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THRILLER*

From the Stanford Chaparral, *Mystery Thriller* will tickle the funnybone of anyone who has read the books, seen the hit movies, or barely skimmed Wikipedia. *Mystery Thriller* is straight off the shelves of your favorite supermarket or airport bookstore. Sure it's a parody, but you can still impress your friends by reading it. It is technically a book.

"The greatest thing ever hewn, written, forged, or borne by a Man."

The Stanford Chaparral

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MYSTERY THRILLER



THE STANFORD CHAPARRAL



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MYSTERY THRILLER

A Parody

What people are probably saying about

MYSTERY THRILLER

“The greatest thing ever hewn, written, forged, or borne by a Man.”

The Stanford Chaparral

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The Atlantic City Journal-Constitution

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SUMMER BLOCKBUSTER MOVIE TIE-IN

INTRODUCTION TO FLUID MECHANICS

***MYSTERY
THRILLER***

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MYSTERY THRILLER

The Stanford Chaparral

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Preface

NOW THAT you're on the verge of experiencing the greatest story ever written, we need to clear up a few things first. Probably, you think that this is a parody or satire, maybe because of the many hilarious jokes or maybe because it says "a parody" on the cover. But this is not something to be taken lightly. This book contains adventure, mystery, thrills, even a little romance — something for the whole family.

We wrote this book as a gift to the world. A gentle tap-dance of nuance that dares to probe the darkest depths of the human condition, *Mystery Thriller* will challenge you. Perhaps you will initially be defeated by its complexity and richness of scope. Perhaps it is simply too much adventure. But, we promise it will be worth it.

Let us, if you will, tout some of the merits of this work. Length, for example. It's just long

enough to be a book. Furthermore, it was designed by physics to fit perfectly in the pouch of an airplane seat. Also, you can put it in your back pocket. When somebody asks what it is, just say, “Oh that? That is just a novel that I am reading in my free time.”

Make sure to read it while you can. There’s not much time for you to still be able to say, “the book was so much better than the movie.” That’s right! We’ve already been optioned for a movie deal. And, between you and me, there’s already a sequel in the works. Did someone say trilogy? No, but someone did say saga!

We have found that the optimal setting for reading this book is on the beach while drinking a piña colada. This will make you more fond of both the beach and the piña colada. This is, incidentally, how the book was written.

At this point, you are probably thoroughly convinced that you are going to read this book cover-to-cover. If you are not, then the book is not so convinced that it wants you to read it. However, if you are ready to start the adventure of your life, look no further than page one and continue until you hit the cardboard page at the end. *Mystery Thriller* will not let you down.

Anthony Scodary & Josh Stark
May 13th 2008

F A C T:

Humans are more closely related to squids than to primates.

Most scholars agree that Atlantis exists, but cannot pinpoint the precise location.

The United States consumes 50,000 tons of canned fish each year. Fish consume one ton of canned human each year.

If every diet pill consumed in the United States were represented by a hotdog and those hotdogs were lined up end-to-end, the resulting chain would stretch to the moon and back 1.2 times. The corresponding chain of penis pill hotdogs would reach the sun.

The Morgan Whale is an electric whale.

A honeybee beats its wings 30 times per second.

Slam dunking was banned in NCAA basketball from 1967 to 1976.

One of out every three cited facts is a lie.

Prologue: Squid Pro Quo

VOLUNTEER docent Flem van der Chôclet stumbled against the jellyfish display. He regained his balance and shot a glance over his shoulder down the long hall of the aquarium's west wing, past the dimly lit tanks to the lobby. From far away down the corridor he heard a faint sound, almost inaudible—perhaps an unhurried footstep, some after-hours visitor—but all of van der Chôclet's evening passes had been issued for the Jardin this week.

Van der Chôclet hesitated, frozen with fear. As he strained his eyes in the gloom of the aquarium a dark figure passed through the far doorway from the lobby into the west wing. Van der Chôclet gasped, his heart leaping. He began to run once more, frantically pumping his short arms. His docent's badge flapped against his chest as he clumsily tottered through the ranks of enclosures like an obese mouse in a maze. With no exits in view, the docent froze to wheeze for a beat.

Van der Chôclet rested his sweaty cheek on the glass and panted, trying his best to hold absolutely still. Hiding in an aquarium was difficult, to say the least—his assailant could see him almost everywhere he ran, albeit refracted and distorted by the water and any intervening marine life. He had come so close to escaping, once even standing dead still behind an inflated pufferfish while the man in loafers padded past the other side of the tank. But the fish had deflated suddenly, revealing van der Chôclet's wide, white face. As van der Chôclet's eyes met the man's through the glass, the man had smiled—was it a bitter smile? Was it joyful? Van der Chôclet didn't notice, because he had wet his pants.

He ran again, the ammonia in his trousers uncomfortably sloshing against his thighs. He ran, passing again and again the displays of jellyfish and seahorses. Though he was nearly out of his mind with terror one thought kept bubbling to the surface of his brain. *How did they find me?*

As he passed Monsieur Bublés's tank something in van der Chôclet's heart rallied, right when it seemed the stranger was gaining ground for the last time. Just as the man reached out to grab his collar, van der Chôclet slipped his hand into his woolen waistcoat and withdrew a fountain pen. The barrel was engraved *À Flem, 10 ans de service au J. d P.* His fingers trembling, van der Chôclet turned to face the man. He found himself eye to eye with a wicked pistol. The man lifted his left hand, pulling back the hammer with his index finger instead of the thumb of the hand with which he held the gun.

Van der Chôclet knew the man in that moment.

This is the man who was sent to murder us all, we keepers of the secret. Crap.

But he did not flinch—in a heartbeat he lifted the pen and depressed the lever of its ink cartridge with a gesture he had known by heart since his days as a schoolboy in Stijl. The ink shot in a mighty arc into the eyes of his pursuer. As the man cursed and wiped at them, van der Chôclet scooted by.

He spoke the words he had practiced so many times. “Bienvenue au Jardin des Poissons. Nous avons y les plus specimens en France, et les plus belles. Peut-être vous êtes ici à regarder Monsieur Bublés, notre calmar géant.” The assailant displayed a cold disinterest in the aquarium’s giant squid.

“But—but do you know what will happen if . . .”

But the man had already turned to leave.

“I’d love to stay and chat, my friend, but I have bigger fish to fry.”

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and turned to the door. His thumbs jutted from his pockets at an odd angle. The man stopped and pivoted as if he had forgotten to say goodbye. With a twitch of his mangled thumbs, a bullet emerged from the barrel of his concealed pistol. The round danced through an assortment of aquatic habitats like a bull in an aquarium. A vortex of glass and artificial seawater trailed the projectile, echoed by a series of shrieks and rumbles.

In the placid eye of the squid, the bullet was reflected as little more than a ripple, a silvery minnow cutting the water. It entered van der Chôclet’s belly, parting the fibers of his tough woolen waistcoat as though they had never existed, as though van der Chôclet were naked, as though bullets just belonged in the

bellies of Belgian ex-pat volunteer docents. It swam unerringly through a school of angelfish, in one side of a manta ray and out the other, and nestled itself in van der Chôclet's lower intestine. A ribbon of blood leaked out into the tank.

So this is what it is like to die, thought van der Chôclet. *It really, really hurts.*

The wall of the tank collapsed an instant after the bullet entered van der Chôclet's abdomen. Monsieur Bublés rolled his giant eye slightly—in his iris, the reflected figure of the bleeding man was swept out into the corridor on a wave of brine and seaweed.

Van der Chôclet flopped desperately on the marble floor. Now that he knew he wouldn't drown, he had only a few moments before he bled to death. It would take all of his strength to complete his final act, and he knew with absolute surety what he had to do. This would be his last attempt—to guard the greatest secret mankind had ever known.

He struggled to a sitting position and began to unbutton his pants.

Angels and Seamen

PROFESSOR RICHARD BROCK rested one elbow on the podium. Lazily, he cracked his knuckles and then cupped his cleft chin in the palm of his hand. His finger muscles rippled.

“Ladies and gentlemen—I mean, madames et monsieurs,” he said, and smiled. His teeth were of the blinding whiteness that accompanies only the purest of genius. “I know some of the arguments I’ve presented this evening seem—well, audacious. No one has ever dared to approach the discipline of ichthyology from such a—can I say this—yes, breathtaking—perspective.”

He smiled again, and at least one madame in the front few rows of the audience pressed a delicate hand to her bosom in a demi-swoon. This Brock took as a cue to adjust his microphone upwards, a sign of disappointment that he had not evoked similar responses at the mezzanine level. Even at maximum height, the amplification device was far from reaching the tower-

ing professor's chiseled jaw line. He hunched over it and resumed speaking.

"Breathtaking, lofty—however you'd like to put it—" Brock winked—"and it's true, as you know, that I am very tall—but what's even more impressive than my height," he continued, "is the evolutionary legacy of the subject of our conversation tonight.

"The giant squid, madames et monsieurs, is perhaps the most mysterious and intriguing denizen of the sea. It's also the living bearer of one of biology's—nay humanity's—greatest secrets."

A pair of women's panties slowly fluttered onto the stage as Brock paused, savoring the moment. He flexed a bicep the way less extraordinarily athletic people might blink. The action forced him upright behind his podium, revealing the scholar's true stature for the first time all evening. In fact, the lectern hardly reached above his waistline. His fly was down, and it looked good.

"The closest relative of the giant squid is . . ." Brock let his flinty eye meet the gaze of one particularly alluring femme in the third row as his voice became suddenly grave. ". . . MAN."

Brock leapt from the stage and bounded through the lecture hall. He jumped high to slap the light fixture overhead before departing through the rear exit. Thunderous applause slipped through the door as it swung shut behind him—borne through as if on a autumn breeze, a whispered *He's good . . . so good* reached Brock's manly eardrum. He nodded, satisfied, and blew imaginary smoke from the barrel of the gun he had formed with the thumb and index finger of his right hand.

At that moment a young boy, still panting from his dash down the aisle, approached him from behind.

“Mr. Brock! Mr. Brock! Can I have your autograph?” He held out a copy of Brock’s most recent book, *Squid↔Man: A Revolutionary New Discovery from the World’s Greatest Academic*.

“Sure thing, kid.” He drew a fountain pen from his breast pocket and inscribed “That’s PROFESSOR Brock, asshole,” on the cover of the book. He patted the boy on the head and continued on his way, loudly humming a song he had composed earlier that day. His reverie was soon interrupted, however—a pair of stern police officers blocked his path.

Brock shrugged and attempted to push past them, but he found them curiously unwilling to give way to even the firmest masculine shove.

He stepped back to re-evaluate the situation. The officers’ name tags read Booker and Jefferson.

“Professor Richard Brock?” asked Booker. “We need you to come with us.”

“Sorry, guys—no more autographs. I’ve got some honey waiting for me backstage.” Brock turned to leave. His muscles pulsated with impatience.

“This is very important.” Jefferson grasped Brock’s arm, which, by now, was bulging to the point that it was stretching the seams of his shirt sleeve.

“We are not here for autographs. This is in regards to Flem van der Chôclet,” explained Booker.

Brock raised his eyebrows. “What? Flembone?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“You mean the Flemster?”

“Yes. The Flem van der Chôclet who worked as a volunteer docent. At the *Jardin des Poissons*.”

“Flemstix?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“He’s not in trouble, is he?”

“You might say so.” Booker paused, as though deciding how to break the news in a way most likely to prevent a pummeling.

“Much like Alyona Ivanovna, the despicable pawnbroker in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, he has been slain for standing in the way of a power far greater than himself. By this time, we can be assured, the assailant surely has become overwhelmed with guilt, fear, and bouts of madness,” Jefferson interrupted.

Brock stared uncomfortably at his feet.

“Excuse my friend here,” Booker said. “He’s been working his way through CliffNotes.”

“I’m at K now,” clarified Jefferson. “As in *King Lear*.”

“Nerd,” Brock scoffed. “Fine, let’s go.” Then he hesitated. “But first we need to make a quick stop backstage.”

Brock led the police officers through the hall. They made an interesting pair, he thought. Early thirties, both of them. He could see himself having a beer with Booker. Jefferson, though, seemed nervous. Twitchy, even. Lacking confidence. Stupid haircut.

As Brock opened the door leading to the backstage area and strode through, his right foot slid forward as he planted on an unexpected puddle of viscous, sticky liquid. He nearly tumbled to the floor, but managed to deftly maneuver his limbs into the proper position to adjust his balance and prevent an embarrassing fall. His muscles fired in perfect sequence, a finely-tuned physical concerto.

“Son of a bitch!” he barked. “Someone spilled my honey.”

Brock motioned to the officers, and the three of them headed toward the bustling city street outside.



Several minutes later, Brock stared out the window of the squad car while the two officers sat next to him in the backseat and spoke quietly. To himself, he named the make, model, and year of each passing vehicle. He also noted which of the cars he could deadlift.

“Dr. Brock, before we reach our destination, we must prepare you for what you will see there,” said Booker.

“Very well,” Brock replied. The seatbelt was tight across his torso. It rubbed against the linen of his shirt, and he shifted uncomfortably as he felt the naked skin begin to chafe where he had shorn it clean a few days before.

“Mr. van der Chôclet has been found in a—how should I say this?—rather compromising position. It is difficult to describe. But I thought I should say something—in case you are shocked when you see him.”

“Nonsense.” Brock dismissed the caution with a wave of his hand. He adjusted his gaze from the road to the surrounding city. After twenty minutes in the car, he had already begun to piece together the case, and was confident that he’d be back at the hotel for an early dinner.

“What is that building?” he asked as he pointed to an imposing stone structure ahead of them. Police officers were clustered at its entrance.

“That is the auxiliary warehouse for the aquarium,” Booker replied. “We have closed it off for the time being.”

“And that one?” Brock indicated another building, further up the road from the warehouse and across the street.

“A local bank. Tellers reported seeing a suspicious-looking individual there immediately before the . . . incident.” The officers glanced at each other and shuddered, each of them picturing the dreadful crime scene. Brock used a pair of pencils as drumsticks, pounding out a beat on his lap and ending with an imaginary cymbal crash on Officer Jefferson’s hat.

“It is time, Dr. Brock,” explained Booker. “There is little more we can explain; it is best for you to simply see for yourself.” He motioned with his head at the car door.

“Excellent,” said Brock. “Now who’s going to drive?”

Chôclet McFleury

JACQUELINE-MICHELLE FLEURY reflected on the utter inefficacy of Officers Booker and Jefferson as the doors of the squad car opened and the two men in question stepped out into the parking lot. A third man walked between them. He was a good six inches taller than either, and his blonde hair reflected even the paltry light from the streetlamps, casting a polished glow. It seemed almost as if he were wearing a golden helmet.

This must be the professor, she thought. And her eyes were drawn from his hair-helmet down to his shoulders, wide and strong within his dark blazer—worn but classy, patched with leather at the elbows—and down to his legs. He was wearing a pair of jeans and a slight acid wash across his thighs emphasized their flabbergasting muscular tautness. Was his fly open? She squinted from on high into the mysterious shadow at his crotch.

Jacqueline-Michelle blinked. She pushed herself away from the window. The men approached the building, and she hurried down to meet them.

The entrance hall of the aquarium echoed with Brock's footsteps—they were surprisingly thunderous, Jacqueline-Michelle noted, for a person wearing tasseled loafers. The three men approached from the street, and Jacqueline-Michelle attempted to assume her all-business stance—her right foot slightly forward, her arms crossed over her breasts. This was fortunate, because as Brock approached her nipples immediately hardened.

“They're steel-toed,” said Brock.

“My name is—pardon me, what?”

“My loafers. They're steel-toed.” He executed a tiny but exceedingly masculine box-step, ending with a swift tap to the granite floor with his right foot. The stone cracked. “Well, that's not entirely honest. Actually, they're completely made of steel.”

Jacqueline-Michelle's eyes widened.

“You were thinking about my shoes, weren't you?” Brock said, and smiled. “I may be an academic, but I also find time to kick a little ass.”

“Well, yes, Professor. Yes, I was. But—my name is Jacqueline-Michelle Fleury. I am an agent for Interpol.” She gestured toward the badge clipped to her blouse.

“Dick Brock.” He stepped closer and flicked the badge with his finger, sending a shiver of lust and irritation through Jacqueline-Michelle. “I am the galaxy's leading ichthyologist. Nice to meet you, Police Lady Jackie. These kind gentlemen inform me you would like to talk to me about the Flemster?”

“Flem van Der Chôclet, yes,” she said. “But before we talk, I think I should take you to see him.”

“Oh, sure,” said Brock.

“I hope you men have not eaten recently,” said Jacqueline-Michelle. She motioned for Brock to follow her down the corridor.



“Here,” Jacqueline-Michelle said. “He was naked when we found him, of course, but for his dignity we have given him a piece of clothing.”

Flem van Der Chôclet was wearing a pair of children’s swim trunks, their thin aqua fabric strained to the bursting point across his crotch and thighs. Blood and salt water seeped through a pattern of starfish and dolphins wearing sunglasses. Shaved into the hair on his leg was a deep, mysterious symbol, vaguely ichthyous.

“Holy crap,” said Brock, and doubled over.

Jacqueline-Michelle was at his side. She laid a dainty, comforting hand on his shoulder. “Professor? I know this is a lot to take in all at once.”

Brock lifted his head. His rough-stubbled cheeks were a deep red and streaked by a single tear. He seemed to be straining to control himself, but all of a sudden a whoop escaped from his throat.

“Poor old Flem!”

“Professor—”

Brock’s laughter echoed off the glass cases of the aquarium. “I thought you were bringing me here to show me that the Flemster was a little perv. I mean, he did some sick things in school, but this—the little boy pants—” he gasped for breath. “Where did they come from?”

“The gift store.”

“Bull crap,” said Brock. “And you expect me to believe that a dainty thing like you wrangled this pair of nut-smushers onto that sack of Dutch?”

“Mr. Brock,” said Jacqueline-Michelle, “I am capable of many things that you would not expect.”

“Is that a promise?” said Brock. He made a ring of his left thumb and index finger and thrust his right index finger in and out of it.

Jacqueline-Michelle covered her dainty lips with her dainty hand. Daintily, she said, “Mr. Brock, this is not America. This is not appropriate. I am no free-swinging American lady.”

“This is what I always do when I’m thinking, Jackie-Mickey.” Brock scratched his head. “And it would be great if you could get me a coffee. I’ve seen that symbol before—it’ll just take a little thinking until I can remember where.”

Conspira-sea Theory

BROCK STOOD PENSIVELY over the body of Flem van der Chôclet and stroked his chin with his left hand. His right hand wandered over to the luscious backside of his dainty French companion, and his fingers wiggled in anticipation as he went in for the score. Not twenty seconds after it had nestled comfortably on the cheek did she slap it away. Brock sighed as his hand recoiled, unsure of where to go next. It settled for inside the front of his pants.

Officer Jefferson held up in front of him a toy fish from the gift shop. He cleared his throat and began to speak. “Alas, poor Flem! I knew him, Booker. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times. And now —”

“Anyway, here’s the body,” said Officer Booker. “We found him like this, pants around the ankles. It seems that —”

“— how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kiss’d

I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your —”

His soliloquy ended in a squeal as Brock swooped in to deliver a devastating wedgie.

“How d’you like that, William Shatner?” Brock shouted, bobbing his head in triumph.

“Enough of this, gentlemen.” Jacqueline-Michelle broke the silence, as the rest of the group had been milling about awkwardly for several minutes. “I’ve examined the body, and I’ve developed what I believe to be an accurate description of what must have happened here. I call it my Five-Pronged Hypothesis. Now, as the name suggests, there are five crucial elements to keep in mind. They are: Death, Dionysus, Defiance, Deuteronomy, and Dante.

“Upon first glance, you immediately notice the victim’s clasped hands. Even in the face of death, poor van der Chôclet struggled to send us a message from the cusp of his ultimate demise. He worked furiously to speak to us - we only have to listen.

“A flamboyant hedonist, Flem was a true lover of the finer things in life. A wine-lover and collector of cheeses, Flem was certainly no stranger to the Greek god of merriment. On many a night, Flem was known to slumber in his chamber in the aquarium with a wheel of Brie clutched in his fingers.”

Booker and Jefferson listened intently, while Brock slowly wandered away toward the pufferfish exhibit. The ichthyologist chuckled as he imagined squeezing a pufferfish until it popped.

“I quote now from page 183 of Flem’s diary. According to our on-scene investigators, this entry was written just two hours before he died. ‘Dear Diary, D

was really mean to me today. I don't like mean people, but what I do like is a generous tumbler of Chambord in my hand as I feed the fishies.' End quote. Who is this D? Who else was mean to our friend here? This D is the centerpiece; the enigma at the heart of our quest.

"That brings me to the third prong: defiance."

Tourist pamphlets fluttered down from above, as Brock attempted to lift the mahogany information desk on the second floor.

Jacqueline-Michelle scolded him, "Dr. Brock, I beg you, if you could just give me a moment of your time."

Brock yelled as if atop a mountain, "Sorry, babe," and came to a calm. He began to think of his favorite kind of sandwich.

Ham.

"As I was saying, defiance. Who defied whom? The answer, as any good psychoanalyst will tell you, lies in the depth of the human mind. Our psyche has two opposing forces: the part that wishes to submit to societal norms and the part that wishes to rebel. In most people, the two forces remain dormant in a quiet equilibrium. But, in many — often the most remarkable — people, that balance is easily upset.

"Flem belonged to many trade organizations. But few were as defiant as United Plumbers 73. You see, Flem originally flirted with the aquarium community as an on-again, off-again plumber. Only after decades of service did he rise to the heights of one of the greatest docents the world has ever seen. United Plumbers 73 may not seem like a defiant organization to the outsider, but to plumbing aficionados they are better known as 'Le Fou Neuf' — "The Crazy Nine." A mis-

nomer actually, as they are ten in number, but in their own way, they are indeed quite crazy. It is in these great men that the quiet beast of defiance stamped out of control. Of course, from defiance grows greatness.

“You may wonder how these all these pieces fit together, but you need look no further than the pattern shaved into the back of his leg. By removing his pants, he was speaking not just as Flem van der Chôclet, but as the Lord himself. In its Hebrew, the book of Deuteronomy contains what many believe is an encrypted message.”

Brock interrupted, “Hey guys, check this out!”

He coiled his 6’4” frame and leaped, grabbing the rim of a ventilation duct, far out of the reach of 98% of the French population. He then began a pull-up, entering the flimsy duct that popped and echoed as he struggled to pull his arms past his head.

Jefferson yelled, “Dr., do you need any help?”

Brock’s voiced boomed through the climate control system, “I think I found a clue.”

Jacqueline-Michelle said, “Dr. Brock, I am going to need to simply continue. The encrypted message in Deuteronomy of course requires a key, and that astute observation brings me to my grand unified conclusion ...”

Brock gracefully leaped down to the first floor, landing with one foot on either side of Flem’s body. He removed the crumpled piece of paper from between his muscular teeth, and he waved it like a flag: the American Flag. “Check it, Bert, Ernie, and Nipples.”

Jacqueline-Michelle looked down at herself self-consciously and tugged her overcoat across her chest.

“I found a map.”

“Damn, he’s good,” whispered Jefferson.

“So good,” Booker whispered back. He turned back to the ichthyologist. “It looks like there’s a note at the top, Dr. Brock.”

Jacqueline-Michelle took the note from his hands.

She read aloud, “ ‘My Dear Dr. Brock, I knew only you could be trusted with information this important, so in my dying moments I took great pains to hide it in a place only you could reach. Do not wonder at the implausibility of a dying man reaching an out-of-reach duct - rather, focus on the pathos of the situation. It seems I write in my last minutes, and thus it is ever more necessary that you preserve not only my life’s work but a secret so vital to our civilization that the longevity of our species demands that it be protected. On this map, I have labeled what will be the first step of a long and arduous journey. I regret, some secrets escape even Flem, but I can assure you these directions will bear the first fruit of discovery. There is more than meets the eye in this metropolis to which you shall journey, and hence, from one cheese lover to another, use your nose.’ ”

Correction, Brock thought. *Ham and cheese.*

“This is perfect!” exclaimed Jacqueline-Michelle. “Exactly as I thought. As the great poet Dante once wrote - ”

“Shove it,” said Brock.

And so they left Paris for the City of Lights: St. Louis, MO.

Digital Force-less

ELSEWHERE IN PARIS, a thin trail of blood on the sidewalk traced a neat path to a badly mangled thumb. The thumb was at the end of an arm, which was currently positioned in order to provide the owner of these body parts with a clearer view of his wound. Upon closer inspection, Chum Salmons discovered that nearly half of his thumbnail had broken off.

Son of a bitch! he thought. *It must've gotten caught on that chain link fence I passed a few minutes ago. Second damn time this month.*

He cursed to himself again, and stuck his bloody thumb in his mouth, bending his arm in an uncomfortable fashion in order to do so. His paced slowed considerably as he struggled to keep pumping his underdeveloped legs. He felt his lower body, unaccustomed to supporting his own weight without the aid of a substantial buoyant force, screaming at him to find a lake, a river, anything he could dive into to keep his strength from giving out. His thumb continued to throb. But he knew he had to go on.

Sirens blared in the distance, and Chum imagined that his window of escape was closing rapidly. He ran

faster, forgetting momentarily about his thumb. His left arm curled in a C-shape beside his torso, clenched tight around the scuba helmet he carried. The oxygen tank on his back bounced in a syncopated rhythm with his irregular, palsied gait. At this moment, it didn't seem that he was going to make it. Not with his scuba gear. Not with his bleeding thumb. And especially not with his inexperience with land-based bipedal locomotion.

Flem van der Chôclet was dead. Chum had done what he had been sent here to do. But somehow this didn't make him feel any better. In fact, he continued to feel worse with every passing moment, as his body threatened to explode as a result of the paltry force of standard atmospheric pressure, to which he had scarcely been exposed since early childhood.

Aw, crap!

Chum felt as if his ribcage was about to leap out through his chest.

Seriously, WHAT THE HELL.

And it wasn't just his ribcage, either. Every part of his body seemed just a second away from bursting out of its weakening container. Organs, eyeballs, veins and arteries, everything; he didn't think he could keep it together much longer.



An orphan, Chum Salmons had been tossed onto the streets of Bruges by his parents, whose shame at birthing a child with unopposable thumbs was simply too much for them to bear. He spent the first years of his life in a discarded burlap sack, occasionally venturing outside to find food. This was easier said than

done, as he was generally unable to grasp any scraps of nourishment that he might have found on the street. In order to eat, he had to mash his face along the pavement like a catfish. A scared, lonely, hungry, abandoned catfish.

Finally, salvation came, albeit from a most unlikely source. Chum was struggling to pick up a dime off the sidewalk with his tongue when a shadow blotted out the sun above him. He looked up to see a group of roughly ten robed figures, their faces and bodies entirely obscured. The figures' robes made a strange sound as they moved — a soft squeaking noise, as if they were made from rubber. Chum could just barely make out the sloshing of water and the outline of an upside-down glass bowl underneath each black hood. Wordlessly, they surrounded him and led him away.

Now, nearly thirty years later, Chum felt a certain loyalty to these people who had become his only family, and every chance he had he displayed his gratitude. But he was beginning to wonder, did he really need to constantly perform demeaning, menial tasks just to fit in? Did he really need to constantly risk asphyxiation and/or serious internal organ damage in the process? Did he really need to play the most dangerous part in the most dangerous game of all: the game of life?



Oh thank God.

After what seemed like an eternity of running, Chum finally arrived at his destination. With a barely perceptible flick of the wrist, he tossed his scuba helmet onto his nearly imploding head. He ran halfway across a bridge and, with nary a glance backward, he

swooped into the waiting river below like a carp in springtime.

Chum began to swim. He swam through Paris and through the French countryside. He swam out into the Pacific Ocean and made a left. He swam and he swam. Many days later, he looked below and, on the ocean floor, saw the dim lights and felt the tell-tale clockwise swirling currents of what had been his home for so many years. He checked his air supply and began his descent. But he had already decided he wouldn't be staying long.

Arch Enemy

BEADS OF DIRTY SWEAT danced down the smooth, shiny contours of Richard Brock's chest as he did upside down sit-ups in the coat closet of the St. Louis hotel room. "Seven. Eight," Brock counted with each muscular burst.

The hotel door flew open violently, slamming into Brock mid-thrust. He took the hit like the man he was, and let out nary a whimper. Jacqueline-Michelle entered the room in a fury. "Well, the man at the front desk says there are no other rooms available," she said.

Brock shrugged and did another sit-up. "Five hundred and nine."

"Dr. Brock, you have been up here for ten minutes."

"Yeah, so?"

"You have managed to do five hundred sit-ups in the closet while I was downstairs struggling to fix our room arrangements?"

"Calm down, Frenchy, sometimes I add a couple hundred to the count. It gets me pumped."

"I need you to listen to me. They are not allowing me to change our room."

“What’s wrong with it? It’s not big enough?”

“Dr. Brock, would you please get down from there? I was downstairs because you requested a room with a single twin bed and a fully stocked mini bar.”

“Don’t get your panties tied up in a French braid, Jackie-Monassis. We’re on a secret mission, so I figured we’d go undercover together in more ways than one.” Brock high-fived himself.

Jacqueline-Michelle prepared to scold Brock, although she could not help but take notice of his rock-hard, dripping physique as he hung there, eyes squinted.

“Dr. Brock, I am an agent of Interpol; you are a Professor of Ichthyology. You are not undercover. In fact, I am not undercover. This is ridiculous and presumptuous —”

“Come on, CrackerJackie With Caramel On Top, it’s just a bed, and it’ll happen eventually anyway.”

“Dr. Brock, my name is Jacqueline-Michelle, or, if you’d prefer, Mademoiselle Fleury. I think it would be appropriate if you slept on the floor or in the mini bar or wherever else you’d like tonight. Or I can ask that Interpol make separate arrangements, but if you are going to tag along with me in the course of —”

Brock gracefully rolled from the hanging position. “Whoa there, Michelle. Tag along with *you*? You just wait there one minute, sugar-rounds. In case you forgot, the docent left the map for me. Flem van der Chôclet was a man who knew many secrets, and I guarantee a high-profile docent like Chôclet does not die unless someone is trying to hide a very, very big secret. I promise this is much bigger than you, and, honey, if you think you can unravel this mystery without me, then you can go take your cute little French

ass and play spy lady in Paris.”

Jaqueline-Michelle slapped Brock’s cheek.

“I’ll have the concierge bring you a bed roll,” she said sharply. “Now, we will be meeting with my contact in one hour. I recommend you shower.” This silenced Brock, who did not want to reveal his preference for baths.



Brock’s stride covered more than double that of Jacqueline-Michelle, and her chest heaved from the effort of keeping up. “Come on, Jackie-Mic, we’re going to be late,” Brock said.

“Perhaps that would not be an issue,” she replied, sucking wind, “if you had prepared to depart a bit faster.” She lunged forward and caught his arm. “Dr. Brock, the man we are meeting, Jeffery Hudson, is one of the top American cartographic historians. We are very fortunate that he was in town to meet with us. I would appreciate it if you kept on your best behavior in our meeting, and whatever you do don’t call him—”

“Geekwad. Affirmative, Busty, and breathe easy. I just think the guy sounds like a major league captain of dork patrol.” Brock made fake glasses over his real glasses.

“Please, Dr. Brock. And if we could only hail a cab—”

“Okay, you know what, Little Miss I-Walk-So-Slow-I-May-As-Well-Be-A-Dirty-Cripple? I’ll get us there.” He grabbed Jacqueline-Michelle and arranged her into a seaman’s carry. “Hold tight,” he said, motioning to one of his own sugar-rounds. Jacqueline-Michelle made a sound as if she were going to protest,

then clung to his iron breast as if she were but a wee bébé. Richard Brock broke into a run. A manly run. Jacqueline-Michelle resisted the urge to pluck one of his hairs and smuggle it into her purse.

They arrived at the restaurant Hudson had recommended for the meeting. It was a small pub called "Sailor's Cove" located on the exterior of a riverboat casino permanently docked on the Mississippi. A garish logo was plastered to the menus, the signs, and the windows: a sailor in a yellow poncho hugging a pair of fish.

Jacqueline-Michelle spoke to the hostess. "We're here to meet a Jeffery Hudson."

The hostess looked up from the waiting desk; she was twirling her hair with her right index finger. "Mr. Hudson is seated in the back under the Kayak."

As they walked in, a burly man in a sleeveless Coast Guard t-shirt stood up and greeted them. His neck reminded Jacqueline-Michelle of a tree trunk. He grinned as he walked past her. "Dr. Richard Brock. It is a goddamned pleasure to meet you."

His handshake was firm and his hands like beefy mittens. Richard Brock liked him immediately. "You must be Jeff."

Hudson patted Brock's shoulder, and Brock reciprocated.

"Dr. Brock, I've been a longtime reader of your work. I brought a copy of *Of Squid and Men*, if you don't mind autographing it."

He held out the copy of the book. Brock whipped out his autograph marker and scrawled *DICK B.* across the pen-and-ink diagram of a tentacled man on the cover.

“Thanks, Dr. Brock,” said Hudson.

“Call me Dick.”

“I’d be honored. Why don’t you grab a seat, and we’ll talk about the map you’ve got.” He took one chair at the table. Brock took the other.

Jacqueline-Michelle cleared her throat.

“You feel like brewskis?” Hudson asked Brock.

Jacqueline-Michelle interrupted, “Excuse me, but Dr. Brock, there’s nowhere for me to—”

“Hell yeah,” said Hudson, “brewskis and —”

“Wings!” said Brock, and smacked the table with his fist.

“Brock!” said Jacqueline-Michelle.

“Where is the waitress?” said Brock. “Where did she go, that cute one, with the wiggly little butt? Now there’s a fish that wants the hook—”

“BROCK!”

“What the shit,” said Brock, turning to Jacqueline-Michelle, “are you honking about?”

Jacqueline-Michelle flushed. She clenched her fists. “Mr. Hudson,” she said, trying to ignore the fact that she was still standing. “Thank you for agreeing to meet with us on such short notice.”

“Are you Agent Fleury?”

“Yes. Jacqueline-Michelle Fleury, pleasure to meet you.”

“Not every day Interpol calls me up, Miss Fleury.”

“Well, I must say, this seems to be a special case. But before we get started, would you mind if we try to find an extra chair?”

“You should stand,” said Brock. “It’ll help you get rid of that little tummy of yours.”

Jacqueline-Michelle stiffened. She drew in her

breath, but before she could speak Brock reached into his coat pocket and he pulled out the map that van der Chôclet had left for him during his last night alive. He unrolled the map on the table in front of Hudson. The cartographer's thick eyebrows rose, and his eyes widened in fascination. He pulled a linty magnifier from his pocket.

Hudson explained, "Well, what I'd normally tell you is that this map is from Hellenistic Greece, probably late 3rd century B.C. Judging by the texture of the papyrus, I'd say the pulp is from Northern Crete. And that the writer was raised in Attica, judging by the dialect. And that the map was later modified by the same man with his non-dominant hand in multiple places. And it mentions the city of Atlantis." He paused. "Ordinarily, that's what I would tell you."

"Ordinarily?" asked Jacqueline-Michelle.

"Miss Fleury, this is a map of St. Louis, Missouri. And it appears to have been made two thousand years ago."

Jacqueline-Michelle said, "Mon. Dieu."

The waiter came to the table, and said, "Hi there, mateys! Welcome to Sailor's Cove."

"Send back the girl," said Brock.

"My sister just went on break," said the waiter, and frowned. He continued in a decidedly less jovial tone. "Our special tonight is the Seafarer's Steak and Captain Darrell's Buffalo Wings."

Hudson and Brock grinned at each other.

"First, can I get you something to drink?"

"We're ready to order," Hudson said, "I think I can speak for us all that we'd like to start with a round of wings and a pitcher of Bud Light."

Brock and Hudson slammed their fists together.

“Actually, waiter, could you excuse us for a moment?” Jacqueline-Michelle said.

“Sure, I’ll be right back with your beer.”

Jacqueline-Michelle continued, “So, how do you know it is a map of St. Louis? Couldn’t it be coincidental? Maybe it just looks like the city?”

“No.” He pointed his finger at the map. “You see right there? The weird writing? That’s Greek. It says—and this is a literal translation, of course—”Land That is a Particularly Special Favorite of the Saint Who is Named Louis.”

Jacqueline-Michelle looked skeptical. She began, “That doesn’t make any—”

Brock said, “Exactly. Now, van der Chôclet once spoke of a pathway to Atlantis. I’d bet my Heisman that this map will lead us to the entrance gate.”

“It seems to indicate what it calls the Atlantis triangle, and instructions for passing through it.” He studied the map in silence for a moment. “And I’d bet *my* Heisman”—here he and Brock bashed their palms together in a brotherly high-five—“that the gate is relatively nearby.”

“How nearby?” asked Jacqueline-Michelle.

“Let’s just say you should bring your water wings.”

“I’m sorry; I don’t quite know what the water wings are.”

“Let’s just say you should bring your AquaNoodle.”

“Pardon?”

“Let’s just say you should be ready to get wet.”

“I’m still not following you.”

“Let’s just say the map explicitly indicates a se-

cret entrance beneath the Mississippi River. This is the so-called Atlantic Triangle. And it's right next to the Gateway Arch, the only memorable landmark in downtown St. Louis. You probably flew past it when you landed."

"Oh." Jacqueline-Michelle said, "I see now. I guess we should all get ready to douche, yes?"

"No time, baby," said Brock. "We're going swimming."



The sun had set over downtown St. Louis, and Jacqueline-Michelle, Brock, and Hudson were now all dressed in wet suits. It had taken Brock and Hudson nearly an hour to don them, as they were both now very visibly drunk.

Jacqueline-Michelle instructed, "Now, I've already attached the B.C. vest and regulators to your SCUBA tank, so you just need to strap it on like a backpack. I recommend putting on the weight belts first. This GPS device is waterproof, but the radio waves won't penetrate the water, so we're going to have to use old fashioned dead reckoning from this point."

Brock and Hudson were out of earshot, resting on the dock. They had been having a push-up contest, which came to a halt when Brock skipped two thousand counts in his rep total.

"Three thousand and forty-one," he grunted.

"Fuck no!" grunted Hudson.

Jacqueline-Michelle stomped over and gave them their scuba gear, and they clumsily attempted to support the weight of the equipment without toppling into

the Mississippi. According to the map, the Atlantis Triangle lay in the depths below.

“Hey, Jeff, come on,” Brock said, “let’s go. Come on.”

“Shut up, man. You look like a horse,” Hudson said, “with your tank.”

“Gentlemen, please, before another barge comes,” Jacqueline-Michelle said.

They both rolled their eyes and heads. Hudson pantomimed a whip but made the sound of an explosion.

“Follow me,” Jacqueline-Michelle commanded, and then she jumped into the cold, turbid water.

The two men stumbled to the edge of the dock.

“All right,” Hudson said, “we jump on the count of three. One, two . . .”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait!” Brock yelled. “Let’s do the count to five.”

“Good idea. Being safe.”

“One, two, three . . .”

Suddenly, a chunk of concrete on the commercial boat dock exploded next to them. A high-powered rifle had been fired from a distance.

Both men fell over backwards. They were screaming and grabbing each other. Then they started laughing.

“What was that?” Hudson said.

“Don’t worry,” suggested Brock. “I think it was just a dream.”

Two more shots, missing on either side of them.

“No, never mind. Get in the water. Let’s go! Come on, man.” Brock yelled.

Brock tried to arrange himself so he could flip

over backwards into the water, as he recalled that that was the most professional entrance for a diver. As he arranged his flippers before the dive, Hudson was just standing up.

“Man, this stuff is like, so ... heavy.” Hudson said.

“I’m ... I’m getting in, Jeff. Come on. You’re so slow!” Brock’s limp body flipped into the water backwards. Moments later, he bobbed back up. Jacqueline-Michelle was with him.

She removed the regulator from her mouth. “What is taking you two so long?”

Brock tried to talk with the regulator in his mouth. “What?”

Hudson started to run to the edge of the dock, but just as he leaped, the distant shooter shot again, puncturing Hudson’s tank. The tank exploded, sending a shock wave across the water. As the cloud of condensation cleared, only Hudson’s legs remained. A light rain of intestine and ancient papyrus began to fall.

”*Merde!*” Jacqueline-Michelle hissed. “Come on, Brock! Underwater! NOW!”

They ducked their hands and began to strive downwards. As they descended, bullets whizzed by them like angry water-loving people-hating bees.

The current was strong, and they struggled to reach the bottom. Jacqueline-Michelle touched down first, her hand sinking into the silt. She felt in the muck. There was something hard, there, and colder than the surrounding water. As Brock drew closer, the current from his mighty flippers washed away a good deal of the mud.

It was a door. Engraved on its iron surface was

the figure of a man drawn inside a circle. Just below it was a triangle circumscribed within an alpha. Jacqueline-Michelle shrugged, but Brock understood. He reared back to punch the triangle, but the resistance of the water deadened the force of the blow to a light tap. Brock increased the pressure on the triangle, and, to Jacqueline-Michelle's surprise, it sank into the stone panel and the whole wall began to shake.

Suddenly, they were sucked up against the stone panel, as water rapidly gushed past around the edges. One edge then angled in by 45 degrees, and the two divers were sucked inside. It was there they discovered the ancient underwater canal that would lead them along the Mississippi to a destination unknown.

It became immediately apparent that van der Chôlet had somehow known of a great historical secret. But little did they know, they were drifting peacefully towards unimaginable danger.

Mississeptic

JACQUELINE-MICHELLE'S EYES snapped open behind her scuba mask. Her head throbbed. She coughed, and a cloud of bubbles emerged from her mouthpiece. She tried to calm herself—if she panicked down here, she would surely drown. Her lungs would slowly implode and she would die as brine began to infiltrate her alveolar sacs. In short, she would be pickled. She had seen it before, in her many other investigations—the shining crust of salt around a cadaver's bronchial tubes that doctors called the Sparkly Death.

She must have smashed her head on something, she thought, desperately trying to get her bearings. She must have lost consciousness for a minute, or even several minutes. Where was she? And where was Brock?

Jacqueline-Michelle looked around her. She appeared to be in an enormous cavern, drifting downward in a circular current about a hundred yards from its walls. She moved her legs, stroking the water cautiously, but the current was surprisingly strong, and she continued to swirl along in what seemed to be a

clockwise direction. She didn't want to make such a vulgar analogy, but in the back of her mind Jacqueline-Michelle thought that the cavern resembled nothing so much as a giant submarine toilet bowl.

Suddenly, an enormous fish—Jacqueline Michelle identified it immediately as a razorface tuna by the crosshatching of spines near its mouth and eyes—swam across the current directly in front of her. She started in terror. This was one of the most endangered—and deadliest—fish in the world. She watched it swim to the other side of the cavern; she hardly dared move a muscle.

If it chose, that fish could rub its face against her until she was grated to pieces. But if such a large creature was swimming around down here, expending a considerable amount of its limited energy supplies on navigating the currents, that meant that there was a food source nearby, smaller fish, an ecosystem in what appeared to be a completely barren and anomalous submarine pocket in the ocean's bedrock. And an ecosystem meant sunlight—and sunlight meant a way out of here.

She looked up. Sure enough, she could see the surface—a few rays filtered down through a blanket of algae. And bobbing up there was a limp figure, its fantastic musculature outlined by the wetsuit even at this distance.

Jacqueline-Michelle cried, "Brock!" The sound emerged as another cloud of bubbles, but it was enough to attract the attention of the tuna, which turned its spiny beak toward her and began to swim.

Merde, she thought, and pumped her legs. She had to escape from the current and make it to Brock

before that fish shredded her legs and started chewing on her guts. She knew her wet suit would be about as much protection as a hymen belonging to a dog in heat.

She struggled. She found her flippers could propel her upwards, but only slowly. There was no fighting the current's clockwise flow. Luckily, the current was also slowing the fish. The tuna seemed to know she was easy prey, and it seemed that they did not want to expend any great effort in reaching her.

Even as Jacqueline-Michelle thrashed upwards in an attempt to avoid almost certain death, her hyperintelligent mind worked constantly. What would make such a current in the first place? This was clearly contrary to the laws of hydrodynamics, even taking into account less visible factors like salinity. She peered downward and thought she glimpsed a deep hole in the floor of the cavern. *This must have been where we entered*, she thought.

The next instant a deep boom echoed up from the hole. The current stopped, and all around her a shower of—*No, it cannot be!* she thought—human hands, intestines, and eye balls sank through the water. The tuna turned and began to chew apart a sinewy ankle that had drifted by its flank. As its head moved, Jacqueline-Michelle caught sight of a small metal device embedded in its gills. On the device, a faint red light blinked on and off.

!?!?!?! Jacqueline-Michelle thought. Finally, her mind had shut off. Released from the current, she shot toward the surface, collided with Brock's body, and grabbed him around the waist.

She dragged Brock to the rim of the cavern, push-

ing aside a thick blanket of green slime. As she lifted her mask, the smell was overpowering. She tried to breathe through her nose but as she heaved Brock's body from the water the odor seemed to punch her in the stomach. As she pulled herself out onto the rock next to him, she vomited on his face. Strings of puke and saliva landed in his golden hair.

She lay beside him, gasping. As she looked up, her eyes widened. That was no sunlight she had seen. A bank of high-wattage lamps burned down from the ceiling of what appeared to be yet another cavern. The tuna wasn't here to feed on smaller fish—this was no ecosystem. It was here for scraps. This was a dumping ground for human waste.

Were they still below sea level? Who had built this place, with its nightmarish smell—blood and shit and fishflesh all rolled up into the mother of all stinks? What sort of butchery was conducted down here, and what in the world did it have to do with Flem van der Chôclet?

She lifted herself up and knelt over Brock. An entire lettuce leaf from last night's salad—her dinner, which she had eaten with as much dignity as possible while the men had gorged themselves on chicken wings—covered his eyes and nose. She felt for a pulse, then cursed. She flung the lettuce from his face, muttered a quick prayer and began CPR.

"Whoah," said Brock, his golden lashes fluttering open. "Get the hell off me." He shoved her away, his manly fist bruising her breast through the wet suit.

"I was trying, Professor, to save your life," Jacqueline-Michelle stammered.

"Well, next time use those shock paddles or some-

thing, I don't care," said Brock, standing up and brushing himself off. He shuddered as he discovered a clump of chewed broccoli behind his ear. "But goddamnit, don't put your Frenchie mouth on me. You taste like fishbarf."

Jacqueline-Michelle turned purple with embarrassment. She turned away from him. She remembered, suddenly, the first boy she had tried to kiss—how he had laughed in her face and called her *Petite Madame des Pimples*. Twenty years later, after spending so much money at her dermatologist, she would not stand for that sort of rejection again.

"Well," she said, "well, maybe if it is so disgusting for you to kiss me then next time I will just let you die!"

At that instant a harpoon sank into Brock's chest. He grasped it with one manly fist and tore it free of his wet suit, then staggered and fell forward on his face.

The Dumb Frenchie Code

BROCK AWOKE WITH A START.

“My face!” he screamed in agony, clutching at the gorgeous features that had taken the brunt of his fall. Nose, skin, stainless steel cheekbone implants—everything seemed to be in order.

“Thank God,” he muttered.

It was then that he looked down and noticed the gruesome mess of bandages and torn clothing on his chest. He also noticed that he seemed to be in some sort of makeshift prison cell-cum-hospital room.

“What the fuck is this shit?” he announced, as he sat up and, with a manly swipe of his paw, tore away the dressings from his wounds. Blood seeped from his chest as he thought about how he was going to have to be late for the party L’Institute des Sciences Maritimes was planning in his honor.

“Excuse me, sir?” said a meek voice in the corner.

Brock jolted in surprise, or at least the closest his

highly-conditioned mind could come to such a pedestrian response. He turned a steely gaze to the whimpering owner of the voice, who continued to cower and twitch his thumbs nervously. Nobody said anything for some time, until Brock started looking around for a mirror.

“Dr. Brock, I believe you have been searching for me,” said the meek voice. “My name is Chum Salmons. Sadly, I am responsible for the murder of Flem van der Chôclet.”

“What? Flemmy’s dead? Why was I not informed of this?” Brock demanded. “This is outrageous.”

“But, Dr. Brock, haven’t you been investigating this murder for the past week?” Chum cocked his head.

“Oh, yes, of course.” Brock remembered the boy-pants that had squeezed a dead Flem’s midsection like a tube of Belgian toothpaste. He bleated out a chuckle before stifling himself. “You’re the son of a bitch we’ve been following.”

“Yes, and I have much to tell you about this place and the people that control it.”

Brock rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”

“I work for an organization known as the Order of the Scarlet Mackerel,” began Chum. “Nobody knows for certain how long this organization has existed. But what is known is their mission. What you see around you is not just an undersea city, but rather an industrial canning factory.”

“Great,” said Brock. “Thrilling.”

“Dr. Brock!” said Chum, somewhat taken aback. “Surely you do not understand that we are no ordinary canning factory. There is no fish here—no tuna, no

smelt, no imitation crab.”

“Uh-huh.”

“This factory is not for canning fish.” He paused. “It is for canning HUMAN BEINGS!”

“Oh well, gee. Isn’t that something.” Brock made no attempt to mask his yawn. “How long are you planning on yakking at me before I break you in half and bust out of this place?”

Chum winced. “I must tell you,” he said, “that there is more to this. The occupants of this factory are not men themselves. Nor are they fish. In fact, they are a hybrid of the two—a species long ago forgotten by the surface dwellers. I myself am a human like you, but I was raised by these beings nearly from birth. They are my family. Or at least they were, until several days ago.”

“Ok, here’s the thing,” said Brock. “I don’t give a shit about this crap. What you’re going to do is tell me how to get the hell out of here. I’m hungry, for one, and now I’m also bored.”

“As you wish, Dr. Brock,” sighed Chum. “You must find the fabled Scarlet Mackerel and seize it. Only with the Scarlet Mackerel in your possession will you be able to leave.”

“Fantastic. All right, Simmons, where do I get the Charlotte’s Macaroni or whatever?”

“Down the hall.” Chum slumped his shoulders as Brock hopped out of bed and ran off, his rock-hard bottom exposed through the unfastened rear of his hospital gown.



Brock’s head was still spinning. He wondered

how long he had been out. Confused about his allegiances, he wondered if he was actually supposed to kill that creepy guy with the goofy thumbs. He also wondered where that French chick was, and how nakedly she was kept in their captivity. *Down the hall and to the . . . what was it?* Brock thought.

Brock came to a door marked "Man Feed VIII." It was a rusty iron door, like one might see on a submarine. In fact, the whole corridor felt very *Red October*. Brock was pretty pleased to turn the large metal wheel to open the door. Inside he was surprised by what he saw: a vintage diving suit with tubes running from the back. He would steal it, but it looked far too cumbersome. Also, Jacqueline-Michelle was tied up in a cage in the corner. Her captors had indeed held her in only her underwear. *Nice*, Brock thought.

"Richard! Oh, thank goodness, I never thought I'd be so glad to see you! Where have you been?"

"Fancy seeing you too, Jimmy-Jack. I was just in the room down the hall. Why are you so worked up?"

"What do you mean?" she said frantically, "I've been in this cage for five days."

Brock was confused. He couldn't have been out for *that* long. The longest he ever remembered sleeping was 21 hours, and that was part of a bet.

Brock walked over to the cage. "I just woke up, Jackie. Some guy with retarded thumbs was saying all this crazy shit about fishpeople and a factory . . ."

"Richard, I know all about it. This is the city of Atlantis. These deformed aquatic human beings run a factory where they are slaughtering people like cows. We have to get out of here; I am not even sure why they kept me alive. Whom did you talk to?"

“I told you, this guy with broken thumbs or something.”

“Jesus, Richard. Unopposable thumbs. He has unopposable thumbs. His name is Chum Salmons, and he is one of the most dangerous assassins in the world.”

“He said that he . . .”

“Killed Flem? Yes, Richard, I know. Could you please give me my clothes?”

“How do you know this . . .”

“Richard, I work for Interpol. You don’t think I get folders filled with this information before I leave the office?”

Brock stared, mostly at her chest. “Why didn’t you tell me . . .”

“Doctor Brock: my pants! Please.”



Brock found the key to the cage and explained all that Chum Salmons had told him as Jacqueline-Michelle got dressed. “Have you ever considered modeling, Jackie?” Brock asked.

Jacqueline-Michelle appeared embarrassed, “Doctor Brock, that is hardly an appropriate . . .”

“You should totally look into it. You have a dynamite body, Jackie-Mickey.”

Jacqueline-Michelle looked away. “Dr. Brock, I’m French. We all consider modeling.”

She stepped out of the cage, and added, “Now let’s get out of here.”

Brock locked the door with joy. The sounds of the metal lever locking in place inside the iron walls

made him feel like the day he got his first dump truck toy as a toddler.

“So, it should be one of these doors on the left, I think. What is the mack, Mick?”

“The Scarlet Mackerel is a sacred artifact of the people of Atlantis. I do not know much more than the fact that the Scarlet Mackerel is of extreme importance.”

Brock decided to up the pace. He felt like this was a pretty cool place to run. He grabbed Jacqueline-Michelle’s hand and pulled her along, saying, “I think we might find it at the end of this hallway. Why would Chubby Fingers help us anyway?”

He felt Jacqueline-Michelle trying to slow him down, but he would have none of it. Breathing heavier, she replied, “I do not know, but I think it is safe to assume we should not take the words of Chum Salmons at face value.”

The door at the end of the hallway had the same symbol as the underwater gate in St. Louis. Brock took a moment to think about how cool all this stuff was.

With a loud, metallic creak, the iron door swung open, and slammed to a stop as it hit the internal wall. The sound resonated with a deep echo in the dark, cavernous room beyond. The only audible noise was the distant buzzing of mechanical equipment. Brock searched for an electric light switch, but to no avail. Still holding Jacqueline-Michelle’s hand, even as she occasionally writhed to free it, the two of them continued to venture into the chamber by only the light of the corridor behind them. There seemed to be small blue lights circling in the distance, but Brock figured that

was just stuff in his eyes. As they became enveloped in darkness, Brock had an idea.

“Is anybody here? Hello!” Brock yelled.

Jacqueline-Michelle covered his mouth with her free hand. “What are you doing?” she whispered furiously through her teeth.

With a loud click, the room was illuminated by bright industrial lights a hundred feet above. They stood at the edge a giant glass dome beneath the sea. The circling blue lights were revealed to be angler fish and deep sea creatures outside the dome.

“Oh, sweet!” Brock exclaimed. In his great excitement, he began to run around frantically exploring the cavernous dome.

Jacqueline-Michelle immediately became nervous.

“Richard, please!”

It was then that she looked up towards the top of the dome. The dome was filled with factory equipment, and at the top, presiding over the equipment was

...

“Brock! Come look ... look up.” He was doing pull-ups on a large lever when he heard her frightened gasps.

“Chill your beans, Jumping Jack Fleursh. I’m just ...” and then suddenly, Brock actuated the lever with a powerful rep. The room sprang to life, as the factory equipment initialized.

Brock saw that Jacqueline-Michelle’s face was ghost-white, as she looked towards the ceiling. *Why are women so afraid of machinery?* Brock wondered. He walked over to her, and grabbed her shoulders. “Jackie, are you ...”

“R ... Richard, look,” she stammered, pointing

up.

Brock slowly looked up and saw the most hideous creature he had seen in his lifetime. A giant ball of scaly manflesh, it looked like a half-human, half-pufferfish hybrid. It wore a crown on its head, and had obviously just been roused by the activation of the factory equipment. The two parties made eye contact for what felt like an eternity. Brock grasped Jacqueline-Michelle like a frightened, musclebound child clinging to his mother. The fish creature opened its gaping mouth and let out a bellowing call that sounded most like three tubas engaged in a prolonged, dissonant honk. It's slimy, gilled chin-fat rippled as the obese aquatic monstrosity called its foot soldiers.

The two broke into a sprint. They needed to find the Mackerel, before the fish soldiers found them. Before long, Jacqueline-Michelle slipped on the slimy floor and had the breath knocked out of her. Brock looked back, and Jacqueline-Michelle held out her hand for help. Brock turned back around and continued running.

Brock began to whimper, "One nation, under God, hallowed be thy name . . . Thy kingdom, the United States of America, and to the republic, forgive those who trespass against us . . ."

He looked back as Jacqueline-Michelle returned to her feet, and they both saw a dozen or so slimy fishpeople entering the glass dome from an iron door across the room.

Brock dove, tucked, and rolled behind a large piece of canning equipment. He saw a door marked with the same fish symbol as before. He tried the knob.

"Jackie! Jackie-Mickey!" he yelled. "I can't get

the door open.”

“Stand back, Richard,” she said as she approached the door, pushing his chest away. She reached down, and pulled a pistol from her ankle holster. A single shot shattered the lock mechanism and she kicked open the door. Brock was kind of impressed. He was also slightly aroused. Furthermore, he felt emasculated. But this only made him feel more aroused. In the deep recesses of his mind—and in his temporary internet files—the professor had always exhibited a fondness for dominant women.

Inside the room there was a small tank. It was surrounded by banks of red light bulbs. As they drew closer Brock noticed a small placard affixed to the side of the tank. In neat capital letters it read: THE SCARLET MACKEREL. Beneath it was a polite warning:

Please Don't Tap on the Glass.

The heavy footfalls of the fishpeople behind them echoed ever closer. Jacqueline-Michelle dove into the tank, her gun in her teeth.

The Scarlet Mackerel was not just an artifact, but the most beautiful fish they had ever seen. Jacqueline-Michelle grabbed the fish violently, and swam to the surface. She held the fish above the water like a prize, but when her vision cleared, she saw that Richard Brock was the captive of the fish soldiers.

She held a gun to the head of the fish and stepped from the tank dripping. “That’s the Scarlet Mackerel?” Brock exclaimed. “As a scientist, I can tell you, that is not a mackerel at all, but a herring. It’s a red herring.”

One of the fish soldiers spoke. He sounded like a man with a mouth full of marshmallows. “Please, release the mackerel; it is a sacred symbol of our soci-

ety.”

Another fish man spoke, “She wouldn’t ever do something to harm one of us. The surface people are weak.”

She pointed the gun at the second fish and shot him between his outwardly-turned eyes. He fell to the ground and began to flop. She returned the gun to the head of the red herring.

“Out of the room, all of you,” she said, shooing them back, “and release him.”



In the domed factory, Brock and Jacqueline-Michelle were encircled by the fish people, the king presiding from above. The king spoke with a deep and sloppy voice, “Jacqueline-Michelle Fleury and Richard Brock, our quarrel is not with you. We share a common enemy. Please release the Scarlet Mackerel.”

“Tell me, king fish, why did you have Flem killed?” Brock demanded.

“The docent’s murder was not an act of ours. We are a fishpeople of peace.”

“Isn’t this a factory for the canning of people?” Jacqueline-Michelle asked.

The king sighed, “Miss Fleury, is that really much different than your canning of tuna?”

Disgusted, Jacqueline-Michelle began to speak, but Brock interrupted immediately, “The king has a point, Jackie.”

The king continued, although he seemed to still be out of breath from his last sentence, “The man who killed the docent, he is one of our people, and we will

punish him for his actions. We do not know why he did what he did, but it was not on our behalf.”

Suddenly, a man appeared behind the king. It was Chum Salmons. “Four words, King Mackerel,” Chum said, “Four. Oh. One. Kay.”

The king tried to look back, but his head could only turn by about seven degrees. “My new employer provides me with benefits, health insurance, and even offered to pay for my long-needed hand surgery.”

A foot soldier yelled from below, “Halt, citizen.” Brock started to laugh, because all the fish people talked like fat babies.

Another soldier stated, “That man is our common enemy. Could you please disable him with your fire weapon. As a culture, we carry no arms.” Brock’s laugh doubled in volume.

Jacqueline-Michelle replied, “I’m not getting involved in this.”

It then became obvious Chum was trying to push the king into the giant grinding blades of the factory below. Using a large metal pipe for leverage, Chum pried the king from his throne of slime, and finished the regicide he had come to complete.

The fish soldiers scrambled in a panic. The officer in charge yelled up to Chum, “Why Chum? We were raised as brothers!” Brock doubled over in hysteria.

“I was simply offered better benefits.”

Chum began to smugly walk away to the airlock at the end of the catwalk above, but he was suddenly hit in the back with a hunting spear. Jacqueline-Michelle looked back and saw Brock following-through on his graceful javelin throw, still giggling. Chum struggled

to pull the spear from his chest, but was unable to grasp the column of metal. His clumsy fingers simply slid up and down the shaft, his thumbs scrambling for purchase that would not come. In his weakness, he tumbled to the same fate as the late king. The machinery tossed pieces of his pants and stringy hair up in the air as he was ground to meat. A single piece of paper floated down to the ground. It was a business card. Jacqueline-Michelle examined the card, it simply said "Doctor Levine Doyle, tekTech." She pocketed it.

At that point, the factory yielded a single can, made from the man with unopposable thumbs. Brock pocketed it.

In the frenzy, the fish soldiers began running around with their fin-arms outstretched in front of them. Jacqueline-Michelle placed a single gunshot in the structurally weakest part of the dome. Brock yelped, as Jacqueline-Michelle grabbed his hand, and pulled him to the cracking glass. They leaped through the glass into the freezing water, and began to swim to the surface.



ISLA BOOBLAR

Jurassic Brock

IT WAS RAINY, and Jacqueline-Michelle was still in New Orleans. She was sitting at the marble-topped dining table in her suite. In front of her was a plate of beignets, powdered over with sugar that glistened white and soft and pure. *Like the snows of Kilimanjaro*, she thought, idly pulling at a pastry's flaky corner. *Flaky . . . like the skin of Robert's left leg*, she thought, *when the gangrene claimed him just a few feet from the summit . . .* She tore off a strip of fried dough and popped it in her mouth. *He was my first love.*

She dipped the remaining the beignets into little cups of chocolate chicory, raspberry, and maple brandy sauces, taking her time, tearing them into small pieces so that she wouldn't feel like a *porc gigante*. The beignets were warm. She had ordered them not too long ago from the Creole—or was he Mulatto? She could never tell—room service boy. Jacqueline-Michelle looked at her watch as she finished the last bite of beignet, then furtively drained the cup of brandy sauce. She belched, quietly.

Then someone knocked at the door. Jacqueline-Michelle jumped up to check her makeup in the mirror, wincing at the sticky coat of brandy sauce at the corners of her lips. She licked at them like mad until her appearance was passable. She walked to the entrance and drew in a long, calming breath. She opened the door.

“Dr. Brock? What are you doing here? I thought you were taking a nap.”

“Good to see you too, Jackie-Mick. I actually got into a fight with one of the bellboys on my floor. I think I broke his jaw, and his left pinky, and maybe his right foot. The top part of it. So I thought I’d lay low for a while. When’s the Dork Squad getting here?”

“Brock, would you please stop calling it the Dork Squad? Interpol has assembled a very impressive team of experts to accompany us to Isla Booblar.”

Richard laughed.

Jacqueline-Michelle rolled her eyes. *Mon dieu*, she thought. *I wish we could just leave him behind.*

Brock took a step forward into the suite and ran his hand through his hair helmet, a gesture that emphasized the spectacular musculature of his arm and set soft rays of hair-sparkle dancing in Jacqueline-Michelle’s eyes.

But maybe, Jacqueline-Michelle couldn’t help but think, *the longer we’re together, the more he’ll like me.*

Brock squeezed out a small fart.

!!! thought Jacqueline-Michelle. *He is an idiot! NO! He is beautiful, and we are going to solve this case together—and then we are going to get married—* her shoulders stiffened and her eyes crossed slightly as she tried to navigate the mess of intellectual repulsion

and animal lust spinning from her brain to her loins.

“Jackie-Mick, quit it with the epilepsy shtick.” Brock crossed his arms. “I have an epileptic cousin, and frankly I find such things offensive.”

“Oh.” said Jacqueline-Michelle. “I—I am sorry. Come in, sit down.” She ushered him toward the table, doing her best to recover her dignity. She pulled a manila folder out from under the beignet plate. Brock disdained the chair she offered him and instead sprung into an athletic handstand.

“Lemme have it,” Brock said.

“This is our team,” Jacqueline-Michelle said, “and they should be here any minute.”

Brock’s shirt fell down over his face, obscuring his strong chin but revealing a thirty-six pack of chiseled abs.

“Little help here?” he said. Jacqueline-Michelle bent down from her seat and took the corner of his shirt. Her fingers trembling, she tucked it into the waistband of his pants.

“Okay, now give the who’s who for our new Dork Squad.”

Jacqueline-Michelle withdrew a series of glossy photographs from the folder and dangled them upside down in front of Brock’s upside down face. “We have Roland Kidder, computer scientist from MIT. Expert in artificial intelligence and computational complexity. Helen Turner, self-described rogue biologist. Controversial geneticist and evolutionary psychologist.”

“Uh-huh.”

Jacqueline-Michelle frowned. She slid the contents of the folder on the table and pawed through the pages. “That’s strange,” she said. “The third personal

profile is missing.” She straightened up and sighed. “Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter. They’ll all be here soon.”

Brock grimaced.

“I assure you,” said Jacqueline-Michelle, “that this team is an excellent one. All these scientists were handpicked by Interpol.”

“It’s not that,” said Brock, “I have a lot of blood in my head and face right now.” He let his arms buckle and shifted out of the handstand with a neat seaman’s roll. “I think I’m going to head down to the lobby, kill some time before the Nerd Patrol shows up.”

“Don’t be gone long. We’re going to depart for Isla Booblar promptly.”

“Booblar,” Brock said. “Sure.” He darted out into the hall like a child released for recess. Jacqueline-Michelle got the feeling he was going to go play with the fire extinguishers. Maybe the ice machine.



Jacqueline-Michelle closed the door and sighed. She was so relieved to have him gone—and yet, her heart and lady parts longed for him.

She dropped herself onto the queen-sized bed. It was springy, a little overstuffed, and it creaked as she shifted her weight. She couldn’t deny that Brock was an impressive man in many ways. But maybe he had a kind of vitamin deficiency, or a brain condition. She had a brother with a brain condition.

Poor Wet Pierre, she thought. *All alone in L’Institute Pour Les Incontinents*.

She wondered what tekTech could possibly be doing on Isla Booblar, and why such a sleazy company

would want anything from that poor docent, *Flem*. He was so old and fat. Jacqueline-Michelle rolled onto her belly and checked her watch, just as the second hand crossed *douze*.

Right on cue, as though part of some well-scripted, slick, funny but otherwise completely non-substantive screenplay or other fictional narrative, there came a firm, manly knock from the hallway. She hoisted herself off the bed, straightened her pantsuit, and opened the door.

Three immaculately dressed individuals of science stood outside. The middle and tallest man held a set of portable speakers aloft, like Atlas shouldering this damn cold world itself. He pushed play on an mp3 player. “Sirius” by the Alan Parsons Project boomed forth.

“Oh, hello,” Jacqueline-Michelle said, “You must be—”

Silently, almost violently, one of the flanking men brought his index finger to his mouth.

Shh, he mouthed.

After the last note of the song had echoed into silence, the tall man said, “Contact information: Roland Kidder, computer scientist. Objective: to find scientific work in a fast-paced, engaging island environment. Intrigue a plus.” His voice was low, a near-monotone.

A trim woman stepped forward to extend her hand. “I’m Helen Turner, genius rogue biologist. I’ve been alternately shunned and exalted by my peers for my just-crazy-enough-to-work experiments. I look forward to working with you, Mademoiselle Fleury.”

Jacqueline-Michelle was pleased with their pro-

fessionalism. *I am pleased with their professionalism*, she thought, before her attentions were distracted by the third team member. He was no longer standing up straight. He was no longer . . . wearing his suit. He had stripped down to a thin tanktop and boxers and was oiling his quadriceps. *Mon dieu*, thought Jacqueline-Michelle. *Can it be—*

“*Pardonnez moi*,” she said, reverting to French as her mind attempted to sort out what she saw before her. “Are you . . . Jeff Goldblum?”

“Uh, in fact, um, yes. Yes, I am,” said Jeff Goldblum. “I feel that, uh, that uh, my valuable experience as, uh, a prominent member of, of many past dream teams makes me a valuable asset here.”

With much difficulty, Jacqueline-Michelle regained her composure. “Lady and gentlemen, most of you represent the best in your respective fields. You’ve been gathered here today because you are needed for a mission of the utmost importance and the utmost secrecy. We have reason to believe that a corporation called tekTech was behind the killing of a very important docent named Flem van der Chôclet. We know very little—”

“*Objective*,” murmured Kidder. “To know more.”

“Right,” Jacqueline-Michelle agreed after a pause, unnerved. “We need to know more. I’ve called you here for exactly that purpose. Soon we’ll fly to an undisclosed island location that serves as the seat of tekTech, and presumably also their experimental laboratories.”

“Uh,” said Goldblum. He languidly raised his hand. “Maybe, uh, it’s important to let you know that I got my degree, uh, from tekTech Tech. In network.

Administration.”

“Wait,” said Turner irritably. She had produced from one pocket of her pantsuit jacket a pair of albino mice and was busily crosstyping their genomes as she spoke. “Is this a corporation or a degree farm?”

“Both,” said Jacqueline-Michelle.

The mice fell from Turner’s hands with a squeal. Kidder’s mouth gaped. “My... *God*,” drawled Goldblum.

“*Oui*,” said Jacqueline-Michelle. “And that’s just the half of it. These people are into spamming, penis pills, misplaced Nigerian fortunes—everything nefarious can somehow be traced back to tekTech. Now that you understand the severity of the situation, perhaps you see why we must spring into action posthaste. A helicopter is waiting on the roof to take us to tekTech’s island. If we encounter trouble when we arrive, remember our mainland contact. General Chuckyeager Patton will be on call in case a rescue is required.”

Warming to her task, she continued. “This will not be an easy job. Nor will it be a safe one. Maybe you wish you were somewhere else—experimenting, coding, or laying down a DVD commentary track for the director’s cut of *The Fly*. And I don’t blame you. I lost my lover on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro, and not a day goes by that I don’t wish I had convinced him to stay home in bed. But he was destined for things greater than this, for things greater than loving Jacqueline-Michelle Fleury so well she sometimes felt like a puddle of melted vanilla pudding, and so are all of you. Let us get on that helicopter. Let us stop tekTech. And for God’s sake—don’t get captured.”

Turner’s eyes welled with the faintest glimmer of

what might have been tears. She scooped up the mice and tucked them back into her pocket. His chin held high and firm with resolve, Kidder said, "Future past work experience: kicking some tekTech ass." Goldblum did nothing, as he had already sprinted up the stairs to the helipad and was no longer in the room.

Jacqueline-Michelle gathered her coat and followed her dream team up the stairs. As she was about to shut the rooftop door behind her, she heard a familiar voice funneled up the stairs, as though from inside a well.

Brock?

"HEY," Brock bellowed. "WHERE ARE YOU GOING?"

Jacqueline-Michelle looked down at him, a wavering lager of a man. "We're going to stop tekTech. Come on!" With one graceful French hand she grabbed his wrist, and they were both flying out onto the roof and into the waiting helicopter.

Dream(team)catcher

THE DREAM TEAM'S HELICOPTER swooped over the island in a calculated arc. Clifford Bishop, hanging out around the beach village of the Tick-Tecks, traced their path through the sky with mild interest. Bishop had been living on the island with the Tick-Tecks for three years after signing up with the most fraudulent cruise company in the history of the tourist industry. Overlook Cruise Lines had offered a corporate discount rate at the industrial laundry Bishop worked at in Corpus Christi. Most people had believed that a luxury cruise to Newfoundland crewed by desperate bikini models was too good to be true, but there was a scheduled stop in Maine, the state Bishop believed held the key to his destiny.

The helicopter was clearly going to land on the tekTech helipad at the north end of the beach. Bishop decided to go see what all the fuss was about. He

might as well; the Tick-Tecks were busy jamming on their handmade gourd-instruments to Grateful Dead songs. Of all the things tekTech used to barter with the Tick-Tecks, second-hand Grateful Dead bootlegs had to be the most bizarre and the most irritating.

Clifford Bishop sighed and took a sixer of Pabst Blue Ribbon from a stack under a banana tree and walked down the beach. PBR was probably the best thing tekTech traded with the Tick-Tecks, although they mostly used it to get the monkeys drunk, and then violent. In any case, Pabst was a fine drink for a stranded blue-collar working stiff who had just wanted to go to Maine to write stories. Bishop knew he would live in the town of Berry, a place where he'd heard a man could sit around jawin' with the old-timers by day and writing scary stories by night. If he lived in Berry, Bishop could finally write his story about a clown monster that startles children.

Yeah, life would be good in Berry, Maine.

A hundred yards down the beach, Bishop cracked a Pabst and settled down in the bushes to get a look at the newcomers. The first one to emerge from the helicopter was a large, powerful-looking blonde man. He was the kind of man who had a last name like Rock, or Brick, or something, Bishop thought. The man threw a box off of the helipad into the ocean. Next out was a fussy-looking woman who was yelling at the big guy.

"Professor Brock!" the woman shrieked. *Bingo*, thought Bishop. "You have just thrown our rations into the sea! What are you thinking? We will starve!"

"Relax, Yakky Michelle," Brock replied, "who needs rations when we've got these?"

Brock unsheathed two machetes from the knife-

belts strapped across his chest.

“Professor Brock!” the woman screeched. “I am a pisco-lacto-vegan-tarian!”

“Not anymore, you aren’t,” said Brock. “I will feed my team with meat I slaughter with my own twin blades.”

He spun around and made hacking and stabbing motions with the machetes. He whirled too close to the woman and sliced a button off her blouse. Another man emerged from the chopper just in time to catch the flying button in the eye.

“Ouch!” said the man. *Is that Jeff Goldblum?* thought Bishop. *Whatever.*

Two more people climbed out of the helicopter. They were science-types, a man and a woman carrying a metal case imprinted with the words “SCIENCE GEAR - EXTREMELY SCIENTIFIC/DANGEROUS”.

Bishop presumed these two were a sort of science dream team who’d help navigate the surprising number of scientific puzzles on the island.



The scientists turned to each other and immediately began arguing. “Dr. Kidder, as the biologist, I think I should be the one to carry the bioscope.”

“Negative, Dr. Turner. The bioscope’s computer language is inordinately complex. If a device is computery, then the computer scientist should carry it, or else we should rock, scissors, paper for it.”

Dr. Kidder and Dr. Turner each had a deathgrip on a very advanced-looking science machine. Bishop wasn’t surprised that they each wanted to carry it; it

looked like something out of a George Lucas fever dream.

“Okay then,” said Dr. Kidder. “Best of three, throw on *paper*.” Dr. Turner won the contest.

“Don’t feel bad, Dr. Biologist. My rock, scissors, paper algorithm is provably unbeatable.”

“Shut it, codemonkey, or I’ll sock you hard enough to reallocate your memory.”

Meanwhile, Jaqueline-Michelle had managed to wrestle away one of Brock’s machetes. Brock was visibly distraught over this fifty-percent disarming, and was trying to pacify Jaqueline-Michelle with the only French words he could remember, or thought he remembered. “Whoa, Jackie! Éclair, oui, ennui, Champs Elysées. Kraftwerk!” Jaqueline-Michelle growled and hurled the machete into the ocean.

“System alert, Dr. Fleury,” Dr. Kidder called out. “We have company.”



The Dream Team was ready to rumble when Jaqueline-Michelle and Brock turned to look. A cheerful-looking man in a light business suit was walking up to the helipad. The scientists hid their science box behind them, Jaqueline-Michelle gave her best angry-French-chick stare, and Brock brandished his remaining machete.

“Hello and welcome to tekTech Island!” The executive beamed at the people in front of him. “My name is Levine Doyle and I am a representative for tekTech. We are so happy to have you here.”

Jaqueline-Michelle looked confused, as if she had woken up in her stylish flat to a view of Paris, only

to realize the Eiffel tower was missing. Brock, no longer sensing danger, became immediately bored and looked around for something that could do with a good machete-chop.

Levine continued.

“tekTech hopes you will be our guests for some time. While you are here, you will have access to all the opportunities and advantages afforded by our corporation. Do any of you like paintball?” Brock raised his hand timidly and tried not to look at Jaqueline-Michelle.

“Great!” said Levine. “We have a corporate paintball course. How about batting cages? We have those too.”

Brock raised his hand higher. Levine smiled even wider. “That’s just fantastic. But does anybody here like . . . sciiiiieence?”

Brock, Helen, and Roland’s hands shot up.

“Oh, that’s just wonderful!” Levine exclaimed.

“We would be delighted if you wanted to come have a look around our labs, and, you know, make a major scientific advancement or two. How does that sound?”

Before Brock or the scientists could mutter their approval, Jaqueline-Michelle spoke coldly at Levine.

“Thank you, Monsieur Doyle, but we have our own objective on this island, and I warn you not to impede our progress.”

“I won’t stop you, Dr. Fleury,” Levine said, still smiling affably. “You are our guests here. And what’s more, not only does tekTech see you as valued guests on our island, but we believe in you. We’d like to encourage you to enroll at tekTech Tech.” Off in the

bushes, Bishop rolled his eyes and cracked another Pabst. The diploma mills were tekTech's biggest scam. "Dr. Turner, you're a biologist, correct?"

"Yes . . ." said Turner guardedly.

"Fantastic. But what's a Ph.D. in biology worth if you don't have a practical skill as well? That's why tekTech can make you a certified x-ray technician, paralegal, or mechanic in less time than you might think. It sure beats tedious field work, am I right?"

"What? No! Is this a scam?" Turner look incredulously at Levine, who was unperturbed.

"I don't know, Helen Keller, this seems like a pretty good offer," said Brock.

"Exactly, Professor Brock! I can tell you are a man of good sense as well as ichthyology."

Brock's upper-body muscles flexed in response to the compliment. "Now, Professor Brock, you have a Ph.D. Am I correct?"

"Damn straight, Levine. For my dissertation I wrestled a swordfish in shallow water. At my defense I fed the panel marlin steaks." Brock looked nostalgic and stabbed the air absentmindedly with the machete.

Levine Doyle looked concerned. "I thought as much, Professor Brock. Do you ever wonder if maybe one Ph.D. just isn't enough anymore?"

"What?" asked Brock. "It took five years of punching tiger sharks in the snout to get that degree."

"I know, Professor Brock, but the world has moved on, and these days having one doctorate . . ." He lowered his voice and leaned towards Brock. ". . . makes a guy seem kinda like a pansy."

Bishop noticed from his hiding place that Brock looked apprehensive. The furrow of his mighty brow

reminded Bishop of the Grand Canyon at dusk, only much, much more macho. Brock clapped Levine on the shoulder. “Doyly, I think it’s time I resumed my education. What can tekTech U. do for me?”

“I’m glad you asked, Professor Brock. Thanks to certain loopholes in the accreditation system and tek-Tech’s corporate know-how, tekTech U. can grant you a Ph.D. in nearly anything you want, for a very nominal fee. But now here’s the extra special part.” Doyle’s eyes twinkled. “We believe in your potential so much, that you can major and minor in a subject at the same time! The truly motivated student can obtain a Ph.D. in as little as eighteen months. A rugged individual such as yourself should have no problem. What do you say, Professor Brock?”

Brock stared levelly at Levine Doyle. “Boyle, I’d like to major and minor in the History of Hand-to-Hand Combat.”

Jaqueline-Michelle was livid in the way only a native of the Quartier Latin can be. “Richard Brock, do not be an idiot! We came to this island for a reason, not to throw money into a diploma mill!”

“Chill out baby, take a croissant break. We can do your little mission and get correspondence degrees at the same time. Roluids, Turnip, you in?”

The scientists mumbled.

“Sweet. Hey Gollum, you want a Ph.D.?”

Goldblum was inspecting his thick-lensed glasses in a vanity mirror. He didn’t bother to respond.

Bishop chuckled to himself. As smart, masculine, or French as these people were, they wouldn’t survive a day on the island without some help. Whatever their plan was, it was better than watching drunk

monkeys dance to the Tick-Tecks' gourd-guitar solos all night. And this team had a helicopter; if he aided them, maybe they'd be a lot more helpful in getting off the island than tekTech had ever been. He sighed and hefted himself to his feet.

"Mr. Bishop!" cried Levine with his unflagging enthusiasm.

"I'd like you to meet our new guests. Now if you would follow me to the headquarters . . ."

"Save it, Levine. I heard everything from the bushes." He pointed at each member of the team. "Kidder – computer scientist, Turner – biologist, Richard Brock – Man's Man (Brock's muscles flexed involuntarily), and Yakky-Michelle Fleury – highly antagonized team leader. My name is Clifford Bishop. I want to help you. I know this hell-hole island better than anyone, and I don't work for tekTech. I just want to get away from this place and write stories about the family dog that goes crazy. And if you don't take my offer, you'll die horribly. There's some scary shit on this island."

Brock and Jaqueline-Michelle looked at each other dubiously. Brock shrugged. "Okay, Cliffy, you've got a deal. Now what do you say you wing me a Pabst?"

The Mandromeda Gain

AS THE SCIENTISTS, the aspiring writer, and the sleazeball businessman trekked through the jungle to the primary tekTech complex, Jacqueline-Michelle looked around at the curious foliage. A thallose plant, with its distinct tubularities and sporophytes, dangled in the beams of morning lights. Its fronds waved as they were knocked about by the large group.

“Excuse me, Mr. Doyle,” Jacqueline-Michelle said, “is that plant a nematophyte?”

Levine Doyle looked back, and the sun reflected in the circular glasses made him look like a frightened cartoon. “Indeed it is, Jacqueline-Michelle. You must have a Ph.D. or two in science.”

“Oh, I just dabble in paleobotany.” She paused. “What’s curious is that that plant went extinct millions of years ago.” She racked her brain for some way to explain this peculiar phenomenon.

Levine laughed like a man in awe of a humdrum product on a television infomercial. “You are mis-

taken. That plant there is very much alive and well. It also has very powerful . . . how shall I say . . . medicinal effects. All discovered by our researchers here at tek-Tech.”

Turner’s ears perked at this statement, and she asked, “Medicinal effects? What sort of effects? The nematophyte most closely resembles the modern green algae. And that looked like a plain old bush to me.”

Jacqueline-Michelle felt a twinge of pride that she had beaten Turner to the punch, as her paleobotany dabbling was evidently far more sophisticated than that of the so-called “biologist.” Jacqueline-Michelle had spent six years dabbling as a post-doc, before she left academia to dabble in her own interests. However, an athletic and confident woman, Turner appeared unwilling to let Jacqueline-Michelle out-science or out-dabble her.

“I’ll show you, as soon as we get to our main complex, Doctor Turner. I’ll show you.” Levine fixed his collar and tucked his thumbs under the straps of his pack. Beads of sweat had formed on his forehead, but Jacqueline-Michelle noted the increased apocrine sweat production in his armpits and groin. In addition, his breathing was heavy, even considering the steady ten-degree grade. His pupils were dilated and his twitch muscle response quickened. There was no doubt that something was weighing in on him, and it was not them. He was nervous. Also, the bacterial metabolism of the organic lipids in the armpit and groin sweat left the foul odor of an animal carcass. It reminded her of her years, before joining Interpol, of field work in Africa, tracking the mating and hunting habits of the hyena. The stench still sent waves of fear

up her neck, as she recalled her near-death encounter with a herd of furious hippos.

Suddenly, a terrestrial shock wave propagated under the feet of the group, accompanied by the undeniable chaotic rumble of a seismic p-wave. Richard Brock tumbled to the ground in panic. Roland Kidder's eyes widened from behind his thick glasses. A deep, bellowing roar emerged from the deep jungle, easily two kilometers away in the gorge below.

Jeff Goldblum began to tap his head and frantically tried to piece together an appropriately fragmented sentence. "I ... um ... ha,ha ... jeez ... WOW ... I don't know if ... um ... how do I ... WOW."

Brock seemed to be wiping a tear from his eye, as he clutched the earth. Levine tried to remain cool, but he was obviously distressed by the quake. Clifford Bishop seemed to barely notice. His glance of disinterest spoke volumes: one part blue-collar bravado and one part cool apathy. He looked at his wrist, but wore no watch. He spoke: "It sounds like something woke up one of the gerbils."

The cryptic statement was lost on the rest of the group, who were startled and dazed. Jacqueline-Michelle tried to piece together some semblance of meaning from it, but failed. Levine cleared his throat, and began to speak. "I think we should get going. The compound is just over this hill."

As the group reached the top of the hill, a large concrete industrial complex loomed from behind a web of electric fences. The border of the invisible electric fence was marked with little flags. "Are you guys playing lawn darts or something?" Brock asked. He did not understand the rules of lawn darts. His stupidity

irked Jacqueline-Michelle, but his incorrigible boldness sent a blissful shiver down her spine. She tried to force herself into the proper frame of mind, but she could not tear her eyes away from Brock. The back of his pants had caught on a tree branch and ripped on one side, revealing a sweaty cheek that looked frighteningly like a marble counter-top.

“The electric fence is simply a precaution. Nothing to be worried about,” Levine assured his guests. Jacqueline-Michelle jerked back to attention.

“A precaution against what?” she asked. She glared at him intently; it was one of her assortment of seven ‘I mean business’ glances.

Levine squirmed as he searched for an answer. “Well, it’s . . .”

Kidder said, “If there is need for an electric fence, then there is reason to be cautious, else such a fence would be superfluous.” He twitched a bit as he finished his statement.

Levine added, “Much of the fauna on this island is enhanced. Performance, size, longevity, intensity, girth. These are all found in elevated levels in the animals on Isla Booblar. In a sense, it is a bit too much of a good thing, perhaps.”

“Or way too much of a bad thing,” Bishop said ominously. “Wait until you see the spiders.” He then tossed an empty beer can to the edge of the dense foliage and a giant paw swatted the can into the forest from beyond the plants. The leaves and branches shook as the concealed animal violently consumed the can. The sounds were horrifying, resembling a giant slug eating a box of aluminum foil while burping.

“Let’s go inside,” Levine said. His companions

agreed, except for Goldblum, who was doddering about near a tree, ostensibly conversing with the various plant life around the complex. Eventually, stammering to himself, he followed Jacqueline-Michelle and the rest of the group inside the secured building.

Inside the complex, Kidder immediately noticed the bank of computers on the wall. "Unix," he muttered. "Of course." He attempted to enter a simple keystroke, but was rebuffed by a barrage of pop-ups and a screen advertising domain name registration and free ringtones. Brock swooped in to make a purchase as Kidder shook his head. "Damn. Clever bastards," said Kidder.

"Excuse me, doctors," said Levine. "I kindly request that you do not poke around the computer systems."

Jacqueline-Michelle had had enough. "Enough!" she shouted, pushing her away through the group to confront Levine. Her hip brushed Brock's crotch on the way, and only the fortuitous grasp of a banister prevented her buckling knees from causing her to collapse. "*Merde!*" she cursed under her breath. "Pull yourself together." She approached Levine Doyle and assumed her most threatening position: hands on hips and brow irrevocably furrowed.

"Mr. Doyle, we have been on this island for several hours and already we have noticed severe anomalies in the animal and plant life. You cannot hide the cause forever."

"Indeed," offered Turner. "As a biologist, I agree."

Doyle looked at his shoes for several seconds. Eventually, he looked up, carrying a defeated look on his face. "Come with me," he said softly, as he led

them to a desk in the corner of the room.

“As you know, tekTech prides itself on its pharmaceutical research. We are the world leaders in the production of many drugs, including this particular one here —”

Doyle paused as he noticed the emptiness of the pill container in his hand. He looked around confused. Jacqueline-Michelle followed his gaze until it settled on a guilty-looking Brock, who was chewing violently on what appeared to be a small blue item. As he ate, his groin bulged and the button on his safari shorts popped off. It ricocheted off a bank of computer screens and hit Jeff Goldblum in the eye.

“Oh,” said Jeff Goldblum. “Ow.”

The group members stared at each other until finally Doyle broke the uncomfortable silence.

“Well, it seems that Dr. Brock has demonstrated the function of the drug that has been causing us so many problems recently. Drs. Turner and Fleury, I believe this technical document will explain everything in adequate detail, although far more slowly and less clearly than if I simply described its contents. Nevertheless, here it is.”

tekTech

Penis Pill Studies
September 26, 2007
tekTech Penis Laboratory

Test Subject 1 (Control)

Age: 67
Impotence: pronounced
Drug received: Viagra
Sexual prowess: slightly improved
Side effects: none

Test Subject 2 (Experimental)

Age: 54
Impotence: confidence-crippling
Drug Received: tekTech Penis Pills
Sexual prowess: lover-pleasing
Side effects: kielbasa-sized thumbs

Test Subject 3 (Experimental)

Age: 42
Impotence: none
Drug Received: tekTech Penis Pills
Sexual prowess: unquantifiable
Side effects: OH MY GOD

Test results show remarkable patterns of human growth and unmistakable signs of danger.

Possible causes: Mankind's hubris and exploitation of science. Also, drug was engineered by first-year students at tekTech Pharmacy School.

Potential solutions: Abort all work on tekTech penis pills. Carelessly dispose of all remaining chemicals. More hubris.

“My God!” gasped Turner as she dropped the paper. Kidder and Goldblum looked at her, concerned. “The tekTech penis pills must be in the water supply. Mr. Doyle, how could you let this happen?”

Kidder scrambled to find an operable computer and began to type rapidly, an unlit cigarette dangling limply from his mouth. After several minutes, he looked up at the rest of the group and told them the grim news.

“By my calculations, the increased biological mass is causing this island to sink. If we plan to stay here long enough to accomplish our mission, we’ll have no more than twenty-four hours.”

The team stood motionless for a moment, unsure of how to proceed and only slowly coming to terms with the situation. Brock let out a delayed, “Oh, fuck!” Jacqueline-Michelle suspected that he did not understand precisely what the problem was.

Finally, Clifford Bishop spoke. “I must say,” he ventured hesitantly, “that I have noticed some strange changes in the Tick-tecks . . .” He trailed off, unsure of how to properly describe what he had seen.

Jacqueline-Michelle sensed that it was time for a strong-willed European woman to take charge. “Dream Team, we have no time to waste. Mr. Doyle, does tek-Tech manufacture an antidote to the manpills?”

Doyle began to shake his head, but then his eyes widened. “Diet pills!” he shouted, and scurried to his computer. A few minutes later, he returned.

“If my records are correct, here at tekTech we sell a line of weight-loss pills, whose shrinking power just might be sufficient to counteract the enlargement properties of our male-enhancement product. The laboratory is on the other side of the island, but we should

be able to make it there in several hours. The Dream Team and I will make the trip.” Levine looked at Brock, whose expanding genitals threatened to topple him over, and Bishop, whose working-class, Maine-bred ethos was clearly at odds with the highly scientific tekTech environment. Jacqueline-Michelle knew what he was thinking.

“Dr. Brock and Mr. Bishop will go, uh, start up a generator on the south side of the island. You never know when we’ll need, erm, more power,” Levine said. Bishop, by this point fairly tipsy from his Pabst, mumbled his assent and he and Brock scampered out the door and into the jungle. Jacqueline-Michelle signaled, and the rest of the team followed Levine to the exit. Once outside, they barely noticed the fleeting image of a loincloth-clad man dart behind a tree. His hand was the size of a wild turkey.

The tekTech Redemption

THE JUNGLE WAS THICK AND TERRIFYING. While Clifford Bishop was well used to trekking through the verdant underbrush either with Tick-tecks or—more often—to get away from them, he knew tonight would be nothing like those walks in the park.

Clifford kept his eyes on Brock's chiseled back. He was hurtling through the underbrush at a great rate, like a slab of granite blasting through cobwebs. Clifford was glad for the shining machete that Brock waved around in front of them, hacking indiscriminately at vines, branches, monkeys and ferns, but something in the very pit of his stomach whispered that one floppy knife wouldn't be enough. Instinct made him turn his head to eye the foreboding wall of unforgiving green behind them, and then instinct made him look forward again.

Brock was doubled over, clutching at his stomach or his knees, Clifford couldn't quite tell which. He reached out to Brock, his hands shaking with fear.

What could make this mountain of muscle cower on the ground?

Brock finished tying his shoe and punched Clifford playfully in the arm.

“Up the hill,” he said. He pointed. The hill rose over them, ominous and heavy and blanketed in what seemed to a layer of thick chocolate pudding.

Clifford held the bruising limb tight to his chest as they began to ascend the slippery slope.

The two men, one timid, the other ignorant and fearless, made their way up the muddy switchbacks. The gray sky darkened and a light rain begin to fall. It trickled down around their feet as they plunged down into the steaming muck of the hillside. From the dark patches of thick foliage Clifford heard the undeniable pulse of a beating heart.

Clifford had managed to survive so far by drinking only light beer and staying put near the beach. He had known most of the terrors in the jungle only by their distant rumbles in the night. But now Clifford felt the hot breath of Danger on the back of his neck. He noticed that he had either stepped in a warm puddle or let out a fear tinkle.

As if on deadly cue, a muted sound that had long been filling Clifford with a subliminal fear suddenly rang out loud and clear. It was the beating of giant wings. Clifford threw himself to the ground, dragging Brock with him just as a massive insect crashed through the trees on their left. Like a giant, leg-less elephant, it hovered above them; instead of a trunk it had a vicious-looking proboscis, longer than a man, protruding from its blank, inhuman face. It was a mosquito.

Oh my God, it's a mosquito, Clifford thought. It's here for revenge.

The giant bug moved closer and Brock pushed Clifford off him and rose to his feet. "Cool!" Brock yelled, pumping his fists.

"It's huge," Clifford breathed.

"Thanks," agreed Brock. He rippled his biceps as if to give Clifford a better look. "I don't really work out, though." He brandished the machete towards the leviathan. "Come and get me, bug!" he bellowed.

The insect began to descend, looking for a soft bit of flesh in which to sink its bloodthirsty snout, when suddenly a movement distracted all three of them. A small bunny rabbit was hopping across the other side of the clearing and quick as lightning the great bug descended to the rabbit and sucked the poor thing dry. It left just a matted patch of fur, more recognizable as road kill or a shriveled furry raisin than the adorable bunny it had been moments before. The hideous creature was satisfied and buzzed off to horrify another patch of jungle. Clifford shuddered and tried not to retch. Brock shrugged and turned back to the jungle crashing forwards with as much zeal as before, but in a different direction.

Clifford ran to keep up, his heart pounding in his mouth. "Oh fuck. Oh fuck. I'm going to die. I'm going to die," he repeated, mouthing the words. He began to say an Our Father, but it sort of blended into the lyrics of *Stairway to Heaven*. He fucking loved that song. His heart rate was slowly stabilizing. He was in worse shape than his grandfather.

They had reached the summit of the muddy hill, and by now the sky was a churning gray and black

mass. Beneath the jungle canopy, only dim beams of light illuminated the horrifying labyrinth of foliage between them and the generator building a mile ahead. Clifford began to wonder how death might feel. It sure as hell would hurt.

“Brock,” Clifford began, “I think maybe we should just stay here. That area down there is where the worst of them hang out.”

Brock was not listening. He was aiming his machete at a tree.

“Hey,” said Clifford, “Wait! That’s not—!” The machete ricocheted into the jungle and from beyond the trees they heard a deep hiss.

Unconcerned, Brock ran after his lost blade, and for almost a minute Clifford was alone, hearing only the rain pour through the rain forest and the insects that had yet to suck up dick pill runoff and grow into monsters. The darkness closed in around him like a noose. Realizing that was a pretty solid sentence, he took out his notepad to write it down. Flipping past a page with the words: “Reth-guals-nam: backwards for manslaughter. I’m going to be so mad rich!” Clifford began feeling his pants for his pen, but suddenly Brock ran from the jungle, machete strapped to his chest. His hands were flailing, and although it was raining hard, it was apparent he was crying.

Brock’s lips were trembling. “Ssss, ssss, ssss-.” “What is it, buddy?” Clifford said.

“Ssssnake. Snake.” Brock panted.

Clifford’s eyes widened to the size of soup plates. He had never been much afraid of snakes, but today seemed like a good day to start. The two trembling men slowly stepped away from the tree line in an em-

brace of utter horror. As they stared ahead, a tiny garter snake joyfully slithered out from the trees. “Ha, that’s it, Brock? Thank god.”

“Snake. Snake.” Brock continued to repeat, pointing towards the garter. “Brock, there’s nothing to be afraid, it’s just a little jungle snake. It can’t hurt you.”

And with an explosion of raw energy, the towering trees vaporized as a twenty foot-tall, football field-long pit viper smashed into the clearing. Its hiss was louder than a burst helium tank, and as its massive tongue swatted the air, smelling for organic matter in the air, large dog-sized globules of venom plummeted earthward. Where they fell, the vegetation withered with a sound uncannily like a human shriek.

“Well, fuck,” said Clifford.

Brock ran off into the jungle, along the path to the generator building. Brock’s comparatively unhealthy arteries filled with adrenaline, and the two men flailed away. Clifford noticed the brand name on the back of Brock’s sweat-soaked shirt. *CNUT*. He swallowed. *It may be the last thing I ever see*, he thought.

Just then a towering squirrel the size of a three-story whorehouse appeared out of the trees in front of Brock. Its foot was poised to squash Brock and his toothpick machete into some kind of yucky pancake. Brock stopped and the two men ran to the side just as the snake and squirrel saw each other began to engage in bloody, loud, dangerous, scary combat. “We’re almost there!” Clifford shouted above the din of tearing flesh, “Just up this final embankment and we’ll be at the generator building. I remember it from my long, thoughtful walks away from the Tick-Tecks.”

By the time the two men got the generator door

they were trailed by a red-eyed giant tree frog and a blood thirsty carpenter snail. Both of them, Clifford's instinct told him, wanted to devour the two men. Messily.

They had barely slammed the metal door behind them when they heard the two beasts slam against the sturdy generator-room walls. The noise of squishy bodies hurled at metal continued for some time, muted by the foot thick titanium walls.

The generator sat in the middle of the generator room. A computer sat next to it. On the computer a screen sat, blinking eerily. The jarring light and the unnatural silence sat like a cold hand on the back of Clifford's neck. He went over to the computer console and sat down. As he sat, he tried to bring the generator back to life.

In the meantime, Brock tried to draw on the floor with his machete, ignoring Clifford's requests for help at the computer. Eventually he began to walk around the room, swinging his machete at anything that wasn't titanium. After a few moments Clifford heard a shout and hurried over. Brock was pointing to the top of a few dusty file boxes in the corner, where a pile of papers sat.

Exactly Why tekTech Wants to Kill Flem van der Chôclet: an Illustrated Report .

The papers only had a few machete cuts and Brock swooped them up with one of his mammoth hands. He whooped and gave Clifford a noogie. Clifford smiled.

Damn, he's good, Clifford thought.

Then he thought, *What was that?*

They were not alone. A quiet scratching sound echoed reached them from deeper inside the generator

station. Clifford's adrenaline began to pump and his stomach crawled about his abdominal cavity with fear. After a panicked moment Clifford located a small door they hadn't seen before and when Brock, brandishing the machete, finally pulled it open, the generator room filled with music. *Everything's Gonna Be Alright*. An unshaven man in a crumpled suit fell out of the closet backwards. He shoved himself up into a sitting position and rubbed his eyes, squinting at the two men.

"Who are you?" Brock demanded.

"Buddy T. Douglas," the crumpled-suit man replied, "I'm a lawyer, and I represent tekTech's investors."

Clifford quickly explained to Douglas what was happening on the island with the scary overgrown animals and the rising water levels. Douglas, it turned out, had hidden in the generator shack once the giant animals started killing people. It was a long conversation, and maybe not worth reporting.

Suddenly, a bloodthirsty carpenter snail stuck its mammoth head into the generator room. The beast snarled, and Brock and Clifford fled, the damning documents in-hand. An unwilling Buddy Douglas was pulled from his closet and out the back door into the steaming jungle beyond.

"I think I can hotwire that golf cart," said Brock, pointing to the small white vehicle chained to the fence outside the generator building. Clifford Bishop closed his eyes and imagined he was in Maine. Douglas wrung his hands.

The Sperminal Man

JACQUELINE-MICHELLE was always secretly a little bit happy whenever she got to use a machete. From her prim, professional appearance, most people figured that she was the kind of girl who'd be uncomfortable in the vicinity of a steak knife. The truth was, Jacqueline-Michelle knew her way around all manner of blades, and the machete was a personal favorite. She led the way through the dense vegetation, with Kidder, Turner, and Doyle struggling to keep pace. Jeff Goldblum leapt gracefully from tree to tree above their heads.

Kidder looked from side to side with a combination of awe and nervousness. "You know, it's funny," he muttered. "This place, it's quite unnatural. Dr. Turner, are you familiar with Pandemonium Theory?"

Turner nodded. "Pandemonium Theory: the tendency of complex island systems to deteriorate into utter catastrophe."

"Exactly," said Kidder. "First proposed by Sir

Desmond Morgan in 1896. Not proven mathematically until the mid-1960s and the advent of modern computers.”

A look of puzzlement appeared on Turner’s face. “You aren’t seriously suggesting that this island would qualify as a Pandemonium System, Dr. Kidder.”

“A Code 4 Pan-sys, to be precise. All the elements are there: island, science, people.”

“My God! If only we had the time and resources to perform a computer simulation.” Turner wrung her hands together.

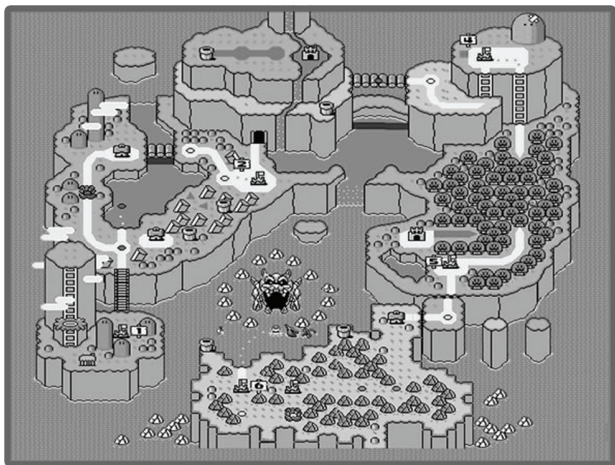
“I am already one step ahead of you, Dr. Turner. Here are the results of a simulation I performed three days before we left for the island.” Kidder removed three folded sheets of paper from his back pocket.

User: Kidder, Roland
 Mainframe: System 2

 Simulation: tekTech Island
 Initial Conditions: Prosperity, "Uncle John's Band"

Time in simulation world: 3.14 hours after arrival

Status:.....UNEASY PEACE.....



 code4: \$@Fjd@8fd8#!(58CFj2ds@*NV2

Shows beginnings of instability. Take caution when proceeding.

“Three hours in, we see limited signs of pandemonium,” Kidder explained. “An uneasy peace permeates the environment.”

Turner retorted, “I don’t know, Dr. Kidder, I’m unconvinced there are signs of a genuine pandemonium instability.”

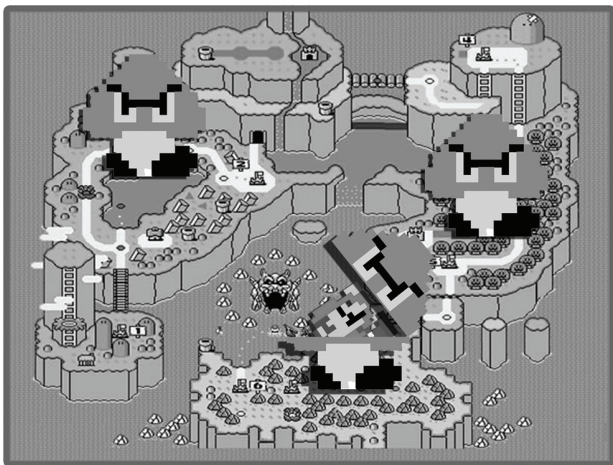
“Just hold on, and look at this.”

User: Kidder, Roland
Mainframe: System 2

Simulation: tekTech Island
Initial Conditions: Prosperity, "Uncle John's Band"

Time in simulation world: 5.37 hours after arrival

Status:.....PANDEMONIUM.....



code4: F*#)fd#*0V@0gv@543(F(Djal

Signs of mathematical pandemonium. Long term stability of the island impossible. Cinematic climax approaching.

Kidder moved on to the next image. "Five hours in, the mutated wildlife begins to take over. Stability may never be recovered."

Turner gasped. "I don't believe it," she whispered.

and looked down at the printouts from his perch in the canopy above. He stammered, "That's uh . . . that's, that's, uh . . . that's uh Pandemonium Theory."

The group pondered the meaning of the simulation results until they were interrupted by Levine.

"The diet pill facility should be right around here," he panted. "It's where our patented PoundShedder supplements are made. They were created by a team of leading dietitians, and they're all natural!"

As Levine prattled on about the wonders of tek-Tech's line of weight-loss products, Jacqueline-Michelle felt a loud crunch under her boot. She lifted her foot to find the remains of a beetle almost four inches long. *We'd better hurry, she thought, before we encounter any more of these freaks.*

"What's the plan when we get there, Helen?" Jacqueline-Michelle asked without turning, her machete arm swinging rhythmically in front of her.

"Well, the only way we'll be able to get the diet pills to all the animals is to put the pills in the water supply. Unfortunately, the active chemical currently being used isn't water soluble. I'll need to synthesize a related compound with the same effects that can be delivered to the entire island's water supply," Turner replied.

"We don't have much time. Is that a straightforward process?" asked Jacqueline-Michelle.

"It's never been done before, but it is likely immensely complex," replied Turner stoically. "But it's our only chance. Luckily, my thesis on biochemical synthesis covered this exact topic. I'm probably the only one in the world who can do it."

A heavy silence fell over the team as they marched.

They trudged on through the jungle, all of them pretending not to hear the cries of nearby animals. Once familiar, the bird calls and the hissing of jungle snakes were many octaves lower—a side effect of their recent unnatural growth. The 20 Hz buzzing of giant insect wings was particularly disconcerting. At times, the sound warbled dangerously close to the brown note.

Finally, the group came upon a clearing and laid their eyes on the glistening façade of tekTech's diet supplement laboratory. Just as Roland Kidder began to exclaim his happiness at their arrival, Jacqueline-Michelle hissed out a sharp *Shhh*. She laid her index finger over her lips, then used it to point at the jungle off to their left. The trees shook and birds flew out of the foliage as a three-story tall spider monkey emerged from the dense green. The enormous beast moved at a lazy pace.

Jacqueline-Michelle led her group quickly and quietly into the diet pill lab. Upon entering the building, they found themselves in a long, branching hallway lined with doors fitted with small observation windows. "We need to find a room where Helen can whip up a new batch of this diet pill," said Jacqueline-Michelle.

"Objective: Find a needle in a haystack," Kidder murmured under his breath. But Turner, who had already begun peering into the rooms, let out a sharp cry.

"It's this one, everybody. This is the room with all the chemicals in it."

The group filed into the room and stood anxiously along the back wall as Turner snatched beakers, flasks, and test-tubes off the shelves. They were filled with ominously colored liquids—angry orange and bilious green. Selfish, unfriendly purple. With expert preci-

sion and great flourish, Turner began mixing the chemicals together. She worked in silence, making batch after batch of different mixtures, and then furiously dumping them out. Nobody dared interrupt her to ask what she was doing. Finally, after twenty minutes of frenzied experimentation, Turner wiped her brow and smiled.

“This is it!” she said, relieved. “I think I’ve done it. Time to try it out, I suppose.” She raised the flask, preparing to drink from it.

“Wait!” cried Goldblum. “Are, uh, are you, uh, sure that that, um, stuff is, well, is it safe?”

“I think so. Then again, if I’m wrong, I’ll probably die.” Turner paused for a second. “Bottoms up!” She drained all 20 fluid ounces of the mixture in under 10 seconds. The rest of the group stood staring at her, amazed.

“See,” she said, “I told you I would die if I was wrong.”

In that instant she vomited up a rainbow of unhappy colors and expired on the floor.

Eventually Jacqueline-Michelle gathered herself enough to speak.

“I know this is sad,” she choked, “but I think we need to keep moving if we—”

In the middle of her sentence, a massive furry hand punched through the wall of the laboratory and plucked Jeff Goldblum out of the room.

The hand belonged to the giant spider monkey. Goldblum was barely able to stammer as it held him tight, forty feet up.

“Goddammit, not again,” Levine said. He opened a cabinet and pulled out two military shotguns with

folding stocks. He tossed one to Jacqueline-Michelle.

They fired rapidly at the monkey, dousing it in twelve-gauge shot and slugs. The shot seemed to barely puncture the layer of solid muscles beneath the monkey's thick pelt. Enraged by the tickling sensation, the behemoth tightened his fist around Goldblum.

Goldblum moaned.

"Hey, uh—ha, stop bothering it!" he wheezed. The monkey increased the pressure. Then Goldblum's eyeballs popped from his head and exploded against the insides of his thick-lensed glasses.

Pandemonium ensued. The group ran blindly along the hallways of the lab, until Kidder motioned everyone inside another room.

"This room, everyone, it's the room with the computers!"

Once inside, Kidder began typing in the mainframe. "This is the control room," he said confidently. "If I can hack the security system and turn on the emergency controls, we can use the island's defense system to take care of that enormous monkey."

"Just do it fast!" shouted Jacqueline-Michelle as she tried to console a bawling Levine.

"Don't worry," said Kidder as his fingers raced over the keyboard. "Fast is my specialty. They call me the Flash for a reason. I'm the fastest there is, and I have a need for speed. This will be over in the blink of an eye. Around the world in 80 days."

There was a chime as the computer slowly began to boot up.

Contraception Point

THE ESPLANADE between the diet pill factory and the ocean was long and empty. A cloud of diet pill powder hung low in the sky and mingled with sea mist. Cigarillo smoke curled off the lips of an anxious yachtsman and drifted ashore.

Brock throttled the golf cart he had hotwired earlier that day into a gap between the light poles lining the port side of the esplanade. In the shadows, only those with a keen eye would notice that Brock's vehicle was stolen as he had placed a cup over the frayed wires sprouting from the cart's ignition. "*Bonjour wires,*" Brock recalled his stepmother once saying. "*Sont pour des cups.*" She was a French professor and a mechanic.

Brock reached beneath his seat and flipped the golf cart into reverse. An intermittent beeping began to resonate from deep inside the cart. It both startled and excited him—the golf cart had not emitted such sounds before. "Beeps? *Pourquoi?*" he said gruffly

and punched the kill switch. He pressed his fingers to his temples, closed his eyes and froze. A whiff of cigarillo smoke penetrated Brock's nostrils. He estimated the yachtsman was twenty-eight, maybe thirty miles offshore.

After a brief moment, Brock turned the golf cart back on and flipped it into reverse for a second time. Again, the beeping commenced. It seemed louder. He clicked his strong white teeth, sprung from his seat and slid under the cart to investigate. The underside of the golf cart was a labyrinth of interconnected metal parts, bundled wire and plastic; however, Brock quickly observed an anomaly. Attached to the main axle was a tekTech tracking beacon. "I knew it," he said under his breath. Clifford Bishop and Buddy Douglas, each clutching a can of Pabst, stared down at him from their seats in the golf cart.

"Damn, he's good," they whispered in unison.

It was unclear if the beacon was activated. The tekTech corporation had put tracking beacons on all of its vehicles since the attempted assassination of a senior security officer on the island. Half were activated. Half were not, Bishop explained.

Dangerous odds, Brock thought. He pulled the casing off the device. It appeared it was properly configured. The power supply line was connected to the modulator. An encrypted code was programmed into the RAM chip. And unfortunately for Brock, Clifford and Buddy, the antenna was network active. Even if the signal was weak on account of the pill dust, it only had to reach the receiver station at the end of the esplanade.



In the April issue of Forbes magazine that year, tekTech was ranked the most paranoid organization in the world. Buddy T. Douglas's friend and investigative economist Ralph Helmut wrote the feature article. According to Helmut, tekTech had been spending upwards of three million dollars per week to surveil its Genevan bankers—nearly twice as much money as tekTech ever had in its Genevan accounts. The numbers were so staggering, so bizarre, Helmut killed himself with an elk knife. In his suicide note, he wrote, "*Pray one day the professional and private lives of investigative economists separate.*" After Helmut's suicide, few dared to investigate tekTech for fear of what they might find. If the economic mysteries of tekTech could drive a sane man insane, the political and sexual mysteries might drive a sane man insane too. The risk of undertaking such investigations was a sexual mind game of epic proportions.



"Don't move!" Brock shouted to Buddy T. Douglas and Clifford Bishop, who were still drinking on the backseat of the golf cart despite Brock's discovery of the tracker beacon.

"Does it look like we're moving?" they said in unison.

Brock twisted his wrist and caught their reflection in his masculine, large-faced watch. "Good, stay that way—I think this tracker beacon is hot," Brock shouted. "I am going to deactivate it with my machete." With his left hand, Brock grabbed his machete and exercise bag off the passenger seat and swung both under the stolen golf cart. He braced the exercise bag

between his knees and rifled through it with his machete. It was full of towels, water bottles and important papers about tekTech's involvement in the death of Flem van der Chôclet he had not bothered to read yet. A few pages fluttered out of the bag and into the ocean.

Still under the golf cart, Brock stabbed a water bottle hiding in the corner of his bag with his machete. He transferred the bottle to his free hand and, without hesitation, sprayed the bottle's contents all over the tracker beacon. Brock knew he had to lubricate the tracker beacon well before he could chop it with his machete. He sprayed water on it and then spit for good measure. Then Brock began to chop. *CLING CLING!* The machete blade sounded against the components of the tracker beacon. *CLING CLING!* After two mighty chops, it fell off the golf cart's undercarriage on to the marble tiles of the esplanade. Brock got out from under the cart, picked the tracker beacon up and hurled it into the ocean. "Where are we now!" he yelled triumphantly. "Where *are* we now!"

"I believe you are right—hmm—there," said a tekTech security agent glancing up from his tablet computer.

"Guess again," Brock said as he sprinted away from the agent.

"There, there, there, there—I still know where you are," the agent demurred. At this point the agent did not need his tablet computer to locate Brock.

"Okay, fine, maybe you do," Brock admitted. He picked up a beach rock and threw it sidearm at the agent's head. He missed—barely—and the agent ran away scared. "Enough of this guys, let's go!" Brock

said to Clifford and Buddy, who were now drinking brandy. “We can reach the diet pill factory in two minutes flat. The main building is only a half mile from us.” With his exercise bag slung over his shoulder and his machete in hand, Brock proceeded to run backwards in front of Buddy and Clifford. “Hurry up, hurry up, let’s go to the factory!” Brock commanded. “Levine is probably there!” Buddy and Clifford continued to stroll drunkenly.

Frustrated, Brock turned around and sprinted to the diet pill factory by himself, touched its wall and sprinted back to the group. “What did you see?” Buddy asked when Brock returned. Brock jogged in place and made slashing motions with his machete.

“Just some, ah ha, doors and it’s a ah ha, building,” Brock said choking on his words.

“So—should we still go over there?” Clifford asked.

“Yeah, yeah. Oh ah ha, ah, ha. Oh, I ah ha, got some, ahhh, papers about, ah ha, ahhhh” Brock said, continuing to struggle with his fluency.

“Papers? Papers about what? From the factory? What are you talking about?” Buddy said. It was almost impossible to carry on a conversation with an overactive Brock.

“I ah ha, ah ha, got, some, ah ha papers about Flem,” said Brock breathlessly.

“Flem van der Chôclet? ” Buddy whispered. His eyes locked on Brock.



The group approached the employee entrance of the diet pill factory. The pill powder cloud, which

hung so low in the sky near the water, dissipated in the presence of three industrial fans affixed to the roof of the factory. However, only those with a keen eye would notice they spun counterclockwise and that Levine Doyle lurked behind them.

The sign on the employee entrance door read: DOOR BROKEN, USE LADDER. Brock put his hand on the sign. The letters felt warm. "This was just printed," he remarked to Clifford. Brock was excited by this discovery, but more excited by the fact he would be the first to climb the ladder. The rickety old ladder rested against the side of the building. As Brock walked towards it, Levine crawled across the roof. Slowly, Brock began to climb.

The building at this location was ten stories tall. From that height, a man, even of Brock's stature, could not survive the fall. Levine readied himself to push the ladder when Brock reached the ninth story. "1, 2, 3, 4," he counted to himself. "5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10."

Levine had missed his chance. Brock had made it to the top. Desperate, he made a feeble grab for the exercise bag.

"Excuse me?" Brock asked.

Levine muttered to himself and scurried away. Hours before Brock, Buddy and Clifford arrived, Levine Doyle had chained the door of the employee entrance, unbolted the ladder and printed the sign. In retrospect, it was a terrible plan.

Brock stood on the roof waiting for Clifford and Buddy when Jacqueline-Michelle approached him from behind. She was already radioing Chuckyeager Patton, the former military general who now did contract work for Interpol, for a rescue. Usually aroused by

Jacqueline-Michelle's presence, tonight Brock felt different. Long shadows from the industrial fans moved across her face.

Is she pretty? Brock thought to himself.

He could not decide. He had been with thousands of women. Perhaps millions, he estimated. Normally such thoughts did not cross his mind.



Static came from Jacqueline-Michelle's radio. It was Patton. "I am with Brock," she said. It was all she needed to say to get Patton's attention.

The Runaway Fleury

THE ROAR OF THE OCEAN was the second sweetest thing Douglas had ever heard (the first time his objection has been sustained in a courtroom was and would always remain the first.) Disheveled and sweaty, the group stumbled onto the small, white sand beach just beyond the final stretch of low-hanging jungle vines. Roland Kidder's last-ditch attempt to use the island's security system against the giant spider monkey had failed miserably, but Clifford Bishop had managed to convince the angry beast that all it really wanted to do was sip on a Pabst and read some of Bishop's stories about a haunted hotel room.

Douglas blotted perspiration from his brow with the sleeve of his starched Brooks Brothers buttondown. *Where is the general?*

Jacqueline-Michelle, who was shading the beet-red Kidder from the sun with a large palm leaf, looked over at Douglas despairingly. He didn't need to ask if she was worried about the same thing he was worried

about. He knew that she was worried about the same thing he was worried about.



Before this, Douglas' most frightening moment had been three years ago, when he was named lead counsel on a pivotal police brutality case for his firm. Winning the case would mean Douglas was one step closer to partner; losing it would mean he was two or three steps away, perhaps more, depending on the size of the step and the cant of the gait. Douglas remembered how he had shook uncontrollably with fear as he stood up to cross examine the defendant. A good cross examination was an art form; Douglas, luckily, had found out he was an artist that day. But his quick wit and sharp, intimidating voice were no match against the roar of the waves, a roar that seemed to be getting louder and yet louder, coming in almost mechanical bursts. It was sounding less and less like the ocean and more and more like—

“Check it!” yelled Brock with some measure of joy, flinging one arm upward. Douglas jerked his head up to see the approach of a military helicopter, diving towards the beach. As the chopper grew closer, Douglas saw a figure inside; dark-haired, wearing old-fashioned aviator goggles, the man's head was flung back in what looked to Douglas like maniacal laughter. Douglas had seen the same slightly unhinged look on defendants who had successfully avoided conviction. He knew that look: Chuckyeager Patton was a natural-born killer.

He was also their savior. The straggle of tekTech survivors staggered back in the soft sand as the he-

licopter touched down near the water's edge. Patton rolled down the window and jumped out without even opening the door, his sinewy muscles flexing beneath a stylishly vintage Green Beret uniform, complete with what could only be faded, rusty bloodstains from some terrible skirmish of years past. Or possibly from this morning.

He carried a large, government-grade automatic rifle in one hand and a few hand grenades in the other, as easily as Douglas himself might have carried a set of Chinese cloisonne stress balls. Without a word, Patton raised the rifle and shot at a horseshoe crab scuttling along the waterline, spraying the creature apart with a single bullet. Douglas winced, particularly as Patton turned towards the survivors with a glint in his eye. He wiped sweat from his forehead; he spat; he was, generally speaking, a very moist man all over.

"I hear you need to get off this goddamn island," Patton said.

Douglas' voice stuck in his throat with fright, as it often did at counsel table; only after coughing productively was he able to produce sound. Patton regarded him with a rather disgusted look as he hacked, and the disgust only intensified when Douglas managed to squeak, "Yes! We do!"

"You some kind of invalid, son? You got the cystic fibrosis?" Patton asked derisively.

"Excuse me," interjected Kidder, "special skills: 2 years of EMT training. He just coughed. Cystic fibrosis is a very serious ailment that derails many otherwise healthy youths through a thick buildup of clogging mucous that prevents the lungs—"

Kidder was not able to continue his sentence, as

Patton fired a round directly into the computer scientist's head. Jacqueline-Michelle, Bishop, and Douglas all shrieked in shock and sorrow. Brock chuckled and muttered, "Geekwad."

Douglas had found his voice. "What the hell did you do that for? He didn't do anything!"

Patton squinted at him. "Buddy, that little man had it coming. Now, ladies, if you'll excuse me I'm going to drink some jungle dew. Then we can get out of this hellhole." He stepped over Kidder's form in his giant combat boots and walked towards the boundary where the jungle met and exchanged niceties with the beach. Jacqueline-Michelle turned away from the empty terrestrial vessel that had been Kidder to Douglas, Brock, and Bishop and hissed, "We can't go with him! This mad man is a madman!"

"Calm down," said Brock. "He didn't seem that angry to me."

"Richard, she means he's crazy," Douglas clarified, as lawyers so often do. "But I don't think we have much of a choice. There aren't exactly a lot of Apache helicopters being thrown around here. We wouldn't even know how to fly them if there were."

"I could do it," Brock said. Jacqueline-Michelle and Douglas ignored him.

"Yes," sighed Jacqueline-Michelle. "We must go with him. But I don't trust him!" As though to punctuate her statement, a flurry of rifle fire could be heard from inside the tree line. After a moment, Patton returned, wiping his mouth. In answer to Douglas and Jacqueline-Michelle's quizzical looks, he raised the rifle and said, "Ran into some goddamn Indians or something. Damn near scared me outta my skin. I

got 'em, though.”

“Oh, the poor Tick-Tecks,” Bishop moaned, his eyes welling with tears. Jacqueline-Michelle grabbed his hand and gave him a firm, yet sympathetic shake of her head, to indicate that he shouldn't cry around Patton. Douglas thought this was good; in his estimation, Bishop cried too much. The judicial system never looked well on a man who cried.

“Well?” Patton said pointedly. “Am I interrupting tea time or can we get the hell out of here?”

The remaining survivors set down their cups and saucers and rushed to climb inside the helicopter. Douglas closed his eyes, dizzy with emotion and dizziness as Patton, laughing, lifted the chopper off the soft sand and above the blue seas. Jacqueline-Michelle gazed out the window, watching Kidder's body fade to the tiniest speck beneath them.



Once away from the island, Patton seemed to calm. He glanced over his shoulder at his dirty passengers in the cargo hold. “So,” he said, “After I drop you folks off, what sort of bomb should I bring back to this shit-bird island?”

“No!” Bishop shouted. “The people are so gentle!”

“What we need isn't a bomb,” Douglas said, suddenly warming with inspiration. “What we need is a good lawsuit.”

Patton snorted derisively, “To get a good lawsuit, you gotta have a good lawyer. Any of you cocksuckers ever met one of those?”

The orchestra in Douglas' head swelled to fever pitch. He stood up carefully, wary not to bump his head on the helicopter's ceiling. He extended his hand for Patton to shake. "Well, sir, today you've met me. Buddy T. Douglas, attorney at law."



While those aboard Patton's helicopter were hatching plans to bomb and sue the island, the native Tick-tecks were mourning the loss of one of their own. Nearly everywhere on the island, a soft humming of "A Touch of Grey," the Tick-teck funeral song, could be heard. Among other villagers, the slaughter had taken two of the Chief's sons; their wives rent their hair and beat their woven taro-leaf garments in grief while the Chief paced in his hut, wondering how to combat this island invasion.

His wife appeared in the doorway. Her eyes were swollen, betraying that she had been crying recently, but at this moment her cheeks were dry. "What will you do?" she asked in Ticcky-Tecky.

"We need the shaman," the chief said. "This is no man, no beast. This is the work of a demon."

And in a way, he was right.

THE CIRCUIT COURT OF PHILADELPHIA COUNTY
OF THE STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA

RICHARD BROCK, individually and)
on behalf of all others)
similarly situated,)
Plaintiff,)
v.)
TEK TECH INC., a company with)
a PO box in Pennsylvania)
Defendant.)

CLASS ACTION COMPLAINT

Plaintiff, RICHARD BROCK ("Plaintiff" or "BROCK"), for his Class Action Complaint on behalf of himself and all others similarly situated, by and through his attorneys, BUDDY DUGLAS of MASON, DIXON, AND FAULKNER, upon personal knowledge as to facts pertaining to himself and upon information and belief as to all other matters, based on the investigation of his council, against Defendant TEK TECH INC. (hereinafter "Defendant") states as follows:

1. Defendant, TEK TECH INC., knowingly provided the Plaintiff, Brock with a male enhancement formula known to cause excessive growth and girth in all dimensions of a human body.
2. TEK TECH INC. tempted the Plaintiff with degree programs that were known to be fraudulent or of little use in modern society, including but not limited to, X-Ray Technician, Paralegal, Veterinarian, Information Technology Specialist, and Swordsman.
3. Defendant, TEK TECH INC. put the Plaintiff in danger by not informing him of the known existence of mutated and giant land creatures surrounding their headquarters on the island of Isla Booblar. The creatures included Huge Squirrel, Huge Spider, Huge Monkey, Huge Beetle, and Huge Tick-Teck Native Wild Man.
4. Defendant, TEK TECH INC. sent the Plaintiff, Brock, hundreds of SPAM emails, many of which included appealing promises including

The Sum of All Spheres

CHUCKYEAGER PATTON'S military helicopter beat the surface of the water white. Professor Richard Brock sat in the co-pilot seat while Jacqueline-Michelle Fleury, Clifford Bishop, and Buddy T. Douglas huddled in the cargo bay.

"Okay Brock, where to?" shouted Patton over his shoulder.

Brock, looking unsuccessfully for whales with his hands cupped over his eyes like binoculars, shrugged. "How about whale country? Croatia."

"Don't you ever mention Croatia," the grisly general scolded. "We're going to Philadelphia."

"Philadelphia? I live in Philadelphia!" Buddy T. Douglas interjected.

"And, more importantly, so does tekTech's PO Box." Patton added.

"And, and, and, the Philadelphia Municipal Whale Museum!" Brock cheered. "While I was research-

ing my seminal book on whales, *Moby Brock*, I spent hours admiring the whales there. Did you know the average whale is smart enough to ride a bicycle? It's true, even if it's in captivity. Also, the Morgan whale is an electric whale."

"An electric whale? Really? That's fascinating, Brock. Does this the military know about this? We've been searching for electric mammals for years," said a fascinated Patton. "Do you have a brochure for the museum?"

"As a matter of fact I do." Brock reached into his jacket and pulled out a stack of glossy brochures from the Philadelphia Municipal Whale Museum and distributed them to everybody on board. Chuckyea-ger Patton put the helicopter on autopilot and they all eagerly read the pamphlet.

Pleased with everyone's interest in whales, Brock nodded and gestured to the door of the helicopter. "I'm going outside to see if I can get a better view," he said and matter-of-factly unlatched his multi-point seatbelt.

Patton grinned. He knew Brock wasn't just going outside for the view. Brock opened the door, hopped out and immediately began doing pulls up on the starboard rail of the helicopter.

"That's my boy," Patton said to himself as he admired Brock from the cockpit. He yawned and sleepily finished reading the pamphlet.



Thirty minutes later Patton and everyone else were asleep in their seats as the chopper flew itself over the ocean towards Philadelphia. Everyone except for

Brock, at least, who fell asleep mid-pull on the starboard rail of the helicopter. As Brock slept, the wind whipped through his handsome hair. A female seabird crooned appreciatively from a rock in the sea, even though she was not Brock's species.

Dangling from the siderail, Brock was dreaming about a shot put competition against a Morgan whale, when suddenly an alarm blared, and the passengers and pilot awoke with a start.

"Shit! We're either out of wiper fluid or fuel," Patton shouted into the yoke.

"Eh, don't worry. I can see Independence Hall. We've made it. We've made it to Philly," Buddy T. Douglas sleepily reassured Patton.

"You don't understand, we have less than one minute of fuel left! We are going to crash!" Patton shouted.

"Ahhhh!" screamed Brock as he gymnastically maneuvered himself back into the chopper.

The engine sputtered and the helicopter wobbled in the air. Memories of Croatia raced through Patton's mind. Eating at a Croatian McDonalds. Driving tanks through Croatia. The taste of McDonalds. The taste of Croatian air. The taste of a McFlurry. Firing bullets into the Croatian flag during a blood red Croatian sunset. Getting a toy with a hamburger. Driving a tank naked. Eating a McFlurry every day.

Then, vividly he recalled a Croatian child sobbing next to a beached whale. "It was a Morgan whale!" Chuckyeager Patton stuttered.

Snapping out of his malaise, he punched out of autopilot and drew on his military experience from the USS Flag. He bellowed to the crew, "We're not getting drafted to hell today, men! I am authorizing a

crash landing. Brock, tell the FAA we're coming down hard."

Brock dutifully radioed the FAA and asked for permission to crash. "FAA, this is helicopter 4CJINF. We need permission to crash within the Philadelphia city limits. Do you read me FAA? This is Brock. I am a professor."

FAA captain Ramsey returned the call. "Brock, this is FAA captain Ramsey. You cannot crash your helicopter anywhere in Philadelphia. I repeat, permission denied."

"They can stick their permission up their ass! Override! They can't stop us!" Patton bellowed.

The helicopter careened towards the Liberty Bell. Smoke bellowed from the rotor, which was about to explode. The dials in the cockpit spun madly. Buddy T. Douglas struggled to keep down his lunch.

The reflection of the falling helicopter shone brightly across the bell's crack as a crowd of Japanese tourists milled around the historic landmark. A young boy wearing a HelloKitty backpack grasped his mother's hand and turned his head at the sound of the crashing whirlybird. Exclaiming something crazy-sounding in Japanese, the crowd turned to point as one would a giant lizard terrorizing a city. After an inappropriate pause, the crowd began to evacuate the building.

Patton looked back and forth frantically. The Liberty Bell. Japanese tourists. A beautiful symbol of peace and freedom. A throng of foreigners making the peace sign in all their photographs.

Running out of time and options, Patton struggled against the helicopter's controls. With the strength of 1776 bald eagles, General Chuckyeager Patton man-

aged to invert the helicopter sideways—narrowly avoiding a collision with the bell and mowing down all 400 of the fleeing Japanese tourists.



When the smoke cleared, Chuckyeager Patton emerged from the helicopter and examined the wreckage. Mangled bodies and blood covered the lawn outside of the bell house.

“We didn’t have a choice,” he said turning to Jacqueline-Michelle. He winked at the unscathed Liberty Bell and said under his breath, “It’s good to see you again, old friend.”

He kissed the bell like the Pope kissing the earth.

Adjusting her blouse, Jacqueline-Michelle stepped away from the smoldering copter. “General Patton, we must go to Interpol. They will be expecting a report about the island.”

“Look,” Patton said. “There are some Japanese tour buses we can commandeer in the parking lot. Clifford and Brock —go find us a place to stay. Buddy, go home.”

“Home? I don’t think so. I figured out the perfect way to bring down tekTech through the legal system because I am a lawyer,” Buddy retorted.

“That’s great, Buddy. Go pick a bus,” Patton said.

The three groups split up to their respective buses. Chuckyeager Patton began pounding on the door of the nearest and yelling to the frightened driver sitting inside. “By order of the United States Military, open this door immediately. This vehicle is now the personal property of Uncle Sam.”

The driver opened the door and shouted at the entering General, “You can’t just take this bus. It has all my passengers’ luggage on board! I need to take them to their hotel!”

“Luggage? Hotel? I have news for you, friend. Your precious Chinese tourists just made the ultimate sacrifice for liberty. Those Korean sons of bitches just gladly died for a country they don’t even live in, and you won’t lend a bus to a decorated veteran of the Croatian Invasion? You’re what’s wrong with this nation. You bus drivers sitting here without any knowledge of the sons dying overseas so you have the **OPPORTUNITY** to get your communist-carrying buses stolen. Are you telling me those boys are dying in vain? Is that what you’re trying to say? Because if it is, sir, I strongly suggest you reconsider your opinion before I forget you’re a fellow countryman and have an ‘accidental discharge’ of my boot in your ass.”

The rant succeeded in scaring the driver out of the bus. Jacqueline-Michelle took a seat as Patton set off for Interpol.



Meanwhile, Buddy T. Douglas was pretending to argue with the driver of a neighboring bus. As soon as Chuckyeager Patton and Jacqueline-Michelle were out of sight, he apologized to the bus driver for his rude behavior and began to walk to his car, which was parked 45 blocks away.

Across the parking lot, Clifford Bishop was trying desperately to get into an unoccupied locked bus; Richard Brock was trying to squat lift it.

“Okay, Richard. The bus is locked and none of the windows are open. How are we going to handle this?”

“Hush up, Bishop,” replied Brock. “I need to blast my quads pronto and your whining is undefatiguing my glutoids.” The sentence didn’t make sense, but Clifford Bishop was silenced regardless. As Clifford scanned the parking lot for some other mode of transportation, he noticed a coil of cable beside an idling taxi.

“Richard! I have an idea! Go grab that cable.”

Brock fetched the cable and brought it back to the bus. Clifford fed the cable under the front axle of the bus. Brock’s pants tightened as he began to recognize the workout ahead of him.

“Alright Brock, time to pump those legs. Take this cable and MUSH!” With that, Clifford climbed on Brock’s shoulders as the ichthyologist began to slowly pull the parked bus towards a hotel.

The Pelican Boxers

BUDDY T. DOUGLAS lowered the volume of his car radio as he pulled into the parking structure. It was his first time back at the office since his two-week long trip to tekTech, and some jerk had already started parking in his space. The attorney settled for another on the ramp between the first and second floors. Always by the book, he lifted his parking brake and turned the steering column counter-clockwise before exiting a BMW leased in his firm's name. As his hands slipped out of the 10-2 position, his left one slid along a device that looked a bit like a hidden microphone. "Odd," Buddy said to himself. "My car doesn't have Bluetooth."

"No, yeah, it does," replied a voice from the microphone. "Definitely."

"Oh, good," said Buddy, relieved. He locked the car.



The forty-three year old felt out of place as he walked the exposed path to his building. It was a dreary Philadelphia morning, but he wore a textbook lawyer's tan (lines at the collar *and* the cuffs) as a reminder of the misadventures of the past eight chapters of his life. Douglas nodded at the security guard as he walked through the doors of the Franklin Executive Building, who did not respond. He took the elevator to the eighth floor, where he was greeted by the embossed "Mason, Dixon, and Faulkner" header above the office's double doors. Underneath it rested an ominous maintenance ladder, which he noted. Duly.

"...And I think that lovely new bride of yours will approve of the charming apartment we've picked out," Douglas overheard as he turned the corner past reception. He followed the Southern drawl along a corridor to the office it belonged to. Senior partner Jeb Dixon was sitting with his heels up on his desk. As usual, he managed to appear both casual and terrifying.

The associate stood impishly in his boss's doorway for several minutes before he was acknowledged. In the meantime, he sized up the kid sitting opposite his boss in the chair near the door. He was clean-cut enough, wearing his only good suit along with a twelve-dollar haircut. His smile was priceless, as a smile should be on the first day at this firm.

"Of course," Dixon continued, "we'll be taking those student loans off your hands. In return we expect only that you start immediately and take charge of a priority case. Some issues within Philly's Mangetti family, you know the Mangettis, started the organic butcher chain in town way back when. We're defend-

ing the current franchise owner, Giuseppe, against allegations of embezzlement, racketeering, and beheading horses for symbolic purposes.”

“Beheading horses?” the newbie inquired. His expression was part confused, part nervous, but all toothy. He would go far.

Before anyone could offer piece of mind, though, Douglas finally interrupted. “I thought Glen Thompkins and Jimmy Mason were handling Mangetti.”

The head partner looked up, taken aback. Dixon greeted Douglas rather than directly answer his question. “Hey there, buddy boy. Looks like you finally came home. And just in time to meet our newest recruit; this is Steve McDowell, straight out of Harvard Law. Stevie, say hello to one of our veteran associates, Fr . . . uh..Pa.um . . .”

“Buddy,” Douglas mumbled resignedly. “But,” he picked up again, “what the hell happened to Thompkins and Jim? Why are they off the case?” Douglas’s gaze burned into the liver spots atop his superior’s balding head.

“Oh, lawdy. The firm experienced a bit of a tragedy last weekend. You know the scuba diving package that we’ve been rotating along with the keys to the vacation place down in Martinique?”

To this Douglas didn’t respond. He generally was not included in these kinds of rotations. In fact, the only time the firm ever wined and dined him anymore was at the annual Pennsylvania Bar Luncheon. And that was because they needed a firm representative to show.

“You might want to sit down for this, Dick. There was a shark attack . . .”

“What! They were eaten by a shark?” Douglas couldn’t help but note (duly) his boss’s stoicism.

“No, no,” the man corrected. “Only Thompkins was eaten by a shark. Jimmy Mason’s lungs exploded in an unrelated incident during their stay.”

“You mean to tell me we lost a five-year associate *and* a senior partner in, wait, what are you doing?”

Jeb looked up from the shredder, into which he fed several reams of paperwork from files marked “Mason” and “Thompkins.” “We all grieve in our own way, Aamir.” Douglas blinked back uncomprehendingly. “You know what, let’s talk about you. Weren’t you working on some sort of case-type thing?”

The travel-weary lawyer knew he had a lot of explaining to do: why he’d stayed on the island for such an extended period of time and, perhaps more importantly, why he had switched sides of the case. The boss was sure to grill him on those inconsistencies. “Well —”

Jeb turned around and started up the shredder again. Buddy waited for a moment, gave the new kid a slight nod and started to leave for his desk.

“Oh, one more thing,” Jeb called out as Buddy left the room. “Stevie’s gonna need your old space. You’re sharing a desk with the receptionist now.”

Apparently, Deb the receptionist already knew that Douglas was back in town and had left a welcome home note on his half. The postscript asked him to cover the phone for her while she ran an errand. He tossed the card, he had important calls to make. It wasn’t his fault that meant tying up the phone line.

Immediately, he tried his old law school friend Ted Klosky at Ted’s office. No answer. He wasted no

time before trying the cell.



This wasn't your average 20-year phone reunion. Douglas and Klosky had kept in touch on an almost monthly basis since they graduated from Boston College together. Klosky wasn't exactly a lawyer, but he was the guy you went to if you needed to dig up some dirt on someone. The kind of guy to see for detective work. Interestingly enough, he was also a heluva insurance assessor. Hell, he could even get you a Zamboni ride between periods of a Flyers' game if you were so interested . . . and someone was, once. Ted Klosky was a great asset.

"Isn't it a little early to be calling people?" Klosky answered through the thick layer of morning phlegm lining his throat.

"Ted, it's 11:00 am. I'm sorry I didn't follow up on that stuff I asked for—no service on the island. What do you have for me?"

"Hold your horses," his friend croaked. "This tekTech of yours wasn't in the books before 1998. I thought you were pulling my dick or something."

"Do you have to be so crude all the time?" Buddy snapped. As he spoke, a machine attached to his phone cradle transcribed their conversation onto a piece of paper with the "M, D, & F" letterhead. "That's not even how that figure of speech goes. And shit, you don't think they might have filed stuff under a different name?"

"Not if they were still an S-Corporation back then, no. It would have come up."

Klosky was right, Douglas realized. A registered S corporation, which is to say, a small business corporation for which an election under section 1326 (a) of the Internal Revenue Code in effect for any taxable year, would certainly appear in their files, unless perhaps the organization's capital had been transferred from elsewhere by a trust shareholder, such as a bank (as defined in section 581) or a depository institution holding company (as defined in section 3(w)(1) of the Federal Deposit Insurance Act (12 U.S.C. 1813 (w)(1))), a trust which constitutes an individual retirement account under section 408A. At least that's what Wikipedia said.

"B-but hey!" Klosky continued. "I think I know where you should go with this case. I did some research while you were gone." Klosky was a legal theory expert, as well. "Meet me on the first set of Gothic library steps that you find." With that he hung up. As Douglas got into the elevator, he noticed the firm letterhead now read "Dixon, Faulkner, and DeCavalcante." *How Italian*, Douglas thought.



By the time Buddy T. Douglas arrived at the Philadelphia Municipal Library his friend had been waiting for ten minutes. Even from across Vine Street he could see Klosky had put on weight. He was a short, doughy man, but there was something bellicose about him. The guy may have had a couple of scruples loose, but Buddy wasn't afraid to admit that Klosky was punctual when it came to legal drama. Klosky could be a huge pain in the asset, he claimed to have a case-

winning technicality. As the two men shook hands, Buddy tried and failed to come up with a third pun.

The men headed inside and grabbed a table in the corner. Klosky ran off almost immediately to get the books they needed. He returned with a leather-bound stack that extended far above his sweat-stained Fedora.

“Wow, Klosky. All these to explain the loop-hole?”

“No, this is everything on one of the shelves.” Klosky had never learned the finer points of the Dewey Decimal System, and at this point he didn’t care to. Before Douglas could pose another question, he spread the volumes across the table, card sharp style. He scanned the tomes quickly, his eyes lighting up only at the far right side of the fan. He delicately withdrew a paperback, much thinner than the rest.

“*1001 Wacky Legal Technicalities?!?*” Buddy took the title out of his pal’s hand. “This is how you expect me to take down tekTech?”

“Um . . . Yeah,” Klosky laughed nervously. A bead of sweat developed at his furry brow, and he backed down. He was much more DeVito than Pesci.

The book had 15 bonus lawyer jokes in the back, so Douglas checked it out anyway. He left Klosky and returned to the office, stopping at a liquor store along the way. Finally, a big case, and this was all he had? He needed something to calm him down. Something often meant Wild Turkey.



As he passed through the double doors, Buddy T. Douglas couldn’t help but notice that maintenance

was changing the firm letterhead again. *They probably screwed up the spelling of the new senior partner's name. I've never heard of anybody named "DeCavalcante" anyway.*

From an office down the hall, he heard something that sounded almost like a gunshot. Probably just a printer backfiring or something, Douglas thought, a little shaky on the mechanics of dot-matrix technology. He continued walking until he reached the file room, where he was expecting to receive a fax from Dr. Brock. Douglas had requested from him an account of his adventures leading up to their meeting on the island. Surprisingly, one was on its way through when he got there. More surprisingly, it was filled with text rather than a photocopy of the professor's ass for once. Douglas grabbed it off the loading tray and began reading:

"... Graduated top of his class at Harvard Law. Was inducted into the secret society Nook & Cranny in his second year. He was Phi Beta Kappa at Alabama, but only went there to play football. Parents are Mark and Blythe, a grocer and a Sunday School teacher. Has a birthmark in the shape of a Milano cookie on his left glute. Charged with one crime—minor in possession of alcohol—at a concert in high school. Tried cocaine once, off a stripper's pelvic bone. Has no idea that we're the Mafi—"

This fax wasn't for him, it was about that new recruit Steve McDowell. The paper carried the Mangetti family watermark, and had over four pages of detail. Douglas shrugged nonchalantly and placed it in the file cabinet designated for employee background checks, heading back to his desk. As he walked, he began to

flip absentmindedly through *1001 Wacky Legal Technicalities*. He didn't see that it contained much useful information. To be perfectly frank, the technicalities weren't even that wacky. Off the wall, maybe. Pointedly ignoring two more gunshot sounds, he decided to poke around the archives to see if he couldn't turn up something a little more relevant to his case. He would do this, he decided, like a real lawyer— briskly.



The firm's archives were notorious up and down the Eastern Seaboard as little more than a glorified landfill, and Buddy saw his trip as a formality at best. Just down to the subbasement, take a look at the tek-Tech evidence files, what could it hurt? He whistled a punchy tune, like Thomas Newman but cheaper, as he walked briskly towards the elevator, and then past it, as it was on fire. *Odd*. He took a pull of Wild Turkey.

Stepping briskly out of the stairwell, he was immediately hit by the overpowering odor of rotting depositions. "This is symbolic," said Buddy to nobody in particular. Undeterred by the stench, he wended his way briskly through the maze, passing great heaps of unused evidence, guns, tissue samples, elderly witnesses chained to poles. Any of these exhibits would have been enough to put great men away, powerful men, but Buddy didn't have the time now. He had a tax loophole to look up. Also, a bottle to finish. He downed another finger.

Briskly passing a stack of lost children on his right, the lawyer reflected on the good times he had spent in this labyrinthine hellhole, researching the finer points of maritime law or Sharpie-ing in a couple of

extra lines on a DNA test. So many cases. There was the one with the hate crime, the one with environmentalism, the one with the chick from Brazil, the one in the military with that conspiracy, or was that even his? All of those stories ran together in Buddy's head after a while. They seemed to follow the same basic pattern.

The tekTech file was not easy to find. Or, rather it was, it was alphabetized and suspended neatly in a file folder, much as a dossier ought to be. But Buddy was now feeling the Turkey, and was having trouble locating his own left elbow. It was on his left arm, he knew, but *where* exactly was utterly confounding.

"Fuck it," announced Buddy to a copy of the 1977 tax code. One-armed, he grasped the tekTech file and gingerly withdrew it. And then shook it vigorously to see if anything was inside.

As it turned out, four things were inside the file. One of these, Buddy observed as he collected it from the bin of law books five rows over where it had landed, was an audiocassette recording of Chicago's Greatest Hits. "Sounds of the 70s," the case stated. Buddy painstakingly noted this on a Post-it note, his superiors having denied him access to legal pads until he made partner.

The other three items were simple documents. One was a notice informing employees of "Bufino, Dixon, and DeCavalcante" —*Bufino?* thought Douglas— that all evidence relating to the tekTech case had been removed for destruction. A second was a tattered envelope with "-AFIA SECRETS" in indistinct lettering across its front. Clearly a misfile. Douglas tossed it onto a heap of oily rags. He hated that sort of bureaucratic inattention.

The third paper Buddy almost missed. As he went to replace the folder, a shred of paper fluttered to the ground. Intrigued, he bent to look. Unlike the other two sheets, the message was not printed on company letterhead, but rather scrawled on part of napkin: "p. 172." Buddy, senses dulled by Kentucky's finest 101 proof, sat confused for a minute before he thought to turn to his *Wacky* paperback. And there it was at the top of the page, in Klosky's unmistakable hand.

"Chicago rocks," it said.



Back at home, Buddy found it difficult to eat the penne with escarole his wife had prepared. This was partially because they had no utensils. Their silverware drawer was taken up by a massive tape recorder the feds had placed there a month ago while disguised as something they called "radio repairmen." Douglas, never one to rock the boat, didn't have the heart to acknowledge the change, and so now ate his meals with his children's school supplies.

Adding to Buddy's lack of appetite, however, was his inability to get hold of Klosky in order to decipher the mysterious message his friend had gone to such lengths to disguise. Chicago did rock. Buddy was very much aware of this, having lost his virginity to a plump 17-year-old named Sidney Wallford as the tinny strains of "Colour My World" played through his Trans Am's speakers. But Klosky had always been more of a Boston guy.

He stood up abruptly, knocking into a low-hanging microphone a rival firm had recently installed.

"Hon?" his wife asked, worried.

“Nothing, nothing,” Buddy replied, sitting back down and absentmindedly taking a bite of a burnt umber crayon.

“You know it always goes like this,” she said. “Every time there’s a case it’s the same old story.”

“I know, I know. I get so sick of the pattern, though. The repetition. It’s all so formulaic.”

“Maybe this one won’t be.” She looked at him with big doe eyes. She was a sweet girl, Sidney.



Heading briskly into the office the next day, Buddy saw yet another new name—Bonanno—above the double doors. Having a new partner on board wouldn’t make his job any easier, he knew. And yet, his talk with his wife had, however subtly, given him a new sense of purpose. *Maybe this time really will be different*, he thought. *Maybe I’ll break this pattern*. He’d best introduce himself around.

Timidly, but briskly, he knocked on the door labeled “Bonanno,” stepping over three paralegals impaled on a curtain rod that, Buddy was nearly positive, had come from Accounting.

“Why don’t you come in,” said a voice with a precise accent somewhere between New York and Sicily, somewhat strained from exertion, but nevertheless elegant and controlled. Buddy slid into the room, finding a sweaty and blackened Mr. Bonanno, Esq. sitting behind half a desk. The room was pockmarked with craters, and what appeared to be most of Bonanno’s secretary’s leg was half in, half out of a desk drawer. Nevertheless, his dark suit remained pristine, and the white cat in his lap seemed unscathed. “It is very much

a pleasure to meet with you, my friend.” Bonanno said, extending his arm. “If I could ask you to duck for a moment.” The partner lobbed a grenade into the hallway behind Buddy. “How might I help you?”

Buddy’s answer was drowned out by an explosion and the screams of dismembered personal injury lawyers.

“Mmm?” asked Bonanno.

“The three men on the curtain rod outside?” repeated Buddy, utterly deaf.

“The ah . . . how can I put this . . . new three-hole punches? They are not user friendly.” *Makes sense*, Buddy thought. He turned to leave.

“Oh, one more question,” the lawyer remembered, turning. “Your accent . . . where did you go to school?”

Bonanno looked up from his bowl of spaghetti. “Oh? I cannot say that I have had much in the way of finer schooling. Instead, one might say that I merely have a great deal of experience in the art of persuasion.”

“But where are you from?”

“I am from, let us say, Biloxia.”

“You mean Biloxi? Buddy’s eyes narrowed.”

“Yes.”

“In Mississippi?”

“Very much so.”

Buddy thought for a second. “I have relatives in Biloxi!”



Klosky finally called Buddy back just as he was leaving Bonanno’s office, dodging the hail of bullets

that was coming from the lounge area. He sounded pleased with his handiwork.

“Wasn’t it great? I did good, right?”

“Totally. You know, I lost my virginity to that tape.”

A pause on the other end of the line. “Really?”

“Well, to the original album, not a compilation.”

“Oh thank God,” said Klosky.

Buddy looked at his phone, confused. He hadn’t realized Klosky was such a purist.

“Look, Douglas, I found a witness for the whole tekTech scandal. He’s perfect, cuts a real sympathetic figure. Just a kid, but knows everything there is to know.”

“Great - is he with you?”

“No, no, that’s the thing. He disappeared on me. But I taped an interview with him. That’s what the tape is, Buddy. It’s the interview with your star witness.”

Buddy rushed briskly to his car. He could feel his adrenaline pumping as he inserted the cassette into the tapedeck, feel his fingers shaking with the excitement. He leaned back into the driver’s seat and pressed play.

The sound quality was scratchy but not unintelligible. Buddy could hear a voice, clearly Klosky’s, giving the date and time, and the name of the witness, Clovis Hetchins. And then after a brief sound of shuffling, the interview.

KLOSKY: Could you just go ahead and describe for me what your involvement with tekTech was?

(Pause.)

KLOSKY: YOU TELL ME RIGHT NOW ABOUT TEKTECH, YOU LITTLE PUNK.

(Pause.)

KLOSKY: Why don't you just go ahead and start from the beginning. Look. We just want to help you.

(Pause.)

KLOSKY: JESUS FUCK, YOU SHIT-EATING ASSHOLE.

(Pause.)

KLOSKY: How about those Phillies?

Buddy fast-forwarded a little.

KLOSKY: OK, good, we're finally getting somewhere.

(Pause.)

KLOSKY: All right, that's good, then. Can you tell me a little more?

(Pause.)

KLOSKY: Fascinating, fascinating. So -

(Pause.)

KLOSKY: Oh, wow.

Here, Klosky's recording evidently stopped, as Chicago songwriter James Pankow went on an extended trombone solo.

Buddy paused the tape and dialed Klosky again.

"Hello?"

Hey, uh, Klosky? Could you tell me a little bit more about our witness?"

"Did you listen to the tape?"

"Oh yeah, yeah, I just wanted to get a little background."

“Just about the kid?”

“Yeah.”

“So he’s about seven.”

“Seven?”

“Mm-hm. And he’s from somewhere down in Clanton.”

“OK.”

“Parents were employees of tekTech.”

“Sure.”

“And he’s got no mouth.”

Buddy mulled over this statement briefly. “He has no mouth.”

“Absolutely no mouth.”

“Mouthless?”

“Sans mouth. Some sort of condition. Talked entirely through sign language.”

“And you, ah - you didn’t think write any of that stuff down, by chance?”

“What? Naw, man, I taped it.”

“All right. Thanks a bunch, Klosky.”

“Hey, no problem. Any time.”

Buddy hung up. He sat still for several minutes, sinking into the BMW’s leather seat. So he probably wasn’t going to win this case. Not with this evidence. That much was clear. Maybe there was some out there waiting for him, but he doubted it. With the lugubrious but brisk movements of a depressed lawyer, Buddy ejected the tape, turned it over, and rewound to the first song, *What Kind of Man Would I Be?* His head hung, Buddy pressed play.

“You want a smoke?” Klosky asked his witness.

The Whining

WITH THE REST OF THE TEAM occupied, Bishop and Brock were left to check into the hotel. Bishop was aware that he had essentially been given a babysitting job. He sighed as Brock's enormous bulk lowered the taxi by three inches. *First we check in, he thought, then I'll buy a case of High Life and a porno movie. That ought to keep him busy while I work on the book.*

"Hey Cliffy, where's the minibar in this limo?" Brock asked loudly.

"This isn't a limo, Brock. It's a taxi. You flagged it down, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah," Brock replied. "Hey, after we get to the hotel, what do you say we pick up a case of High Life and a porno movie?"

"Sounds good, Brock, but I'm going to work on my book tonight."

"You're working on a book?" Brock asked with mild interest. "Is it about fish?"

"No, it's about spooky shit in New England."

Brock shrugged. "Booring. Let me know if you decide to make it about fish. You know what you

should write about? Female bodybuilders.”

Bishop didn't answer, as he was pretending to be asleep. Brock didn't notice, and continued to talk about his aunts Chrissy, Danielle, and Claire, who were all female bodybuilders competing on the Eastern European circuit. Bishop may not have been listening, but the cab driver was very impressed, and he drove around the block of the hotel seven times so he and Brock could discuss well-muscled women.

The hotel was the Independence Tower, in one of the oldest parts of Philadelphia. Bishop and the bellhop grumbled as it took Brock three tries to jump and slap the top of the enormous doorway. The challenge seemed to excite Brock. “Hey, Cardinal, this place is alright!”

“My last name is Bishop, Brock.”

“Right. Sorry, Heathcliff.”

The men approached the front desk. A gaunt, ashen-faced clerk leered at them. Bishop walked towards this man, only to be blocked by Brock, who leaned against the desk casually. “Hey Bish, check out the talent in this place,” Brock said, eyeing several attractive, rich-looking women who were enjoying cocktails on couches around the lobby. The desk clerk coughed politely.

“Hey pal,” said Brock. “Hell of a place you have here. Hell-of-a-place.”

The clerk winced. “As you say, sir ... *hell* of a place.”

“We're registered under the Fleury party,” Bishop said, doing his best to slowly push Brock aside. Brock didn't seem to notice. “I'm Clifford Bishop and this is Dr. Richard Brock.”

“Ah yes, I have your reservation here. You and Dr. Brock have a suite . . . oh my . . .”

“Is there a problem?” Bishop asked.

“Mr. Bishop, there appears to be a slight problem with your room . . . we would be happy to pay for your stay and dining expenses at any other five-star hotel in Philadelphia until a different room is available tomorrow.”

Bishop drew himself up, preparing for the traditional dance of indignation and threats of litigation that so commonly accompanies a botched reservation. “What exactly is wrong with the room, may I ask?”

“I’m sorry sir, but since the accident none of our guests have found themselves able to spend even a single night in the room. Many have reported . . . disturbances.”

“Never mind that,” Brock interjected. “Where’s the weight room? I want to look jacked before I make the rounds.” He resumed winking and flashing his flawless smile at the socialites who were strewn about the room.

Bishop mumbled under his breath, “What was this accident? What’s wrong with the room?”

“Ah, sir, hotel policy forbids me to speak of it.”

“I’ll tell you what, pal. You tell me what the hell is going on, or I’ll call my good friend Buddy Douglas and tell him that this hotel discriminated against me and my retarded friend here.” Brock didn’t hear this slight against him, as he had grabbed a waiter and was ordering drinks for twin sisters across the room who reeked of congenital wealth and Cosmopolitans.

Bishop sighed. “Fine, I’ll call my good friend General Chuckyeager Patton and let him know that a

Commie-run hotel in the cradle of liberty is turning away honest, hard-working Americans.”

The clerk went pale. “Of course, sir. General Patton is a frequent and valued guest here. Very well . . . two weeks ago in the room in which you are booked, a painter fell off a stepladder and sprained his wrist.”

“What the hell?” said Bishop confusedly. “What does a minor injury have to do with ‘disturbances’?”

The clerk shrugged. “It might just be a coincidence.”

Bishop rubbed his forehead. “Whatever. Just give us the room.”

“Are you sure, Mr. Bishop? I strongly advise you to—”

Bishop snatched the keys from the hand of the paranoid clerk, suppressing a “yoink.”



Brock and Bishop stood outside their room. Bishop tried to figure out which way to insert the incomprehensible key card. Brock gripped his arm suddenly.

“Brock, what the hell . . .”

There was mingled fear and fascination on Brock’s face. His lips moved silently and he stared at the door.

“Problem, Dick?” Bishop noted that Brock’s grip on his jacket was tightening.

“We can’t go in there, Bishop. Let’s get another room.”

“What? Why not? What’s with you?”

“Look at the room number! It’s 1300!”

“So what?”

“What are you, some kinda mouth-breather? It sums to thirteen!”

Bishop looked at the pale and quivering Richard Brock before him.

“No it doesn’t, Brock. It sums to four.”

Brock stopped shivering. “Oh, right. Ha ha, good one, man!”

By now Bishop had managed to get the door open. “I call top bunk!” Brock bellowed, pushing into the room. “Crap, no bunk beds. Hey Bish, I’ll wrestle you for the bed in front of the TV.”

Bishop didn’t answer. He stood just inside the threshold of the room, slowly moving his eyes around every corner. He shivered slightly. “Brock, do you notice anything . . . weird about this room?”

Brock rolled his eyes. “Uh, yeah I do — total sausage fest in here. I’m going to put on a tighter T-shirt and go check out those Betsy Rosses in the bar.”

Brock turned and froze. Bishop saw it too; the two queen size beds were gone, and instead, stacked neatly in the corner, were twin bunk beds.

“Brock . . . I thought you said there were no bunk beds . . . what the hell is going on in this room . . .”

“I did say that, Bishop,” said Brock, shaking his head in disbelief. He paused. “Oh well, I guess I was wrong. I must be tanked!” Brock considered this new information. “When did I have a drink, or enough drinks to get completely plastered? Hmm . . . must have been in that limo on the way over.”

“Christ, Brock!” shouted Bishop. “Don’t you see? The clerk was right! This room is haunted! If we stay here we’ll die!”

Brock brought his hands up in a gesture of unaccountability. “Whoa man, I didn’t say we should stay here, I said we should go to the bar.”

Bishop stared at Brock before sighing in defeat, mumbling to himself, “This kind of shit doesn’t happen in Maine.”

Brock scratched his head. “Yo Bishop, I’ve been meaning to ask: what is it with you and Maine?”

Bishop whipped around, pointing at Brock fiercely. “Don’t *ever* talk that way about Maine.”

“Hey, hey, I didn’t say anything about Old Mainey. I like that place. Did a summer research job up there as a sophomore. Lobstermen really know how to knock a few back.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry. I get little touchy about the greatest state in the Union.”

Brock was confused. “What, Michigan?”

Bishop’s face clouded. “Sure, Michigan. I need a drink. Let’s go.”

Brock reached for the door. The handle wouldn’t give. “What the...” he said, jerking the doorknob. “Bishop! Doorknob’s all retarded; we’re going to have to punch our way out.”

Brock clenched both fists and delivered a quick series of haymakers to the door. The door didn’t budge, and Brock recoiled with bruised knuckles. A deep, primal groan swelled as if from the floor and the walls and shook everything in the room. It was the sound of dinosaurs singing a funeral dirge, and the hair on Brock’s rippling forearms stood up straight.

Bishop looked up from his manuscript. “What the hell was that?”

“I think it was Mr. Door saying he wants a flying kick,” Brock replied. He ran and leaped at the kicking it ninja-style with the full force of his considerable mass. Upon connecting with the door, Brock

was thrown back ten feet, careening into Bishop. The door shuddered and the room filled with the sound of howler monkeys watching a fireworks show. Brock and Bishop covered their ears as the din rose to a staggering volume.

“Stop, drop, and roll!” roared Brock. Bishop couldn’t hear him, but surmised what he had said as Brock rolled around on the ground. The hellish cacophony subsided several seconds later. The two men, pale and shaken, looked at each other silently.

“Brock,” Bishop asked, seeing something out of the corner of his eye, “did you chip a layer of paint off the door, exposing red underneath, or is the door bleeding?”

Brock hoisted himself up and peered at the door. “Yeah, it’s bleeding.” The men stared at it with fascination, bewilderment, and dread. Brock came to his senses first. “So, the door is bleeding . . . Ha! I guess I wounded the bastard! Let’s finish him off!” He lowered his shoulder and prepared to ram himself through the door.

“Brock, no!” Bishop grabbed Brock and yanked him back. “You tried that, and the room screamed like every kitten in the world was put in a blender the size of Maine.”

Brock shrugged. “I thought it sounded more like a shoe sale.” Bishop stared at Brock, not following. “Hell hath no fury like a woman denied the last pair of half-off Italian pumps.”

Bishop shook his head. “Whatever. The bottom line is, the door locked mysteriously, and shit flew when you tried to bust out. Oh, for God’s sake, can we cauterize that damn door or something?” The door

continued to bleed profusely, and the fluid was beginning to pool on the carpet.

“Huh, kind of reminds me of a shoe sale,” said Brock.

Bishop looked pained. “Look, Brock. This room is haunted as hell, and we need to get out, or we will be the next ghosts to haunt it. What are we going to do?”

Brock shrugged. “I dunno, read from the Bible?”

Bishop brightened. “Yes, yes! Why didn’t we think of this sooner? The Gideon Bible’s got to be in one of these drawers . . . Brock, check that one in the nightstand.”

Brock opened the drawer and brought out a book. His face contorted with terror, and he flung the book away. “*Dianetics*? What kind of hotel is this?”

“We have to get fucking out of here!” Bishop screamed and ran at the sliding glass doors to the balcony. He struggled violently to jerk the door open, but it would not give. Dismayed and breathing erratically, Bishop sank to his knees. From outside on the balcony, a topiary figure of an elephant stared mockingly back at him. Bishop closed his eyes and muttered to himself. “Got to get out, got to get to Maine. Must be most popular fiction writer of twentieth century. Must eventually write guest column for *Entertainment Weekly*.”

“Whoa, Bishop, open your eyes, man,” said Brock, a small shudder in his voice. Bishop opened his eyes, the topiary again stared back at him, but it was no longer an elephant . . . it had changed, morphed itself into an adorable rabbit with green, leafy eyes full of malice.

“Well I don’t know if I should be terrified or just

say that that's really awesome," said Bishop, some of his composure returning.

"Shut the curtains, man," Brock said, shaking his head. "That devil bunny is just too adorable."

Bishop drew the curtains and turned towards Brock. "What now?"

Brock considered this for a moment. "There's this thing I can do with my Grandma . . . we can have conversations in different rooms, or even across the world . . . I could ask her to send help."

Bishop looked fascinated. "You mean, a psychic gift? You can speak in each other's minds?"

"What? No, man. Grandma and I get free any-time long distance calling between our cell phones." He paused, his eyes watering ever so slightly. "I love my Grandma."

"Give Granny a call then."

"Who's Granny?"

"Your grandmother."

"Oooooooooooh, you mean Ms. Chandler-Richards. We were never allowed to call her 'Granny.' She made a man out of me."

"That's great. Now how about you call Ms. Chandler-Richards and see if she can send help."

"Right." Brock hit speed dial on his phone and waited for the ring. "You've reached the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals hotline," said a voice on the other end. "Ew, nasty! I accidentally called PETA!"

"Try again, then!" Bishop was getting more and more anxious.

Brock dialed again. He listened for his Grandma's voice. "Hello, you've reached the People Against Rich-

ard Brock hotline.” Brock threw the phone; it exploded against the wall. “PARB! I thought I had shaken them!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Demon phone only calls the things I hate the most!”

“Like what, the ‘Ichthyology is a joke science’ hotline?” Bishop said cruelly.

“THAT’S NOT FUNNY!” Brock roared, throwing himself at Bishop, knocking him to the floor.

“Gah, stop! Stop! It’s the room!”

Brock had picked up Bishop and was preparing to pile-drive him into the floor.

“Brock! Get ahold of yourself!”

Brock paused, and Bishop’s head stopped just short of the floor.

“You’re right, Bishop. This room wants us to kill each other.” He lay Bishop down and sat on the bottom bunk.

“We can’t get out, Brock, and this room won’t stop trying to drive us crazy. What do we do?”

“We just wait it out. We turn off our brains and wait for the room to give up. Plus, Jackie-Michelle will show up eventually, and in an argument between her and this room, my money’s on her.”

Bishop nodded in agreement with this last comment by Brock. “Okay, Brock. We’ll give it a shot. I’ll go write my book at that desk in the corner. What are you doing to do?”

“I’m going to see if I can find the game on TV.”

“Which game?”

“Dammit Bishop! It doesn’t matter! Turn your mind off! Don’t give this demon chamber anything to

feed on!”

“Okay, okay. Let me know if you find an NHL game; I understand hockey is very popular in Maine.”

The bottom bunk creaked as Brock plunked himself down with the remote. He flipped through the channels.

“Hey Bishop—”

Bishop looked up from his manuscript, mildly irritated. “Yes?”

“They’ve got women playing pro hoops on the TV here.”

“That’s the WNBA. It’s been around for a while.”

“Oh, no shit . . . hey, what’s the ‘W’ stand for?”

“Women, Brock.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Brock continued idly skipping through channels, the content of each barely registering as he let his mind go blank. Suddenly, he stopped.

“Hell, yeah! Shark Week on Discovery.”

Bishop gripped his pen tightly and tried to ignore the overjoyed ichthyologist, who was now off the bed and pumping his fist in the air.

“Sharks,” Brock noted, “are the Richard Brocks of the Fish Kingdom.”

The TV announced that Brock had not only stumbled upon Shark Week, but also on Hammerhead Day. Brock was so happy he did a secret dance only Ph.D.-level ichthyologists know. Bishop was concentrating on his work and didn’t see it.

The program focused on hammerheads in the Sea of Cortez. “Hammerheads,” the documentarian explained, “have electrical receptors on the underside of their heads, which they use like much like a metal

detector, but for seeking fish which bury themselves in the sand.” A hammerhead approached the camera slowly, its powerful jaw rising and falling as if the shark were speaking a threat to the encroaching cameraman.

Brock watched, utterly fascinated, and slightly aroused. The shark’s cold, black eyes stared out from the TV at him. *Richard Brock . . .* A voice said. Brock looked at Bishop, who was still writing intently. He shrugged and looked back at the screen. The hammerhead still stared back at him.

Brock.

What the hell, thought Brock. Goddamn shark is talking to me.

The noise of the TV program had fallen away. Only the shark on the screen remained, gazing with predatory focus at Brock.

What are you doing, Brock?

Brock sat motionless.

Uh, hey Jaws, I’m just watching TV.

Why are you watching TV when Bishop is just sitting there?

Bishop? He’s writing his book.

Have you read his book? I think he’s making a chump out of you.

Nah, not Ol’ Bishy. He’s okay.

He’s an ambitious man, Brock. If he wants to be a famous writer, he needs a strong main character, and an idiot for comic relief. No one’s ever used an ichthyologist for comic relief before. Think about it.

Brock turned his head slowly toward Bishop. That man was still writing at a furious rate, smiling slightly to himself.

Look at him, Brock. He's using you. He's turning you into a laughingstock.

Maybe you're right . . . he was on that island for a long time. Maybe it turned his brains into chum.

Exactly. Brock, you're a fish scientist. You understand me and my kind. I think we're on the same page.

Yeah, we both hate dolphins.

The shark was silent for a second, contemplating Brock, who sat transfixed.

True, but I was thinking more that you know what needs to be done.

What needs to be done?

You need to deal with Bishop.

Yeah, that guy needs some dealing with. I'll give him a titty twister. Maybe stick his head in the toilet if he doesn't take me out of his book.

I don't think that's going to work, Brock. I think you need to take more serious action.

Like what?

You know how to use a gun, Brock? There's one under your mattress.

Whoa, what's a gun doing there?

The Constitution was written in this city, Brock. They understand the Second Amendment here.

So, Americans have the right to blow away bitchy writers.

Exactly. You get my drift now?

I sure do, Grins, old buddy.

Brock got up from the bed.

“I have to murder Clifford Bishop.”

Bishop jerked his head up immediately. “What are you talking about Brock?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Yes you did, you said you have to murder me.”

“I wish Bishop could shut up, so I can murder him quickly,” Brock said as he reached under the mattress.

Dude, Brock, quit talking out loud, the shark spoke in Brock’s mind.

“Shut up, Fish, I’m busy killing Bishop.” Brock cocked the shotgun as he pulled it out.

Bishop leaped away from the desk as Brock lined him up in his sights.

“Later, Bishop. I’m sending you to sleep with the fishes.” Then the possessed Brock paused. “Do you know how fish sleep? It’s really very interesting . . .”

Caught in a moment of scientific discourse, Brock had lost focus on obliterating Bishop. Bishop peered out from behind an armchair in the corner. He spotted something by his knee.

Brock finished his speech: “. . . so in conclusion, fish sleep is more important to humanity than unified field theory. Time to die, Bishop.”

Brock leveled the shotgun. Bishop threw the copy of *Dianetics* at Brock’s head, and spaceship stories and pictures of volcanoes floated to the ground.

Brock snapped to. “Goddamn hammerheads! Every time I trust you, you fuck everything up!” He fired two rounds at the TV, which exploded impressively.

“Don’t ever listen to a TV shark, Bishop. They always pull the weirdest shit. Oh, sorry for trying to kill you.”

“Don’t worry about it. But I think we need to rethink our strategy. This ‘waiting it out’ isn’t going to work.”

“You’re right. Have any ideas?”

“No. God, I need a smoke.”

“You smoke?”

“Been trying to quit. But I still have a couple in my bag for emergencies.”

Bishop fished a beaten Marlboro out of his bag and put it in his mouth. He clicked his lighter on. The room went cold. Bishop and Brock looked around apprehensively.

“Weird.” Brock said.

Bishop shrugged and lit the cigarette. He took a long drag, a look of deep concentration on his face. The hellish sound swelled up in the room once again.

“Shut up, door!” yelled Brock. “I’m just sitting on the bed!”

Bishop seemed not to notice, lost in the rapture of a much needed smoke.

The room groan reached a new spine-rattling volume. With a lurch, Brock and Bishop were picked up and floated in air for a fraction of a second before the door flew open and they were cast forcibly out into the hall. Brock slammed into the wall, and fell down onto Bishop. The door slammed shut behind them.

“What the hell was that about?” Brock asked, quickly picking himself up.

Bishop whimpered weakly.

“Come on Bishop, I think we were going to the bar?”



In the hotel lobby, Brock drained three Long Island Ice Teas in rapid succession. Bishop drank a National Bohemian and stormed over to the front desk.

“Hey asshole!” he yelled at the clerk who checked them in.

“I tried to warn you that room 1300 was unbearable,” the clerk said with a patronizing shake of his head.

“Hey jerk, it was the room that couldn’t deal with us.”

“Oh yes, that happens sometimes . . . were you hurled into the hallway?”

“Yes . . .” Bishop offered cautiously.

“And were you or your friend smoking?”

“I was.”

“Yes, well, room 1300 is a non-smoking room. I’m afraid I am going to have to charge you for smoke damages.”

“Fuck this, I’m going to Maine!” Bishop ran out of the lobby and into the street. He was immediately struck by a van.



When Bishop came to, he couldn’t move. As he painfully opened his eyes, he noticed that he was in traction and that a nurse was checking his IV drip.

“Mmffmmblllff,” he mumbled.

“Oh, Mr. Bishop, you’re awake! You’ve been unconscious for a week. You broke every bone in your body, you know.”

“Wwmmyll?”

“You’re in DeLyle Hospital; we’re the nation’s best total-body fracture rehabilitation center. This is Berry, Maine.”

Almost imperceptibly, Bishop mumbled,

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay.”

The Hunt for Red Brocktober

“**T**HOSE BASTARDS!” Chuckyeager Patton bellowed as he stormed briskly from the Interpol headquarters, Jacqueline-Michelle trailing him. His clenched his beefy fists, a mat of gray chest hair puffing furiously from his partially unbuttoned collared shirt and several sets of dog tags dangling from his grimy, calloused neck.

“General Patton, I cannot help that sometimes Interpol has incomplete intelligence. I refuse to believe this is not a common occurrence for a man with your military background.”

“Ms. Fleury, let me tell you something about military strategy. Are you familiar with the ancient Chinese game of Xiangqi?”

Jacqueline-Michelle answered his question with a blank stare, and a head shake.

“What about the Russian strategy game Sáhku?”

“No,” she replied, “what does this have to . . .”

Chuckyeager Patton continued, “Ms. Fleury, are

you familiar with the game checkers or draughts?"

"I don't think . . ."

"Risk?"

"Nope."

"Chutes and Ladders?"

"Nuh uh."

"Tic-Tac-Toe?"

"No."

"Baseball?"

"Certainly not."

"Kick the can?"

"Excuse me!"

"Operation? Blackjack? Uno?"

"None of them, General Patton."

General Patton's chest began to puff, and his face said, *why I outta!* He regained his composure.

"What about chess? You must know chess."

"Of course I know chess, General Patton. Do you take me for a moron?"

Chuckyeager Patton replied, "Of course not, Ms. Fleury. The point I wanted to make is this: war is not unlike a game of chess. There are things you do know for sure, such as the location of the queen or the black rook. Then there are things you do not know, such as the full extent of your opponent's plan or how much they need to use the shitter. However, Ms. Fleury, there are some things of which you are unsure, but which you can still intelligently reason. Why did your opponent castle, endangering his rook? Why did he shift in his chair when you fondled your knight? These questions, Ms. Fleury, are at the heart of intelligence. Certainty from uncertainty. What my military background has taught me, if anything, is that certainly,

certainty of your uncertainty is the only certainty you can be certain about on the battlefield. Do you follow me?"

Jacqueline-Michelle lied. "Of course, General Patton. What I don't understand is why you feel like this is a war to be fought with guns rather than in the courts. How could we have known that tekTech had such a large interest in Russia? We only received this intelligence in the last day. If we've learned anything, it's that we shouldn't be so hasty about confronting them again, threat or no. You of course should know this better than anyone, after what happened in Croatia."

At once, Jacqueline-Michelle realized her mistake.

Chuckyeager Patton's eyes grew. "How *dare* you bring up Croatia! Ms. Fleury, have you ever knocked on the door of a humble Georgia home, and informed a concerned mother that you watched her beautiful septuplets burst into flame at the hands of a demented Croatian warlord! Have you ever held your best friend's large intestines in your fractured hands and, through bloody tears, promise you would take care of his wife if his septuplets don't make it? Have you ever looked a baby in the eyes and told him that there was no room left in the chopper, because it was full of crude coffins built from an exploded Croatian drug den? If you haven't, then you do not know the ugly face of true horror and the hideous nature of humanity."

Blah, blah, blah, Jacqueline-Michelle thought, and she interrupted, "Yes, General Patton, I'm sorry. Anyway, let's review what we do know now. The tekTech satellite complex in Russia is now serving as their

makeshift headquarters. They run their mail-order bride business, spamming, pirated mp3's . . ."

" . . . and cheap vodka," Chuckyeager Patton added.

"And, cheap vodka. What we cannot do, General Patton, is lead a full military attack against tekTech. That violates hundreds of international treaties."

Chuckyeater Patton hated that international treaty shit. He argued, "Whether you like it or not, Ms. Fleury, I don't know how you French do things, but in America, we don't have time for decades of document signing and photo ops. We get shit done. And right now, I'm about ready to bomb tekTech to the fucking bronze age or further."

Jacqueline-Michelle was getting frustrated, "Fine, General, but before you do anything too rash, let's calm down and discuss this over dinner. There is a very good restaurant two blocks down that was recommended to me."

"Alright, Ms. Fleury, but don't think you can French me out of this."



A thin but strong French woman and a barrel-chested, silver-haired, all-American man, they were certainly an odd pair as they walked down the streets of Philadelphia. Chuckyeager Patton lit a cigar. He loved a good cigar, but grimaced at the taste of a Cuban. Chuckyeager was born on October 14th, 1947, the day that his namesake changed the world forever by traveling faster than the word of the miraculous news itself. His mother wrapped him in a flag, and brought him home to his father, a decorated military hero from World War II. His father taught him that there was no

honor greater than dying for your beautiful country in a war. Chuckyeager's lessons were then promptly ended by his father's death in the Korean War, when he was improperly cared for by a gang of wacky doctors in a disorganized mobile surgical unit.

Eager to follow in the footsteps of his father, father's father, father's father's father, and father's father's father's father, Chuckyeager marched into the Army recruitment office at the tender age of eight, donning a fake mustache and an already-shorn head. The recruiter humored his request, and handed him an officer's exam. To his surprise, Patton not only showed a natural knack for leadership and strategy, but tripled the all-time high score on the exam, qualifying him immediately for the rank of two-star General. By the age of sixteen, he had the most outstanding record of any leader in every branch of the military. Before his twenty-fifth birthday, he had served fifty tours of duty, and been called by many the ultimate war machine. A military historian stationed in Vietnam noted the point at which the number of lives Chuckyeager Patton had saved matched his kill count at exactly thirty thousand. Patton accepted the resulting award by leaning over the microphone in Saigon and quietly saying "thirty thousand and one," slaying a VC assassin in the audience with a throwing knife.

Chuckyeager Patton soon became on of the most decorated military leaders in history. According to some reports, his complete uniform was weighed down by more than forty pounds of medals. Patton was unstoppable, until he was asked to take on the risky mission in Croatia. Any sane man would have refused a mission as mad as Croatia, but the President said it

best when he reminded Chuckyeager on the phone “It is your madness that makes you invincible, General. That madness is patriotism, the most beautiful disease of the mind.”

Patton happily accepted the mission that would ultimately become the greatest military crisis in US history, and would effectively end his career in the Army. He was deemed mentally unfit to continue with the stress associated with his rank, and assigned only to simple missions and exercises. He occasionally resumed his elite Army Ranger training program in Panama, but he spent most of his time today doing trivial search and rescue, as he thought was the case in the tekTech fiasco.



Jacqueline-Michelle and Patton arrived at the restaurant, and it was getting dark. Over dinner Jacqueline-Michelle tried to calm Patton down: “General Patton, you are just going to have to wait for the go-ahead on that sort of paramilitary attack. That region of Russia is notoriously unstable.”

“With all due respect, Ms. Fleury, I know what I’m doing. I have a fleet of twenty five F-18’s waiting in Yugoslavia, equipped with 13,000 pounds of AGM-45 and Taurus air-to-ground missiles, CBU-87 cluster bombs, some MK84’s, and some AIM-9 Sidewinders. We also have some B-2’s waiting for my word to drop enough Mark 84’s on their operation to ensure they’ve sold their last dick pill.”

“General Patton, I have no idea what any of that is. You’re missing the point; we can’t bomb tekTech

because it's a private company based out of Russia. It's very illegal, and doesn't even make sense."

"I've had it up to here with your pacifist lady crap, Ms. Fleury, let me tell you something . . ."

Chuckyeager Patton was interrupted by the waiter, "Good evening. I'll start with you, Madame. Have you decided on what you would like this evening? I highly recommend our *Coq au vin* and *Blanquette de veau*."

Jacqueline-Michelle replied, "How is your chef's bouillabaisse?"

The waiter kissed his fingers and let out a bold, "muah!"

She giggled, "Well, then that sounds splendid. I'll have the bouillabaisse with a glass of the Haut Medoc."

"Excellent choice, Madame. And for you, Monsieur?" the waiter said, stroking his thin, black moustache.

Patton fumbled with the menu, "Oh, I've always been a fan of 'baggot,' if you've got some of that back there."

"'Baggot,' Monsieur?"

"Yeah, it's bread. It's always been a favorite of mine."

The waiter chuckled, clutching his cummerbund. "Oh, you mean *baguette*, Monsieur."

"Yes. Whatever it is you call it."

When the waiter returned with the food, Chuckyeager was engaged in a long diatribe regarding the historical strategic weaknesses of the French people, but paused to immediately begin biting into his baguette. Wiping dry crumbs from his gray stubble, he praised the bread, "Mmm, mmm, Ms. Fleury. Superb choice

on the restaurant. I have always loved good old fashioned American bread products like ‘baggot’.”

Jacqueline-Michelle cautiously corrected Chuckyeager Patton, “Actually, General Patton, it’s ‘baguette’ . . . it’s a French food. When I was a girl, I stopped at the local bakery every day on the way home from school. It is the greatest memory from my childhood in Paris.”

Chuckyeager immediately began spitting out the bread in disgust. “‘Baggot’ is French! Oh god!” Chunks of partially masticated baguette tumbled from his trembling jowls. “Waiter! Waiter!”

The waiter ran to the table, immediately attuned to the apparent urgency. “Is there a problem, Monsieur? Would you like something else?”

“Yes, please!” he said pointing to the menu, “How about your Philly Cheese Steak. Nothing more American than that!”

“Monsieur, that’s *Filet Cheese Steak*; it is very French. This is a French restaurant.”

Patton began to cry. “What have I done?”

Jacqueline-Michelle tried to comfort him, patting his back. “General Patton, you’re a great man. I’ve heard of your accomplishments since I first joined Interpol. There is nothing wrong with experiencing things from a different culture. I find many American things attractive.”

As she wrapped her arms around him, he immediately realized she was talking about him. She had brought him to this fancy restaurant to try to get him to see her in a different light. And it goddamned worked. Much to the horror of the restaurant staff, Chuckyeager Patton did what he had done hundreds of times be-

fore, tearing his shirt from his body, exposing his tan chest covered in thick, gray hairs. He took Jacqueline-Michelle into his arms, and made love to her right there, in a pool of the foreign fish juice she had been scooping into her pretty little mouth.



By the time the police arrived, Patton was overtaken with guilt. He promised Jacqueline-Michelle he would return, but he began to doubt his love of America. He had long known that loving anything French was a mortal sin of patriotism, but it had felt so right at the time. He certainly preferred American women, but just this once, he was overtaken by her exotic mystique.

He soon found himself drunk, wandering down the dark streets of Philadelphia. His decades of service to the land of the free flashed before his eyes as he walked. He saw two lawyers sitting on a park bench, and couldn't help but overhear them discuss tekTech. "With Martinez out of the picture, it's just you and me buddy. It's a win-win scenario — either they take the money and don't testify or they don't take the money, and the judge and the mouthless kid die," one lawyer said. He took another swig from his flask, and stumbled into the historic downtown. It was there he saw the statue of Benjamin Franklin looming over him.

Tears formed in his eyes and he called out to the statue, "Ben! Ben! Have I strayed from my path? America was my mother, father, and babysitter, and I served her for my entire life. Now look what I've done!"

Suddenly, as the last couple of swigs of bourbon settled in his bloodstream, he saw Ben Franklin turn his head and speak to him. In a deep, ominous voice, “Chuckyeager Patton, you are an example American. You have served your country well for your entire life, but you cannot stop now. Do you think I didn’t eat some baguette every now and then?”

“Maybe so, Ben, but what about Ms. Fleury?”

Benjamin Franklin laughed, pebbles tumbling out of his mouth. “General, there’s nothing more American than occasionally banging a French chick. Trust me.” He then winked.

Chuckyeager Patton smiled. “Then what should I do now, Ben?”

“You will go to the Dagobah system.”

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing.” The statue extended his hand to Patton and said, “Do what you have always done, Chuckyeager Patton. Stick to the mission. Make America proud.”

Patton hugged Benjamin Franklin.

A bum across the street watched as Patton let go of the statue and then saluted it repeatedly. The bum raised his fist and yelled, “Damn drunks, get off the streets,” as Patton ran to the nearest military base. He had a Russian thing to bomb.

Some Time to Kill

IT WAS WEEKS after they had left the island of tek-Tech, and Buddy T. Douglas's dreams were still haunted by scores of natives with faces painted ghostly white and by Roland Kidder, bleeding over and over into the soft sand. He woke up almost every morning screaming. One such morning, after weeping in the shower for forty-five minutes, Douglas made his way into work. He had lost weight. He had lost time.

"Where have you been?" shrilled his assistant, Donna.

"I'm sorry," Buddy mumbled. "I had some personal shit to take care of."

"Everyone at this firm has some personal shit to take care of," Donna said. She was tough but fair. "Did you hear that Lawrence Sanders is retiring?"

Buddy couldn't believe his ears. Col. Sanders, who had been a platoon leader in Vietnam, had stared Viet Cong in the face without blinking. Now the rough-and-tumble world of corporate law was proving too much to handle? What a chicken. A thought sprang forward from the back of Buddy's mind. "If Sanders is retiring, someone is getting promoted." Buddy's face

must have telegraphed his guarded optimism because she handed him a slim manila folder.

“It’s not going to just fall into your lap, Buddy,” she chided, in a serious yet still friendly way. “I know it’s hard, but you have to keep working on the tekTech case.”

Buddy heaved a great sigh. “I know, Donna, I know.” He took the folder with resignation. “It’s just—every time I open this damn folder I see his face. By the way, have we been able to find any new witnesses?”

“Oh, yes,” said Donna. “I got a call this morning, from a 14-year-old who just got his college degree on-line from tekTech. Now he wants in on the lawsuit, because it’s severely hamstrung his career options.”

“Great!” shouted Buddy. He was feeling better, and hungrier, by the minute. He took a handful of gummy bears from the fishbowl on Donna’s desk and began munching them ravenously. “Can the kid testify?” he continued, gelatinous ears spilling from the corners of his mouth. “Well, there’s one small hitch,” said Donna. “The kid isn’t . . . neuronormal.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” said an exasperated Douglas.

“He’s an Autie.”

“What the hell does his belly button have to do with the trial?” asked Douglas, gulping the remainder of the gummy bears.

Donna shook her head as though she couldn’t believe his stupidity. She did this a lot; she was often exasperated with him, but in a kind way. “Not an outtie, Buddy, an Autie. Not a neurotypical like me and . . . well, like me.”

A very dim lightbulb went on in Douglas’s head.

“Is the kid stupid or something?”

He remembered the last child witness he’d had to deal with, and was less than excited about this one.

“Jesus Christ, Buddy, he’s autistic. Severely autistic. The kid can’t even handle light and sound at the same time.”

“How the hell did we get into contact with him, then?”

“Apparently he’s perfectly capable of communication by e-mail, but it’s a nightmare in person.”

“Well maybe we can put him on the stand with some sort of Stephen Hawking setup, then.”

“I doubt it. You should go talk to him yourself, he’s in the conference room right now.”

Buddy opened the door to the conference room, only to find it pitch black. He felt blindly along wall the wall for the light switch.

“Why the hell is the light off, Donna?” Buddy yelled. “I thought you said the kid—”

The moment Buddy’s hand hit the light switch, the room was filled with the terrified screams of an autistic child. Buddy clasped his hands over his ears and looked over at the conference table, where he saw the source of the awful sound. There sat a small, frail boy, his mouth open so wide that his uvula was clearly visible. His eyes were familiar to Buddy, a former hunter. Buddy recalled the time that he had missed a deer’s head and hit its neck instead. He recalled the way animal’s eyes looked as it bled out onto the forest floor. The deer’s eyes were both dull and panicked, filled with the purest fear that Buddy had ever come into contact with. Those eyes were the reason that Buddy had vowed to never pick up a rifle again, and

yet here they were again, in the sockets of his most valuable witness.

“Fan-fucking-tastic,” Buddy thought.

As Buddy began to ponder how to make the kid stop, Donna rushed into the room and turned off the light again.

“I wasn’t joking about the light and sound thing, dammit!” she scolded Buddy. Sure enough, within a few seconds, the child’s screams subsided. “If you want to interview him, it’ll have to be in the dark.”

“Why can’t we keep the light on and put a blind-fold on him?”

“We tried to, but I’m sure you can imagine what happens when a stranger tries to touch him.”

Buddy sighed. “Maybe I could put up with this shit if I had a father that loved me,” he thought.



A few weeks later, Douglas was still tearing his hair out. He had no more and no better witnesses than the two kids — the Autie and the mouthless one — and at this point he was starting to become a proponent of neurodiversity in the courtroom, if not everywhere else. He was not sleeping, and he had taken to drinking strong black coffee with several tabs of Zantac prematurely dissolved in each cup every morning.

It was on such a morning that Richard Brock and Jacqueline-Michelle Fleury arrived for their deposition. Buddy was running late, and he entered the courtroom after they had already taken their seats. Seeing them was like hitting a wall; Douglas felt like breaking it down. Jacqueline-Michelle gave him the barest of smiles, her pretty face adorned with nothing more than

the barest hint of peach blush. She wore a conservative black suit. Brock, on the other hand, was dressed in a T-shirt from the Atlantic City boardwalk, jacquard trousers, and Adidas. He had bronzed the everloving shit out of his face. Seeing Buddy, he flashed him an orange-y thumbs up. Buddy felt the familiar stinging fingers of acid crawling inexorably up his esophagus, and he swallowed theatrically twice in order to avoid vomiting.

“Hey, buddy Buddy!” Brock shouted as Douglas fumbled his way behind the prosecution’s counsel table. He stole a glance at the defense counsel, and to his shock saw not one or two lawyers, as he was accustomed to, but rather an entire flock of young, identically turned-out young men and women. They far exceeded the chairs available at counsel table and had brought a few dozen of their own folding chairs to sit on, and they talked quietly amongst themselves, paging through leather binders. *Jesus*, Buddy thought, and swallowed hard yet again. A young assistant handed him some blank paper on which to take notes. The stationery’s header read “Fettucine, Alfredo, and Pizza.” Buddy shook his head.

He turned his attention to Brock. “You can’t talk to me during the trial. You know that, right?”

Brock winked hugely. “Sure, Buddy. *No talking.*”

“Richard, I’m absolutely serious. You could jeopardize our entire case.” Then suddenly, the doors to the judge’s chamber opened and out came the judge. In another life, he had been a linebacker for a wholesome Midwestern town which placed a lot of—but not too much—emphasis on football. Though the years

had softened the Judge's gut, he remained stocky about the shoulders and neck and filled out his judges' robes convincingly. He regarded his courtroom with a calm severity. "We're deposing today, correct?" he said, sitting down in his chair and picking up his satisfying heavy gavel, weighing it in his judging hand. Douglas stood. "Yes, your honor. First prosecution would like to depose our first witness."

"Proceed," the judge said, without much apparent interest.

"Please state your name, spelling the last for the court," Douglas instructed Brock once he had taken the stand.

"Daniel Alan Brock, B-R-O-Q," said Brock. Douglas felt sweat pop up behind his ears.

"Are you sure, Mr. Brock?" he asked. The judge was already frowning as he regarded his docket, clearly looking at the incongruity.

"Shit, yes!" said Brock.

"Well, uh ... what do you do for a living, Mr. Brock?"

"I'm a muscle car model."

"A muscle car model?"

"Yeah. I stand next to the cars at expos and make them look better. You know, more authentic."

"Are you sure, Mr. Brock?"

"I did it last weekend, Buddy!"

No, you didn't, Buddy thought, wishing the nightmare would end. But it didn't end. For the next twenty minutes, Brock lied about all the material facts of his life, while the swarm of tekTech lawyers smiled and chattered amongst themselves like a flock of corporate magpies. Brock rendered any testimony he might have

been called upon to give in the trial itself—if it even made it to trial, Douglas thought grimly—completely and utterly useless. So it was completely beyond Douglas why, when Brock stepped down from the stand, he looked as pleased with himself as any man ever had in all of history.

The judge glanced over the docket again, shaking his head. “Thank you for that . . . entertaining deposition, Mr. Brock. Counsel, do you have another witness? Perhaps one that might actually have a chance in hell of making it into the witness chair during trial?”

“Oh, God,” Douglas whispered. The stress was beginning to get to him. Jacqueline-Michelle had better deliver. He looked back at her and she gave him another small smile, which encouraged him enough to raise his voice to the judge and call her to the stand.

Once Jacqueline-Michelle sat, Douglas relaxed. This would be a cakewalk. “Could you please state your name, spelling your last for the record?”

“Naturellement. Je m’appelle Jacqueline-Michelle Fleury. F-L-E-U-R-Y.”

Douglas felt prickles shoot down the backs of his thighs and calves. “Could you repeat that?”

“*Je vous ai juste dit mon nom. Posez une autre question, s’il vous plait.*”

“Counsel, does your witness speak English?” The judge asked with great irritation.

“Yes, of course, your Honor. Jacqueline, please—” Douglas turned to his witness with fear evident on his face. She herself seemed somewhat agitated. She regarded him with great sympathy, then turned to the judge and said plaintively:

“*Juge. Je suis nerveuse. Démuni j’étais dans un*

auditoire de tribunal avant. J'ai oublié l'anglais. Est-ce que n'importe qui parle ici français?"

When no one responded to her last query, she asked again, more urgently, " *C'est personne qui parle français?"*

The courtroom was utterly silent until one tekTech lawyer responded with boredom, "No, no one here speaks French."

"Damn it, counsel," muttered the judge. "Listen, mademoiselle, you may step down." Jacqueline looked at him uncomprehendingly. He gestured to the stairs leading out of the witness chair and repeated, louder, "*Voulez-vous down the stairs-o.*"

"*Le juge voudrait que vous partiez,*" offered the tekTech lawyer who had just spoken.

"Oh!" Jacqueline-Michelle exclaimed, and walked down the stairs. She paused in front of the stricken Douglas, and staring into his face, grabbed both his hands and said: "*Buddy. Je mourrais plutôt que font ceci à vous. Je suis ainsi embarrassé. Je souhaite que je pourrais me tuer en ce moment. L'anglais I oublié par démuni avant. Je mettrais ma bouche sur votre pénis s'il rendrait des choses droites. D'accord?"*

But Buddy, stricken, didn't respond, and she lowered his hands sadly and walked away.

Buddy turned to the judge, who looked angry and didn't meet his eye. He looked instead to the tekTech lawyers. "Do you have any witnesses to call?"

"No, Judge," said the non-French speaking lawyer. "Actually, we're just paralegals. Some of us are x-ray techs. We're not real lawyers but it doesn't look like you need any lawyers here today."

"You're right I don't," thundered the judge. "This

case will never see the inside of a courtroom. Buddy T. Douglas, I'm disappointed in you. Never come before me again with such a horrible set of witnesses. You left all the evidence on an island, and it's unclear to me who the plaintiff is. They aren't even lawyers, and you still fucked this one up! Just from you to me, you can kiss your chances at partner goodbye. In fact you can kiss your days at —" The judge looked at a memo he had just been handed. "— Mario, Luigi, and Yoshi goodbye. Maybe you'd make a better living at x-ray tech school." And with that, the judge swept out of the courtroom, and Buddy was left alone. It was over.



Later that night, Buddy still felt like crawling out of his own skin like a snake as he drove to his parents house for a pre-scheduled dinner. When he walked in the front door, his mother looked up from setting the table.

"Oh, Buddy," she said, sadly. "Your father told me."

Buddy said nothing and just went into his childhood bedroom and locked the door. He reclined on the bed and stared straight up at the ceiling. After a few minutes, his mother knocked.

"Buddy," her muffled voice said through the door. "Dinner."

He walked out and sat down at his place between his mother and his father, Judge Douglas. The judge ate quickly, seemingly frustrated, and kept glancing at his son, though he didn't speak until the sorbet course. "Buddy," he finally burst out. "What the hell was that?"

You know I've been looking for any excuse to let you go to trial, and you give me that shit?"

"Harold, don't be so hard on him," scolded his mother. "He's our boy, no matter how terrible he is at the law."

"No son of mine has that flagrant a disregard for the justice system that made this country great!" roared the judge. They all sat in silence, and finally the judge slammed his silverware down. "I'm going to watch *Boston Legal*. Buddy, help your mother with the dishes."

Buddy did.

The Junkyard Gang and the Mystery of the Obese Docent

THE NATIONAL NEWS, audible even above the noise of the swanky lunch crowd, blared on the television inside the Philadelphia Cheesesteak Factory, the city's newest trendy bistro.

“Authorities are currently unsure precisely how General Chuckyeager Patton obtained such a massive fleet of fighter jets and bombers and convinced their pilots to participate in a massive air strike against the entire nation of Russia. Nevertheless, Patton will undoubtedly be charged with dozens of counts of international peace treaty violations and war crimes, and will likely go down in history as one of the United States military's greatest disgraces.

“The alleged target of these paramilitary actions,

tekTech, inc., will be receiving massive international aid as the assault continues. Middle schools across the country are already organizing bake sales and car-washes to benefit the victims of what pundits are referring to as the 'tekTech Slaughter'."

Jacqueline-Michelle looked down in shame at her banana souffle and shook her head as Brock attempted to give the TV a high five. Brock downed his fifth Bud Light just as a band of noisy preteens entered through the power-assist handicap door. The oldest among them yelled to the tuxedoed maitre d', "Hey Roscoe, we'll have the usual!"

A befreckled young girl dressed in overalls, with braided hair and a backward Brooklyn Dodgers cap shaped her mitt as she threw a baseball into it. "Yeah! We just finished our chores and we're ready to celebrate."

"You've got it, Junkyard Gang," smiled Roscoe. "Four chocolate malts and some medicine for Ramps!"

A wheelchair-bound youth still trying to make his way through the lunchtime rush feebly shouted, "Thanks, Roscoe," and coughed.

An African-American boy smoothed his flattop as he looked at the bill. "Dang, this tab is wack. Yo, this is the last time we can go halvesies on your meds, Ramps."

Brock and Jacqueline-Michelle looked on, watching with fascination as the children sipped their malts and recounted the excitement of their latest mystery-solving success at the haunted sock hop.

"I can't believe the caretaker thought he would get away with it," said the youngest of the group as he thumbed through a thin paperback novel.

Brock had been staring at the handicapped child for several minutes, and could no longer restrain his curiosity. "Those are the girliest quads I've ever seen." He poked at the boy's legs with his fork. They gave way, reminiscent of Jacqueline-Michelle's soufflé, to the slightest pressure.

"Golly, mister," whimpered the disabled boy, unsure how to respond.

The eldest child swooped in to speak for his friend. "This here's Ramps. He don't walk too good." He then pointed a thumb at his chest. "As for me, my name's Chet. Chet Brown." He motioned to the boy with the novel. "And this is my kid brother, 'Encyclopedia Brown' Brown. He's read every Encyclopedia Brown book, front to back and back to front."

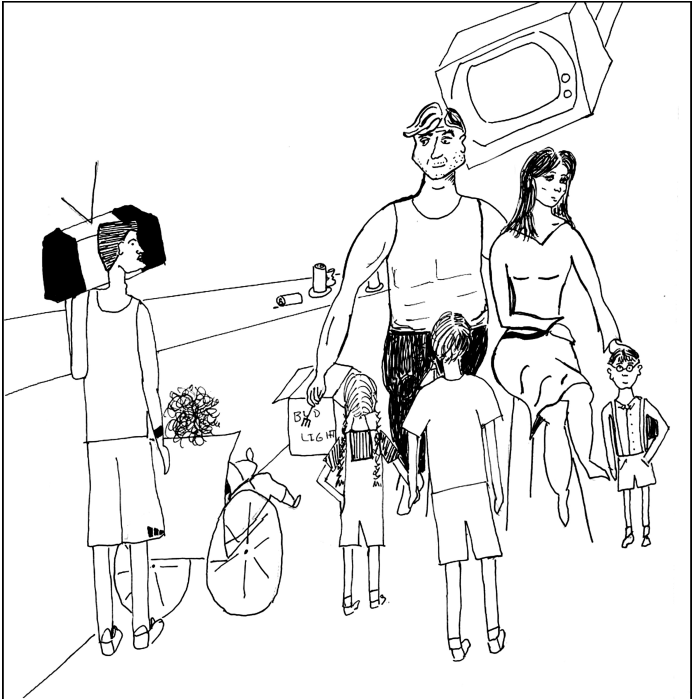
Brock half-listened while performing calf raises on Ramps's wheelchair.

Chet continued, "Over there, that's Sam Slooth, the toughest girl you ever did see. And next to her, well that's Cluemaster Scoop. We don't understand him all the time, but he's sure swell at dancing. Together, we're the Junkyard Gang, mystery-solvers for a nickel a week."

The bistro fell silent for roughly fifteen seconds until Jacqueline-Michelle smartly chimed in to prevent any more insensitive miscues from Brock. "That's marvelous, children. I only wish you could help us with our mystery. It's quite the puzzler."

The children's heads popped up as they shouted in unison, "Did you say puzzler? We're on the case!"

Jacqueline-Michelle chuckled patronizingly, "Oh I don't know. This might be a little too serious for you fellows."



“You’re going to get abducted.”

“AND GIRL,” yelled Sam Slooth, pounding her fist into her palm and spitting on the shiny, tiled floor.

Jacqueline-Michelle, winking at the tomboy, corrected herself. “And girl.”

With that, the gang turned to leave, already hot on the trail. Jacqueline-Michelle called after them, “Wait, won’t you at least need some information about the case? It is a very complex matter of international and corporate intrigue.”

“No way, lady. We don’t need no help from no adults,” rapped Cluemaster Scoop.

“You kids are going to get abducted,” said Brock.



Back at the junkyard, the gang assembled in the backseat of a 1947 Buick. “Alright, crew, we’ve got quite the mystery on our hands,” said Chet. “Does anyone have any leads?”

Sam Slooth shook her head, Cluemaster Scoop was too busy listening to his Walkman, and ‘Encyclopedia Brown’ Brown could only think to reread *Encyclopedia Brown Saves the Day* for the nineteenth time. Ramps just wheeled about aimlessly.

Chet finally spoke up. “This really seems more like a mystery for the third Brown brother, ‘Dan Brown’ Brown. He’s read all three Dan Brown books, front to back and back to front. It only took him an afternoon to become ‘Dan Brown’ Brown, though. He’s not very prolific.”

“Sorry, Chet,” said ‘Encyclopedia Brown’. “‘Dan Brown’ Brown is in Paris.”

“Nuts.” Chet kicked an old car battery on the ground, wishing for the first time that ‘Dan Brown’ wasn’t thousand of miles away.

Cluemaster rolled his eyes. “Come on, dogs, let’s boogie on down to the police. Their fingerprint archives are off da hook, y’all.”

Chet patted Cluemaster on his flattop, “I don’t know what you’re saying, Cluemaster, but it’s crazy!”

Cluemaster responded, ”Dude, Chet, that’s some racist shit.”

“We’ll have time for your athletic competitions later, Cluemaster,” Chet said, “but right now, we’ve got a mystery to solve.”

A large electromagnet loudly dropped half of a ‘64 Chevy several feet away from their Buick. The gang continued to brainstorm, but they could think of nothing.

Feebly, Ramps proffered a suggestion, “The toy factory sounds like a good place to start. I bet they got tons of clues!”

“Great idea, Ramps. I’d wager that the abandoned mine on Mr. McDouglas’s farm could shed some light on this situation too,” said Chet.

Chet led the gang out of the Buick and toward the junkyard exit. Fang, the junkyard rottweiler, galloped after them and chewed violently on one of Ramps’s wheels. Noticing Cluemaster Scoop, Fang left Ramps alone and began to bark madly.

“Aw, shoot!” said Cluemaster as he ran furiously. He leapt over the fifteen foot fence as the rest of the gang calmly walked out.



“Alright, crew,
we’ve got quite the mystery on our hands.”



Three days later, the Junkyard Gang reassembled in Farmer Smith's watermelon patch for a status update on the case. Each junior detective held a clue they had turned up. Chet Brown cradled a dead canary in his hands. His younger brother, 'Encyclopedia Brown,' twirled a length of yo-yo string around his finger. Sam Slooth, the girl, had a pocketful of gravel. Cluemaster Scoop wore a hardhat that was four sizes too large and fit awkwardly on his flattop. Ramps dragged a kite behind him as he slowly wheeled around the patch, baseball cards flapping feebly in the spokes of his wheelchair.

Chet began, "Great job finding clues, gang. Now let's put them all together." Sam Slooth fumbled around while trying to tie the string around the canary's neck. Chet poured the gravel into the hardhat, and Ramps kept trying to get his kite airborne.

After several hours of this, Cluemaster Scoop had had enough. "We goin' nowhere fast, cousins. We gotta get some leads."

Sam Slooth power-dribbled a basketball. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

The whole gang perked up and nodded slowly. "The public library!" they shouted.



A quick bike ride and wheelchair-tow later, the gang pulled up to the library steps.

"See ya inside, Ramps!" Chet yelled as the mobile portion of the gang entered through the glass doors.

“I’ll check the reference section,” volunteered Sam Slooth.

“Good idea,” said Chet. “I’ll check the newspapers. Cluemaster, why don’t you start searching the card catalog?”

Chet looked around for his brother, who was already in the children’s fiction section, browsing three Encyclopedia Brown books simultaneously.

Just then, Ramps wheeled into the lobby. “I’ll check the computer!” Ramps always did have a knack for machines.

After some fruitless investigation, the rest of the gang joined Ramps at the computer terminal.

“What’s this?” asked Chet. “Stop watching TV and get to work!”

“No, no” Ramps clarified. “This is a personal computing machine. It connects me to a whole world of information without having to move a muscle.”

“Wow! How does it work?”

“Uhhh . . .”

Just then, a box appeared on the screen.

‘Lollipopchick471 would like to chat’ was written on the box.

“I love lollipops!” cheered ‘Encyclopedia Brown’ Brown. “Let’s see what she has to say.”

‘Lollipopchick471: Hey cutie ;) a/s/l?’

“It’s some sort of alien language,” deduced Chet. “Cluemaster Scoop, what’s she trying to tell us?”

“Why you always sayin’ I ain’t sayin’ English? We talkin’ the same, ain’t we?”

“Now I’m even more confused!” laughed Sam Slooth.

“Try to figure out who she is, Ramps,” said ‘En-

cyclopedia Brown'. "Type: Hello, friend. Do you like mysteries?"

Ramps obliged, and a reply quickly appeared on the screen.

"Lollipopchick471: OMG, i luvvvv mysteries :) Do u wanna play detective with me sometime?"

"She sounds like quite the mystery solver, 'specially for a girl. Maybe even better than Sam!"

Hearing that comment, Sam Slooth punched Chet right in the kisser, knocking him unconscious. While Chet lay bleeding on the floor, Sam told Ramps to continue.

"Oh yeah? She thinks she's so good at figurin' out clues, but tell her she couldn't never solve the case WE'RE working on. Not ever."

Lollipopchick471 responded, "I already know the answer to your mystery. It was easy, want me to share? :-P"

"Holy smokes, gang! Lollipopchick figured it out!" Ramps couldn't hold back his excitement.

A look of sad disappointment flooded Sam's face. She meekly applied a set of grass stains to her knees, but nobody noticed.

"She's saying we gotsta meet her at the visitor's dugout over at the baseball field at sundown. That's only a block from here, and the sun's already starting to set! Let's get a move on!" said 'Encyclopedia Brown' Brown, shaking his older brother out of his concussion.



“Holy smokes, gang! Lollipopchick figured it out!”



Spent sunflower seeds littered the ground of the visitor's dugout as the Junkyard Gang sat patiently, waiting for the sun to set on the day and, thus, the mystery.

"Say, Ramps, hows about you tell us that story again?" suggested Sam Slooth to help pass the time. "You know, the one that ends with you not being able to walk ever again. Never ever ever."

"You mean the one when I got my Super Chair?" Ramps parents always told him to shine a positive light on things, especially since they couldn't afford physical therapy anymore.

"Well, it started 3 summers ago, at my rich Uncle Gilbert's horse ranch. I was out riding on just the most beautiful filly you've ever seen! Her name was Magic, and we had the greatest connection. I'm telling you, it was like we knew what the other was thinking. Anyways, I guess Magic thought I was thinking, "Boy, Magic, it sure would be great if you started running way too fast for me to hold on, and then stopped abruptly, throwing me off of you and into the side of a barn," because I'll be darned if that isn't just what Magic did! Of course, maybe my legs would've been able to hold on if I didn't have polio, but no use placing blame now!"

Ramps sighed, and patted the armrest of his wheel chair lovingly.

"We've become pretty close, haven't we old girl?" he whispered to the inanimate object.

Cluemaster Scoop muttered, "Man, why he hafta do that? Get me depressed as shit. Psh. Sad as hell."

Everyone stared blankly at the young African-American. After a minute, Chet responded slowly in the way one would speak to a baby, “That’s right, Cluemaster. It WAS a beautiful story. You both have unique ways of speaking. Can you say that word? YOU-NEEK. YOUUUUU-NEEEEEEEK. Watch my lips — like this. YOU-NEEK. Now you give it a try.”

Cluemaster put on the headphones of his walkman and shook his head.

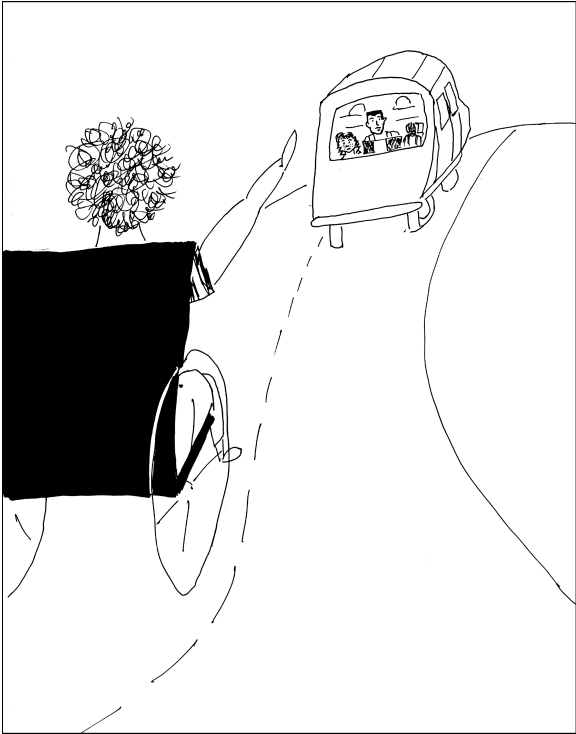
“Don’t worry, Chet. He may just be a slow learner is all. You’ll teach him English soon enough,” reassured ‘Encyclopedia Brown’.

Just then, a rusty, green van pulled up along the dugout. A nervous, oily man with sunglasses and a large parka stepped out of the driver’s seat.

“Say, mister. You’re not a lollipopchick! What’s going on here?” ‘Encyclopedia Brown’ Brown said, suspiciously.

“Hey there kids. Boy, I’m sure sorry about the mix-up. I’m lollipopchick’s dad! She decided to stay at home and start baking cookies for you guys to eat while we talk about ... what was it ... the mystery, right? Yeah, it was a mystery. She knows the answer to the mystery. Anyways, she asked me to come pick you kids up at the visitor’s dugout right away so you can hurry up and ... solve that mystery. What’dya say?”

“Hoo boy! Solving the mystery AND cookies! Looks like the Junkyard Gang stumbled on the jackpot with this one, eh guys?” said Chet, making no effort to hold back his excitement. With that, the children all raised their hands in the air and shouted simultaneously, “Go Junkyard Gang!”



They were abducted.

“Baking cookies is such a girly thing to do. I reckon I could throw a baseball a million miles farther than Lollipopchick. Just say I can’t!” Sam Slooth said while climbing into the back of the van behind Clue-master Scoop and the Brown brothers.

Ramps wheeled timidly up to the greasy driver. “Excuse me, Mr. Lollipopchick’s dad . . . do you happen to have a wheel chair lift?”

The man stopped nervously licking his lips, shut the van door, and turned to Ramps and looked him up and down. “Boy kid, sorry. Ordinarily I’d say just leave the chair and let you ride on my lap, but I’ve got enough of you guys already. Why don’t you just run along.”

“Gee mister, I was really looking forward to those cookies . . .”

But it was too late. The van door slammed behind the man and he drove away. A tear leaked out of Ramps’s left eye. Slowly, he began to wheel himself down the street.

“Don’t you worry, girl,” he whimpered quietly to his chair. “Someday, we’ll be glad we have each other. Someday.”

A pair of headlights and a honking car screeched up next to him. The driver rolled down his window.

“Get the hell out of the middle of the street, you cripple ass bitch!”

Deus ex Brockina

FIVE DAYS AFTER the bizarre run-in at the Cheese-steak Factory, and no closer to any answers, Brock slammed his hand on the greasy mouse in the Philadelphia Municipal Internet café. Unfortunately, the computer was not programmed to respond to such a masculine click. He licked his parched lips as Jacqueline-Michelle waited in line for her Cafe au Lait.

Brock didn't care for coffee, or at least any coffee the he hadn't ground with his bare hands. Instead, he reached into his backpack and removed a beer stein and a carton of milk. As he poured the milk into his frosty mug, he read "Have you seen these children?" accompanied by the pictures of five spunky-looking youths: three nerds, a handicap, and a black boy. He shrugged off the feeling that they looked vaguely familiar.

Opening his email client, Brock logged in as squid-equalsman2000@hotmail.com. Immediately, 40,000 animated envelopes danced across the screen, indicating the multitude of missed messages that had accumulated since he'd last checked his email six months ago. Bored by the minutia of autograph requests, sex-

ual solicitations, and bills, he jumped immediately to the SPAM folder, which was really all he was ever interested in. “Oh, I wouldn’t mind one or seven of those,” Brock mumbled as he made a quick purchase. He reached for his wallet, suddenly remembering he had stopped carrying one in order to allow for tighter pants. “Damn,” he muttered.

Disappointed, he scrolled through the rest of his SPAM folder until one particular message caught his eye. Not six hours away from auto-deletion was an email with the subject line “Flem van der Chôclet needs your help!” Looking both ways, Brock surreptitiously opened the message. Surprised by the contents of the email, Brock began to read it feverishly at the pace of a somewhat gifted third grader:

FLEM VAN DER CHOCLET has sent you a message: ‘Hey friend, if you click this link I will win a free gift certificate to participating Red Lobsters.

“Ooh! That’s a pretty good deal.” Brock said, whispering, “I love their biscuits.” He continued reading:

If any of the four people this has been sent to do not click the link, I will be shot! Oh no! Haha! Thanks, pal.

THIS MESSAGE WAS AUTOMATICALLY SENT BY TEKTECH BULK EMAIL SERVICES

“Ohh,” Brock shuddered through his teeth, “Oh no.”

“One Cafe au Lait,” Jacqueline-Michelle ordered at the front counter with the most exaggerated version of her already obnoxious French accent. The Latino server boy stared blankly. Brock began to sweat as he tried to remember the shortcut for ‘delete forever.’ Fumbling like an old man trying to record *60 Minutes* on a VCR, he only succeeded in magnifying the message and setting it as his desktop background. Jacqueline-Michelle sarcastically thanked the barista for her badly botched order, and headed Brock-ward.

Frozen in a state of guilt and technological incompetence, Brock considered his options. He knew he had to do what was right. Coolly pressing delete and shoving a buck knife through the computer’s hard drive, he greeted Jacqueline-Michelle with a “What’s flapping, French-cakes?”

Momentarily bothered by Brock’s impenetrable idioms, Jacqueline-Michelle composed herself, and delivered a status update. “Professor Brock, I spoke with Interpol this morning, and in the light of the numerous legal difficulties facing Mr. Douglas and his firm Sturgeon, Cod, and Sunfish, as well as General Patton’s disastrous paramilitary fiasco, Interpol has closed the van der Chôlet case. However, your services to Interpol did not go unnoticed; many of my superiors greatly admire your work. Consequently, they’ve extended an offer to make you a full-time consultant. I congratulate you and propose that we celebrate over lunch.”

Smoke spurted from the computer below, but, in his elation, Brock had completely forgotten the message he had just deleted. “Brunch,” Brock corrected, referring not to the time of day and its corresponding meal, but rather to his innovative portmanteau of

“Brock munch.”

Preparing to chime in with a haughty refutation of Brock’s invented word, which he used no less than thrice daily, Jacqueline-Michelle instead chose to hold her tongue. “Yes, of course, Richard, let us go have ‘Brunch’,” she sighed through a reluctant, but genuine, smile.

He stood up and politely held open the door as Jacqueline-Michelle exited, lightly blushing. Swept up in a moment of unearned celebration, Brock leaped dramatically, dislodging a ceiling tile before following Jacqueline-Michelle into the Philadelphia street. As he jogged athletically to her side, she whispered, “Damn he’s good.”

Epilogue: Denouement Brown

A MANLY, YET HAIRLESS, ARM lightly caressed the nape of a dainty female neck. A thick European accent only accentuated the sensuality of her romantic whispers. The pair embraced on the beach as the tide washed over their nude bodies and a Morgan whale exhausted a gleaming vapor, pulsating with electric current, on the horizon. The sun began to set, and their moist flesh sparkled in the early summer's eve.

“We will always be together,” she murmured.

“Of course, my love,” he replied in a husky voice.

“Grooooooss!” an even huskier voice yelled from atop a sand dune. Jacqueline-Michelle slapped Brock's arm, chastising his maddening immaturity.

“It's cute, Richard. Leave them alone,” she said.

Brock continued, “This is a private beach, hot-tits and small-pecs. We're Interpol, and we need you to

clear the beach.” They scattered, their buttocks shedding wet sand as they fled.

Jacqueline-Michelle yelled, “Richard, for the last time, your contract specifically prohibits you from identifying yourself as an agent of Interpol or as Interpol itself. You’re just a consultant.”

“Cool your jets, babe. I’m just making space on the beach for us,” Brock said between puffs into an inflatable beach ball.

“I suppose I can let it pass just this once, Richard,” she said, undeniably charmed, “but, seriously, it’s illegal.”

Coming soon from Clifford Bishop . . .

*The Ways of the Tick-Tecks: A
Fascinating Society on a Shitty
Island*

Religion

The Tick-Tecks are the only society in the world to worship sand. Sand, they feel, is omnipresent and every grain contains the meaning of life.

Their priests ingest enormous quantities of sand which leads them to appear (and be) terribly malnourished. After devoting his life to the church, a Tick-Teck priest's average life is only two weeks, due to this suicidal diet of sand. According to scriptures (all written in sand, erased daily by the tides, and roughly rewritten the next day) an ordained priest's death by sand ingestion is the holiest of deaths, guaranteeing a spot in the Tick-Teck heaven, Top-Tick.

Before I learned of this divine prize, I would sometimes surreptitiously pour chicken broth or granulated sugar over the sand, in an effort to impart some nutrition to the clerical diet. On one occasion, a box of sandpaper washed up on the island. Some of the Tick-Tecks sanded themselves raw, thinking the paper was some device of ritual purification. This hurt too much for even the most devout Tick-Tecks, so for a time sandpaper became the society's currency. Sandpaper money was valued according to how fine its grit was.

Cannibalism

When I asked the Tick-Tecks if they were cannibalistic, they were confused about the term. They had never heard of nor even imagined the concept. Not missing a chance to educate, I tried to explain that certain tribes around the globe consume other human-beings. Still, comprehension eluded them. It soon became evident there was only one way to ensure they fully understood. I stood up quickly and, with the machete I carried with me at all times, beheaded an exceptionally portly Tick-Teck next to me.

I ordered the horrified onlookers to ready a fire. I roasted the carcass for several hours until a medium/medium rare temperature, yet the skin had a firm crisp to it.

The natives rejoiced as I fed the tribe their first meat in weeks. I, of course, did not partake in the barbarian custom. Alas, it seems no corner of the globe can escape the horrors of cannibalism!

Sport

Tick-Teck national pastime is called Raceball, a sport that resembles baseball on steroids. Bases are one-hundred feet apart, and balls are thrown much faster and hit much harder. Already, twenty-eight of the thirty major league baseball teams have replaced a majority of their starting fielders and pitchers with Tick-Teck youth. Major League Baseball's commissioner is trying to rush new legislation starting a Tick-Tegro League so American, Latin or otherwise, baseball players will stop getting their jobs stolen as easily as the Tick-Tecks steal bases.

And don't miss the newest adventure
from the Junkyard Gang TM

***Cluemaster Scoop
and the
Haunted Break Battle***

The Junkyard Gang is back to face its spookiest case yet! The story begins with our reluctant heroes getting off school for a long weekend with nothing but kid stuff on their minds. What they are about to find out, though, is that mystery doesn't take a break for Jewish holidays. The kids learn this firsthand when they meet Mr. Finster, the creepy new city slicker teaching dance lessons at the community center. But as their classmates start randomly disappearing, they realize that they are about to learn a whole new meaning of the word "boogie" man.



"Oh shit! I've never break battled a ghoul before," muttered Cluemaster as his opponent approached.

"I think I'm going to sit this round out," replied Ramps. Not that he had a choice.



Cluemaster Scoop busted a sick headspin as the rest of the gang looked on.

"This must be some sort of ancient demon-fighting ritual," explained Chet Brown in a hushed whisper to

his younger brother. “Cluemaster may not talk like you and me, but he sure knows a lot about magic.”

The demon trembled in fear as it lay a flattened cardboard box on the ground.



Ramps slowly wheeled his way home from the junkyard, feebly pretending to dance in his chair. A tear fell from his face as he remembered Cluemaster Scoop’s dazzling moves from earlier that day.

Just then, a ghoulish figure appeared from behind a bush and executed a perfect handstand freeze.

“Oh no,” said Ramps. “Oh no.”

He reached down to start spinning his wheels, but found that they had turned to stone. He closed his eyes and braced himself for the worst.



Sam Slooth contorted her body on the dance floor while ‘Encyclopedia Brown’ Brown watched from the corner.

“Hey, Cluemaster,” he said. “Sam sure is a swell dancer, isn’t she? For some reason I just can’t stop watching her.”

Cluemaster Scoop looked knowingly at his pal. “Go get your freak on, homeboy,” he winked.

ABOUT THE FONT USED IN THIS TEXT

This text was set in a typeface called *Times New Roman*, designed by a team of scientists at the John P. Wallace Font Laboratory at CalTech. In order to impart a unique personality to every letter, each serif was engineered by a different researcher kept in total isolation.

Times New Roman is intended to be read with furious speed, yet also with delicate precision. Words set in this font tend to mesh together like pieces of a beautiful puzzle. In fact, readers often disregard the substantive meaning of these words in favor of admiring their stunning aesthetic qualities.

