Slipping back inside. So sleepy.



Danny Momus came to a stop halfway on the curb in front of his house, the Mazda's ground effects grinding roughly against the concrete. He ran to the back of the house and stumbled up the spiral stairs. The blaze across the freeway was reflected in the big window, shattered in the blast wave. The orange shards looked like a jack-o-lantern's jagged mouth. He kicked a few more teeth free and leaned in. He could discern that a large bookshelf had toppled, but little more was readily evident, in the darkness.

"Mom!?" Danny cried.

"Call 911," his mother replied weakly.



Rex fell backward onto the quaking pavement. He gaped up blankly at a fiery brimstone demon shrieking out of hell. It was done. Getting back to his feet, he could see the Air Today workers gathering in the parking lot, wriggling clusters of blue, like ants in a flood. The plan had worked. He jumped in the Crown Vic, jostling the bulk of camera and tripod into the shotgun seat like a petulant accomplice. Turning to once more behold the obdurate column of smoke piercing the night sky, Rex pulled onto the feeder road and sped away.



CHAPTER 12

Galveston, TX – 1970

Davis stood in the restroom doorway, silhouetted by the waning rays of the setting sun, and the pink cast of a warming sodium vapor light.

“Maybe your mommy’s in here,” he said to the little girl in front of him.

He quickly inspected the stalls to ensure he and Heather were, in fact, alone. He pushed the door shut, and jammed a mop through the handle, crudely securing it.

Heather completed her own investigation, and stepped out of the last stall to face the man.

“This bathroom is for girls,” she said, noticing the closed door, oblivious to the wicked intentions directed at her. Even seasoned professionals had been confounded by this quiet stranger’s capacity for evil.

“Where shall we look next?” Davis asked, slowly stepping toward her.

An animal instinct flared inside Heather, a reaction to the diminishing space between herself, and the grimy wall, and this mysterious grown-up. She stepped back and her foot slipped out from under her. She fell sharply against the wall, and looked up, whimpering as the man, made black in the shadow of the single light fixture behind him, reached out for her.

Somewhere close, but insensible, 27-year-old Heather witnessed this moment, from outside of it. She had been transported there by a potent drug and a steady guiding voice, and her will to conquer the fear and shame born on this day in her own past. Her memory of it had been murky before, but now it was unfolding clearly before her. She would not turn away.

At this moment, the Air Today plant erupted in a massive, chaotic discharge of chemical energy. The power of this explosion focused through the aperture of Heather's displaced consciousness, directing its power through young Heather's fear. She closed her eyes and curled up tight against the wall, experiencing the following moments as a nightmare concert of sounds. She heard a chime, like when she would stroke the edge of her water glass at Christmas dinner, except louder and deep in her ears. Above that, she heard the man scream; a short, sharp scream as if a dog's tail were stepped on. Then thumping, like her sneakers in the drier, and finally, the sound of a cantaloupe knocked off a table, *thunk-splatt*ing on a tile floor. After, that Heather remembered only what she could comprehend, which was the color red, and little else.



Portillo, TX – Present

The unconscious, adult body of Heather Slown was still alive, but dormant in the absence of its derelict psyche. She had been secured to a body board and carefully transported down the spiral stairs at the rear of the Momus house, by two diligent

EMT's. A dozen units had been summoned to the Air Today site, but none were actually needed. This one had travelled swiftly to the nearby neighborhood, and Heather was on her way to Portillo General Hospital. The fire at the plant was under control, but would burn a while longer.



Galveston, TX – 1929

Heather continued travelling, backward in time, while hovering about the same point on the Galveston seawall. The wave of energy from the Air Today explosion propelled her. The peak of the wave leveled out, and Heather halted, trying to ascertain her surroundings. The restroom had not been built yet, nor had most of the other surrounding structures. To Heather's perception, the landscape had instantly transformed. Dusk became deep night. The tea house and gift shop standing over the surf had suddenly transformed to a neon-lit nightclub. The area directly before her seemed to be lit from directly behind her, or, however improbably, *by* her. A golden light, soft but inconceivably intense, emanated from her. Her form had been stretched out, reduced; she seemed to be only one eyeball, through which she observed the moment on the boulevard, and illuminated it, at the same time. She witnessed what looked like a photographic multiple exposure, a superposition of several simultaneous permutations.

A young man sat in an old car, a Ford Model T. He pitched a small glass bottle over the edge of the seawall, into the sand below. As her light entered the scene, he

turned away, looking at the beach, then raising a revolver in the air and firing it, whooping. The scene blurred as she saw the young man, overlaid on his own image, taking another course of action. She could see another man observing the same scene, an old man in overalls, who flickered away just as quickly. Yet another man appeared in the passenger seat, dressed in hospital clothes, she thought she could see a scar on his head, but he too vanished before she could be sure what she saw.

All of this stretched out with dreamy inertia, but occurred in fractured fractions of seconds. Her presence here, enabled by the powerful combination of pharmaceutical, metaphysical, and chemical powers, created a nexus, a spiritual mass weighing down a fabric, which all these souls slid toward.

The wave carrying Heather began to coil back. Her light diminished, and she detected, with a sense beyond sight – new to her in this journey – the tendrils of effect which radiated from this moment. Branches budded out, ideas were transmitted, lives diverted, ripples pushed forward into the ether. Finally, dragged in the undertow, she drew back from the strange instant. It shifted into sharp focus as her observation collapsed the possibilities into a singular outcome. The young man, now in darkness, brought the weapon to his own head and used it.

She could not bear to see it, for she knew, at that extra-sensory level, that this man's demise somehow made her own life possible. There was not enough room for the both of them. The gray union of lead and brain was like a forming zygote, her own conception; her life allowed to come into existence, and now, to continue, to be made worthwhile by her own perseverance, and will to endure. She felt young Molo's misery

cease. He slumped in the old car, becoming a tiny dot as she rushed back on the retreating wave, returning to her time, and place, and her mute, damaged body.



Portillo, TX – Present

I am Kyle Blyte. Having collected myself, and dragged my ass out of the Sol-Mart dumper, I'm standing in the median of Center Street. Gawking with the others, I watch the emergency responders, the flashing lights, the blaze steadily vanquished. Several others rushed away, like Nemo, worried about their parents. Most of their dads have spent their adult lives sweating in those blue AT jumpsuits. There's a line at the bank of payphones, the ones up front calling home worried, the rest answering *911* pages from parents worried about them. The reports are all positive so far, no injuries. Reports on the radio say the same. There's a single ambulance coming up Center Street. It passes, and I wonder who it carries. I'm compelled to fear not.



CHAPTER 13

Excerpt from

United States Fire Administration Technical Report Series

Air Today Chemical Plant - Explosion and Fire

Investigated by: Jack Oates

Published 1991

During the course of operations at the Air Today Chemical Complex in Portillo, TX, an explosion and ensuing fire occurred which resulted in substantial damage to the process unit which produces [withheld pending judgment in *U.S. v Boyd*]

Personnel Accounting Procedures used at the plant indicate 1 person missing, but no remains have been found, and all employees of Air Today, as well as its contractors and visitors were accounted for. An investigation of these procedures will be conducted.

Minor damage and disturbances were reported in surrounding neighborhoods, including one head injury.

Information available at the time of this report indicated that there was a failure in either a line or valve which carried [withheld]. The line was reported as being approximately 10" in diameter and possibly carrying as much as

700 pounds per square inch pressure. It is not known if a mechanical failure took place or if human error was a factor.

Regardless, a failure of a high pressure line carrying these types of flammable products can create a large, enveloping, explosive cloud within seconds. Information from witnesses indicates that a vapor cloud developed very quickly.

Due to the activation of a fire alarm, by whom or what means is not clear at this time, workers had approximately 2.5 to 4 minutes to evacuate.

Potential ignition sources were all over the plant, including ventilation fans, electrical switches, and gas burn-off flames throughout the work area. The exact ignition source may never be known.



Portillo, TX – Present

Rex raced across Portillo, listening to the report of the Air Today explosion on his radio. He braced his camera, his stiff passenger, as he took one sharp turn, and another. He passed the large backlit TVTO sign and halted sloppily across two *VISITOR* spaces. Rex ejected the tape, the mechanism grinding with excruciating slowness. He snatched it out, and leapt up a small set of steps to the entrance. Pounding on a glass door, he noticed the night person was not at the desk. Usually it was Shirley.

"Shirley!" Rex cried.

He pressed his face to the glass, twisting right and left to see if anyone was inside. Finally, he tried his old pass code on a plastic keypad set in the door frame. Success! Relief quelled a spike of enmity – Nyburg still had his cushy tech job, despite overlooking this type of detail. Rex nearly tripped rushing into the reception lobby. He leaned over the desk and hollered toward a corridor leading to the newsroom. He panted lightly, his brow was damp, the tape rattled in his shaking hand. He listened for a reply, hearing only his breath and the hum of air conditioning.

Rex was startled by his pager beeping on his belt. He did not recognize the number, but reflexively, he stretched over the tall reception desk to answer the summons. He strained clumsily, holding the pager to his eye, the phone under his cheek, keying the digits. The call connected.

"Hello, this is Rex Janneter. Yes. Oh no! I'll be right there!"

He grabbed a pen, perplexed that nobody had responded to his intrusion. He scrawled across the blank label on the face of the videocassette: *URGENT!* Rex searched his pockets and found one of his business cards, having amended a portion of them by whiting out *Flex* and neatly printing the correct three letters in the space above. He snapped off an inch of Scotch tape, affixed the business card - to ensure he would get credit for his offering - and dashed out of the lobby.



Fred and Danny Momus hauled a piece of plywood from their garage. It had been pre-cut, along with several others, to protect the windows of their home from hurricanes. On this night, it would serve perfectly, if unexpectedly. They carried it up the spiral stairs, working around the curve, in graceless lurches and muttered commands.

"Lift, Daniel. Higher."

The EMT's had declared Diane Momus unharmed, but rattled. She reposed on a sofa, tranquil on tea and Nembutal. Fred had already snapped a roll of photos, documenting the damage for the insurance company. He and his son now endeavored to restore the trashed office. They fitted the board into the large window frame and secured it with metal clips. It was late, but they kept going. Fred worked a push broom, and Danny a large dustpan, collecting glass and debris.

"Did you see it, Dad, was it scary?"

"Scary as hell, son. Could'a been my unit. Damn lucky nobody was hurt." He still wore his jumpsuit, and he wiped his brow with a blue sleeve. Danny plucked a cracked pair of glasses out of the dustpan, handing them to Fred. He tucked them in the top pocket of his coverall.

"The news said it registered 2.5 on the Richter scale. Like an earthquake," said Danny. Fred swept a bit longer, not answering, then laid the broom aside.

"I ain't never been to California, son. Help me raise up that bookcase."



A videotape lay on a desk, in a TV station lobby. A smooth wooden hand reached out for it. It was placed in a briefcase, next to a hatchet with a very old handle, and a very sharp blade. A woman, who worked at the desk, returned from another room, beckoned by a sound.

"Hello. Is anyone there?" Shirley asked.

Peering out, she saw the lobby was empty.



Rex passed through electric sliding doors, entering Portillo General Hospital.

He addressed the nurse at the admissions desk, "I need to see Heather Slown."

Rex proceeded to describe her, which the nurse mostly ignored as she clacked on her computer. Rex took an elevator to the floor Heather was recovering on, located the room. A doctor was leaving as he approached.

"Is she alright?" Rex asked.

"Miss Slown sustained a considerable blow to the head. At present, it appears to be superficial, no evidence of contusion, contrecoup, so forth, but she'll be here overnight for observation. You may speak to her, but she's pretty drowsy. 5 minutes, OK?"

"Thank you," said Rex.

He slowly pushed through the door. Heather lay with her head swathed like a white ski cap. She appeared to sleep, and he wondered if he should just come back in the morning. A small TV hung from the ceiling in a bulky frame. It was tuned to TVTO - a live report on the explosion. The fire was almost completely extinguished, barely visible. Rex watched, waiting to see if they would play his footage. The vanity of this stung him, and he looked down, feeling ashamed, overcome by what he had put into motion. The result had been so extreme; he could barely comprehend the images, even though he had witnessed the explosion firsthand.

But he had stopped them. Whatever wickedness was being plotted by those shadowy men, it was now thwarted, or at least hindered. He had to believe that.

Heather stirred. "Rex?"

She held out her hand.

Rex crossed the room, and sat in a chair next to her. She smiled at him, and took his hand. He looked at her, feeling grateful to be near her again, that she was safe. They shared a gaze that expressed a thousand words of relief, of surrender, and forgiveness. Finally, Rex spoke.

"I'm here, Heather."

She replied softly, "I'm ready, Rex."