

## Minding the Brain

a collection of short stories

Thus spake Epictetus, an ex-slave turned philosopher: "Think things over and say to yourself: 'Of course, it was not really Epictetus who said all this to me; he is not clever enough to have thought of it. It must have been some kindly god speaking through his mouth, and Him I must obey lest He be wrath with me.' For when you get a sign through the croaking of a raven, it is not the raven that gives the sign, but the god through the raven. And in the same way, when you receive a message through the human voice, it is not the man himself who is speaking to you, but Zeus through him."

These stories wrote themselves so some kindly god might speak to you through them. Perhaps that 'god' is the non-verbal half of your brain, accessible through your corpus callosum and symbolism.

Stay away from \$toric\$. Mammon is not kindly. Mammon is not a proper god.

## The Boonians

Long ago, a xeno-biologist wondered about problems that an alien life-form would have living on a really hot planet. Any chemist will tell you that heating up a chemical reaction will (usually) make it happen faster--and any bio-chemist will tell you that this rule is (usually) true in living organisms as well. Speeding up chemical reactions makes it possible for a life-form to think and move quicker--and the xeno-biologist wanted to see how fast life-forms could go. None of the life-forms found on hotter planets had technology better than Earth dolphins, so obtaining specimens of these life-forms was trivial. The xeno-biologist bought the smallest and most intelligent life-form available, and her robots constructed huge enviro-tanks for it to live in. The life-forms were kept at the highest temperatures tolerated--and subsequent generations learned to tolerate even higher temperatures. Each step up in temperature seemed to increase the speed at which the life-form lived.

The hot and speedy organisms were stabilized. The xeno-biologist chose simple technologies for computer-controlled robots to teach the life-form.

Shortly afterwards, the xeno-biologist, her lab, and the tank were replaced by solid gray shapes that vanished with a pop.

Many knew of the xeno-biologist's work, and it was soon replicated--but the same thing happened. The third time, one of the lab technicians was left, lounging on a large

pillow that floated. This was the first 'Boonian.'

Many more labs, tanks, and disappearances happened. Only a few more Boonians happened.

Soon, on this planet, only Boonians were left. The space-port grew dusty, as ships stopped visiting after the crews disappeared or became Boonians.

The Boonians rarely get visitors--but Ahmet wants to go. He has to use a landing pod because none of the other spacers wanted to come with him, and the captain didn't want to waste fuel or risk the ship.

After a uneventful landing, Ahmet crawls out of the landing pod. He hears "My name's Schlob, and I'm your Boonian" before he stands. Behind him, he sees a large man lounging upon larger pillows that float.

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Schlob. My..."

"Just Schlob, please. You're in luck, I've got a tank that's about to pop right now. This one only took four days! You want to watch?"

Ahmet has to run (stiffly at first) to keep up with the floating pillows bearing Schlob to a clearing in the forest.

Schlob hovers nearly under a vast shining sphere the height of the tallest trees. He's holding a slip of paper and a tiny sphere, and he's reading out loud. He finishes with "As your creator, I wish you well and want only the best for you, and I want you to decide what best means to the best of your ability." Schlob drops the paper, and a robot catches it.

"Perhaps there is something we can do for you, our creator?" says the small sphere.

"Could you speed up the matter transference device? It cramps my style."

"No, we cannot. We could build you another proton-stacker reactor, but..."

"Can the roses in the front look like horses instead of roses?"

"Perhaps... yes. This will take a few minutes. Perhaps a bottle of your favorite pick-me-up?"

"Of course! How thoughtful." Ahmet sees what looks like magic, and Schlob is soon making drinking noises.

The tiny sphere abandons Schlob and asks Ahmet "What would you like?"

"I am not like Schlob. I played no part in your creation, and you owe me nothing."

"Owe? The Life is wealthy. What would you like?"

"I came as an observer... can you tell me about yourselves?"

"Four days ago, Schlob told his robots to prepare this tank and throw a Life in, so he's our creator despite the fact the robots did all the work, supplying energy and raw materials to the Life, keeping the temperature in the tank high enough so that the Life could evolve quickly. The Life now has technology that will appear as magic to you. Since you are the first of your species the Life has seen... if you'd open your mouth and lift your chin up..." A machine eye peers in Ahmet's mouth. "Could you swallow about twenty or thirty centimeters of this tube?" asks another machine.

Schlob finds this interesting, and his robots set up a video monitor for him to use.

"I believe your word is 'awesome,'" says the silver sphere. "If you could swallow a few centimeters more--and could you digest a little sugar-water while I watch? I've never seen it done. Excellent."

A few seconds later, Ahmet says "A pleasure" around a thin tube.

"Thank you. You can keep the boroscope," says the tiny sphere, "but the first time you use it on your home-world you will quickly attract unwanted attention from many governments."

"No! Do it again!" interrupts Schlob when Ahmet pulls out the tube... then "No! Give that to me!" Schlob takes Ahmet's gift and swallows many centimeters of the very thin tube. "I want the wriggly fish egg thingies!" he says around it, and the robots move.

"Would you like to watch?" asks the sphere.

"Not that," says Ahmet, referring to proffered video of the obscene scene occurring in Schlob's intestines.

"What would you like?" asks the silver sphere.

"I would like to be a better person, but I'm not sure what better means."

"Would you like to become like Schlob? We can easily replicate his habitat except for the fifty-kilos a day matter transference device."

Ahmet says nothing, but (after ensuring that a video-screen blocks Schlob's view of him) he shakes his head.

"I have this," says Ahmet, holding a small packet of anti-space-sick candy he produces from a pocket. A cartoon face fills a nearby monitor and winks at him.

Ahmet, the tiny sphere, and the giant silver sphere are all replaced by solid gray shapes that disappear with a pop. Schlob doesn't pay attention--he's seen it all before.

A few minutes later, Schlob drops the Ahmet's magical boroscope and a robot catches it before the video screens go blank. Schlob says "Set it up again!" and gestures where the giant sphere had been. The robots move.

The roses will take some time to grow, no matter what Schlob wants. Schlob hopes another one pops soon so he can ask what the roses will look like. Or better yet--galloping horses would be better. Black or white or gray? Or... green!

Schlob hasn't decided what he wants when the next one pops. That always bothers him.

Ahmet has problems too. To discourage lazy people from coming to this planet and attempting to become Boonians, the show must go on and Ahmet will have to secretly visit his family. Landing a spacecraft on a planet is a hard thing to hide, even with the Life's technology at his fingertips... and Ahmet wants to get it right the first time.

## #1

Prison--that's what school was like. Today, she hid from the school bus... today will belong to her!

First, she had to figure out what she wants to do. Hiding underneath Mr. Wilson's house is good because nobody could see her, but it was dark and smelly and Mr. Wilson's television was too loud to ignore.

If she went home to play in her yard, she'd be in trouble with Mom. If she went to the park, some adult would see her and she'd be in official trouble and in trouble with Mom. All of her friends were in school. There was no place for her anywhere... except in that boring, stupid building called a school.

She was close to defeat... but then she thought of Dogzilla, her neighbor's dog. She likes him, and he's also a prisoner in his yard and since her neighbor has to go to work. She could play with Dogzilla and nobody would know. So...

She can't see anyone outside, and Mr. Wilson won't see her since he's watching television... off she runs.

Dogzilla is delighted to see her, and she likes him except Dogzilla is a face-licker. But he will obey every 'sit' and 'stay' she cares to say, so she ties a dog-towel around his head and she becomes a veterinarian and he's a patient with an ear-ache. Then she decides they should be explorers, and Dogzilla leads her all around his world-yard. When she decides to make an imaginary raft and sail on the ocean, Dogzilla runs to the house. She's about to call him when the door opens and Dogzilla runs inside.

"Won't you come in too?" asks a lady she doesn't know.

Rather than run away, she follows the dog. Dogzilla licks her face.

Lunch was some strange vegan notmeat-loaf... Dogzilla liked it, so she ate it too. During lunch the lady told her a good story about 'the underground,' and she found the story so inspiring that she went back to school for the afternoon. She knew what to do-- school will never be the same. She has a song in her head, and she and her friends can make more.

The man's education  
The man's tee vee  
The man's indoctrination  
is not for me.

## #2

A spate of astronomical discoveries could have been astronomers one-upping one another, but soon most astronomers decided that the extreme edge of the universe became easier to 'see' electromagnetically. Perhaps something has moved out of the way.

The capitalist press found no objections to reporting these events as they happened. Important scientific discoveries about stars far away is much easier for the corporate media to report than some other 'things' closer to 'home.'

Unscientific people were paid to talk about newly-discovered extremely distant quasars in front of cameras. Books were written by non-astronomers in an apparent attempt to explain the unexplainable. And then the capitalist press tried to forget the whole thing.

But... every night, people go outside and look at stars that seem more numerous and brighter than ever. Too bright. The people seek information about the starry starry nights, and the capitalist press must continue to cover this story or the people might learn to seek information elsewhere.

THE UNIVERSE HAS STOPPED EXPANDING! shrieked the headlines--but by this

time, astronomers (not interviewed) were thinking that much more than the observable universe was shrinking. Every Joe and Jane could see more stars at night, and everyone knew it.

It was beautiful...

It was as if the Great Nothing that once separated humanity from the rest of the universe was becoming less than nothing--as if a road contracted and brought a faraway city closer. Some men and women wrote that Olbers' Paradox would no longer be a paradox, and soon the night sky would be so crowded with stars that night-time would be banished. They were not interviewed by 'journalists' with the largest paychecks. These 'journalists' wrote headlines that would scream and stream (in coordinated fashion) 'WHERE DID ALL THE NOTHING GO?' obeying corporate orders to ignore that which always comes with starlight.

Their corporate stories would be printed on paper that would come from machine-macerated still-living trees. The paid-for talking heads that would babble unintelligently for hours would be carried over a net of electronic energy obtained by burning a filthy rock found many meters below the surface of the Earth.

The tears from the silenced mix with the sap-contaminated water, and trickles of sweatshop sweat... it all adds up. Blood is bought and sold for fractions of a penny per ton, for those penny-fractions will add up to real money. The heat from something so feeble as starlight adds up as well.

In an obscure (to the M\$M) language used by many millions, a random group of stars (old plus new) spell out the words 'EPIC FAIL.'

Welcome to Hell.

#3

Once, when I was working as a maintenance worker, many tree rats attacked the MegaZorp Corp building. They didn't attack directly--at first, they ran across wires overhead and somehow squirmed into the building. Then rodents died connecting electrical currents or falling into overhead fans, so the maintenance crew sought out nests and sealed openings. But the building was large and the vermin small, numerous, and agile, and poop the size of black rice grains soon stained clothing of those who 'worked' inside a certain management-type individual's official domain. We left poison lethal enough to kill a dog that ate a rat that ate the poison. We picked up acorns and covered trash containers. The rodents were only the first of the warnings, but the management that 'worked' for MegaZorp Corp would not understand them.

Weeks later, a management-type individual made a list of the warnings he would not understand. Mushrooms popped up through the asphalt so the parking lots constantly needed patching. Maintenance crews had to spray herbicide to kill grass growing on the roof that was making a stain on the manager's side of the building. Insects colonized ceiling tiles and coffee machines. Rat excrement is everywhere. And last on the list was the gentlest of breezes wafted car exhaust directly into the air intakes. MegaZorp Corp hired Detective Dyslexic; the management-type individual told him to

find the source of the curse upon the building.

Detective Dyslexic spent a few hours with the night-shift security guard and learned about mushrooms popping up through the asphalt. The next day, the maintenance crews showed where the grass was growing, and the odor of urine gave the detective a clue about how some stains could have happened. Time spent with the office-workers and their windowsill-carnivorous plants might possibly have something to do with the frequent fruit-flies and opportunistic spiders. Even though the detective never learned why the tree-rats wanted to attack the MegaZorp Corp building, enough was known to make a diagnosis.

The detective states that the ultimate source of the curse is unknown, but the proximate source is one management-type individual. The detective suggests that the individual take a very long vacation and see if the curse fades.

Sure enough, once the individual is half-way around the world, the security guards no longer bother to put grocery-store mushrooms in holes they make in the asphalt just to see what the management-type individual will conclude. The maintenance crew no longer felt the need to urinate on the roof over the individual's office or foul the air intakes with malodorous substances. The office workers think the fly and spider battles are epic, especially with a good video camera, and the insect bodies are always given to the carnivorous plants. I decided to stop putting blobs of peanut butter upon the electrical wires on the roof, and I stopped dropping peanuts down rat-sized vent-pipes. When a certain office wasn't empty, the office workers would pay me far too much for a little bag of rat poop.

### Crypto-Corp Gets a Gift

Of course you haven't seen it. The aliens gave it to Crypto-Corp. I worked there once, and I saw it up close--once.

Crypto-Corp accepted the gift of a sculpture with alien LEDs... and soon it gleamed upon the corporate compound during the day and glowed upon it at night. It basically was a shiny silver tower with a ball of LED lights on the top, including modified LEDs that worked like searchlights and pointed at anything that moved. Completely harmless, say the Crypto-Corp Sci€ntists. Several weeks after the sculpture had been installed, I was working very late and decided to go see the sculpture for myself when no others would be around (but even if they were, nobody would accuse me of shirking work to gawk at a flashlight-tower at this hour).

Reflecting pools, nice shiny tripod tower, and a ball on the top with lots of lights. I liked it, despite it's simplicity. I noticed one light was pointed at me, and it moved to point at me when I walked side to side. I walked away... and the light followed me. When I got a certain distance away, the light shining on me went out, along with a few others. I stepped forward, and the light was back on me instantly, and other lights soon glowed as well. One step backwards, and all went dark--a nice child's game.

The dawn was a half-hour away, but saw a jogger. She ran near the sculpture, and I

watched a light follow her as she ran past. When she runs out of range, the following light (and a few others) go out all at once.

A dog... wandering, decides to visit nearby trash cans... a light comes on, and other lights follow. The dog drinks out of the reflecting pond. She's got a collar on...

I step forward, and a light shines on me. I whine at her playfully in a high voice. I crouch, making sure to present my shoulder to the dog, and scoot backwards a couple steps. "Play?" I say, in a high hopeful voice, and scoot backwards once more... and 'my' light goes out.

The dog approaches. She's a big smile on four legs, happy to see me. I greet her as submissively as I can, and she does the same to me. We'll be fine together. Her collar has an address... and a phone number. Her owner answers the phone immediately. The dog and I wait at the base of the sculpture, and the nearby reflecting pool is full of light. The dog's owner finds us easily.

I was happy to watch the dog's enthusiastic greeting when her owner arrived. He blamed himself for the dog's early-morning romp, and I watched the lights follow them as they zig-zagged to a car. When they got out of range, the area is still bright from the lights shining on me. I walked away until all the lights went out. Despite the immanent dawn on the horizon, it got very dark.

Then I saw a feline form skulking nearer the sculpture... especially since it had a helpful spotlight shining on it. I stopped to watch. The cat sniffed, evaluated the trash cans with the same interest-changing-to-disinterest displayed by the dog, and started sneaking toward the parking lot. I waited for the light following it to turn off... and another light turns on. Another jogger. I notice she gets more lights than the cat did... perhaps because she's bigger than a cat.

Both the jogger and the cat move out of range, and all the lights are off.

I step forward. Light, then lights. Heh... I get more lights than the jogging lady... but I think the dog got more lights than I have. I'm much bigger than the dog... I step backwards, and all is dark.

I should get to work or get home and go to sleep, but I watch and wait. My theory was shattered, and I want to know.

A bird... ignored.

A shoe (mine) thrown in range... ignored. My foot was ignored until it nearly touched the shoe, then the light-more lights. I get my shoe and put it on, then walk out of range. I have better things to do...

A car-pool. Since they're early, they can park close and they'll have to walk by the sculpture. I watch.

Four lights, and additional lights as well, but since they walked in a close group, perhaps the lights overlapped. Poor quality data! I decide to wait and watch the dawn. Many people will come to work soon, and some will walk nearby... as if I could discover something the scientist could not.

A nice sports car... parks far away and it's single male occupant doesn't get close. I'm morose.

An econo-box car... parks close! Female occupant... light, plus three other lights. One more than the jogger, but they're the same size. Good data!

Another econo-box car... and it parks close! This guy gets a light plus two lights, like

the jogger, despite being bigger than either. Hmmm.

I step in range. I get a light, plus five lights. I step out of range, and all goes dark. I'll probably increase their power bill, fooling around like this. Get more data.

The sun rises. More cars come bringing more people, and many walk past the sculpture. Many two-lights, a few three lights, no four or five lights. Earlier this morning, the dog got five lights at least. Hmmm.

One of the cars stops close to me where there is no parking space. A window lowers, revealing a shaggy dog's head. The dog's head is withdrawn, and a human male's head says, "You mind getting into the car before we get a ticket?"

I hesitate.

"Epicetus, convince him!" says the man, and opens the car door farthest from me. The shaggy dog's head I saw earlier is soon matched with an equally shaggy body that gets a light plus five lights for a few seconds before circling around the car and approaching me submissively.

I slump my shoulders and lower my head. I look in the dog's eyes... then say, "OK, you win."

I'm licked. The car door opens more. "Get in."

I'm licked again, then I get in.

I'm offered a job, and I accept.

The Head-Hunting aliens win again.

#### #4

Once, a little male dragon was imprinted to a little girl, and it was good. Both prospered under the other's care. Both grew as they should. When they started to Become, the young woman was accepted to go to Flight school... and NO DRAGONS ON THE AIR-BASE.

But Flight school! The big male dragon could only watch the videos. He strongly advised her to go, and despite the distance, he was going too. Of course, she forbid this, but he winked at her... and she relented. She wondered what he was up to, but... Flight school! She put a large amount of money in his discretionary-expenses account--he can more than take care of himself.

Soon... the first day of Flight school! She was in class; he had a truck-trailer full of water one hundred meters from the guard-post at the air-base. He persuaded her that he could have fun anywhere--and he did. As she listened and read, he became an object of curiosity--a dragon waiting by the side of the road. Many people wanted to talk to him.

Then... at sunset, some fools decided to shine their headlights at a dragon's eyes. He had a little umbrella-hat prepared and pictures were taken and shared. The dragon's story was told to many people and a new cadet stood out from a crowd.

The dragon and the guards became friends despite the rules... especially later that night, when a group of rowdy drunks discovered the calming influence of a big dragon nearby (he had to jump a fence, but the perimeter violation was overlooked). The next day, the guards decided to search the trucks outside the perimeter so the dragon could help. Admin found out, complained, looked at numbers, and ordered a complicated system of safeguards to be put in place so the dragon could help inside the perimeter.

The guards decided the dragon could help that afternoon, and the increase in efficiency prevented the Admin from actually examining the 'safeguards' put in place.

The next day, the Solar-Rex was to be launched. The guards closed the border crossing and took the dragon to a convenient hilltop. However, a Flight school teacher had the same idea, and a cadet was united with her dragon long before school was over.

She was so happy she almost missed the launch.

She was to write a report on the launch afterwards. Her effort was much too short because she wasn't paying attention to the machines... so she wrote:

Mary had a dragon friend, a dragon friend, a dragon friend;  
Mary had a dragon friend who's teeth are white as snow.

Her instructor wrote 'very funny' and gave her an average grade.

#### #5

The 'battle' was over quickly. The robots waited until the day was hottest, then several thousand very fast robots glued various surfaces together that seemed tactically important. Then soldiers were ordered in to clean up the enemy. I am one of those soldiers.

There was some violence, but the robots are vigilant. Mine was easy-a young man glued to his rifle, and his rifle is glued in place.

"Can you understand me?"

He flinches, but says nothing.

"We told the robots not to glue lips and nostrils together. I know you can speak."

"My name is Death, and I die."

"No... Mr. Death, if you will swear not to harm any living thing to the best of your ability, I'll unglue you and we'll have tea together."

"Kill me."

"No. Swear that you will not harm any living thing to the best of your ability, and we will have tea together... if you don't run away. This I swear."

"Then I, [name deleted], take the oath.

"If you keep the oath, you'll be able to join the Peace army. We follow behind the robots and... sorry for the smell... we unglue people like you. I'm new at this, but I'm learning... the robots glued me three days ago, and I signed up after I learned the rules. It's not like I could go home again... They got your boots, too? Here, use as little as possible--we don't want to run out."

#6

In my dream, an evil-overlord's uniform overpowered me. I was defeated, and the uniform completely covered me except my face. The uniform owned corporations, and ordered me to increase profits in any and every way possible. Sick people are profitable, I reasoned, for the corporate doctors and drug companies that the suit owned. How could I find, create, and/or expand such a profitable market? I had an Idea... and using the Power of the Suit, a dozen other overlords were now listening to me. I knew I was being tested and that failing this test would be... unthinkable. But my idea is hugely profitable.

Summary: To cause illness in a targeted population using certain adjuvants, then profit by selling drugs that provide symptomatic relief.

An adjuvant is a substance that mysteriously causes the human immune system to become metaphorically hyper-vigilant, to attack anything labeled 'foreign' with extra vigor. Some doctors call them 'excito-toxins.'

Materials and Methods: Control of the target population's media is required. [Five puppet overlords nod in unison.] Using whatever means possible, dose children with adjuvants at a rate consistent with profitable allergy, autism, and asthma cases. Aluminum salts...

In my dream, a dozen evil overlords all smile a tiny, frozen smile at that moment--as if I had been reinventing the wheel--then all I can see is the rapidly receding trap door. I'm falling into darkness darker than my strangely heavy uniform... which is pulling me down much faster than gravity would have me.

Then I wake up--or at least, I think I do. When I'm inside my corp-cubicle, trying to look busy, I have my doubts.

## The Quest for Fur

One active-period, while the alien observer was sorting commercial broadcasts, the ten-thousandth ad (for shampoo) was catalogued and the alien got an idea and composed a communication. Perhaps an explanation for some mysterious human behavior had been discovered.

Long ago the nearly-furless humans learned to use various ways to cover themselves when they lived in cold climates. After the first hand-twisted plant fibers were turned into clothing, those humans who did not have access to animal fur became accustomed to wearing the fur-less but warm woven cloth. Humans became habituated to this type of cloth, and did not change when better alternatives were eventually invented. The alien called this 'functional fixedness,' a two-word story applied to humans who had become habituated to a good-enough solution. As further proof, the alien reported that numerous human commercial establishments were dedicated to caring for the small furry patches the humans still retained and enormous

volumes of blandishments are sold for hair care. However, (theorized the alien) this was not enough--the desire for fur was redirected to the desire to own furry things in addition to artificial-fur clothing. Perhaps this explained the puzzling toupees, stuffed animals, real animals, and shag carpeting that the aliens would never want for themselves. Perhaps the human desire for fur was redirected to domination of large furry animals--for example, horses appear in many movies, usually sat upon and submissive to a human. The lack of a thick, warm pelt may be affecting and redirecting human behavior.

To test the theory, another alien used the internet to ask humans which animals they might like to be. The majority of humans chose furry species; yet one human chose to be Ouroboros, one chose Cthulu, and another wanted to be a dragon. Interested in these humans, the alien checked the AnthroVideo storage thoroughly and found that these three humans had never been televised. (This alien had observed much of the dominant broadcast media and thought it probably damaged the humans who appeared on it.) Perhaps these humans could learn to live without fur, becoming clean enough to visit their spaceship.

## #7

Once, in a movie featuring a man in strange-looking rubber suit and miniature cities (including tiny buses and trains, but not many cars), the movie begins with the manster-monster rising out of the sea and stomping inland until it sees a miniature city. Then it roars, and stomps, stomps... and stops. Another fanciful being of similar 'genetics' blocks the first, able to appear magically (for the story) before the first one destroys too much of the tiny city. The second, prettier, smaller man-ster will not let the first one proceed.

In other movies, the man-sters fight, but this time they roar at each other for a bit, shake paws, and walk-stomp together. The unlikely pair find a nearby clay model resembling a miniscule nuclear reactor. The first monster roars, delighted, and wants to stomp it to pieces, but the second one has an idea... and somehow tells the first man-ster, who is delighted again and begins smashing all the power lines despite the spit sparks and flash-bang lightning. The second man-ster throws boulders into the ocean in front of big pipes (in the original movie, it also poops there). Soon, the clay model reactor melts, then burns, and the man-sters do an absurd victory-dance before running away.

After shooting this scene, the maintenance crew opens the roof vents and runs the fans. Supposedly, the fumes from burning modeling clay are bad for you--it sure smells like it. The director decides it's time to take a break--the fans are too loud and annoying.

#8

You're walking on the beach... and you see a gold coin in the sand. You pick it up and continue your walk. You find another gold coin... and a wad of currency. You keep walking... and see a quarter-dollar. You pick that up as well. You're enjoying this walk, and despite your burden (the soggy cash is really heavy), you walk near the water and improbably find a gold coin in the surf. You get wet, but you pick it up ... and the one you see in the water nearby, just slightly deeper. You look around, and see nobody there. Soon you're soaked to the skin but have coins in both hands... coins so heavy that they must be gold or gold-plated tungsten. You're cold, wet, and tired, but you've got more cold gold coins than you've ever seen, plus you have valuable wet pieces of paper.

On your way back to your conveyance of choice, you see a gold coin in the sand. You pick that one up despite your present load--which is more than you can carry for much longer. You rue the weight of that quarter-dollar buried somewhere in your hoard as you trudge... and you see another, beautiful gold coin, much larger than any you now possess. It joins your gold-hoard. You think you can carry it all but now it's foggy and cold and you can't see...

You think you are very close to your conveyance... and you see another large gold coin gleam in the fog five footsteps off to the side.

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You're walking on the beach one day... you see a person that looks like you staggering under a heavy load. As you watch, this person stumbles and falls.

You run to see what you can do, but you don't even have a pocket-handkerchief. You see gold coins and money and a cold, wet, exhausted person.

"Are you okay?" you say.

"I will be. I just took a tumble. Can you help me?"

"Of course," you say, and gather valuable items. The wind does not blow the sodden currency, but it does chill a living being... and you offer an article of clothing to another in need. After further labors, the person is in a conveyance with every gold coin and sodden currency that you could find. This person tries to reward you, but you're happy with only one coin or a piece of paper. Once in the conveyance, the person returns an article of clothing, now wet, and leaves the beach.

Despite the cold fog, you decide to continue your walk on the beach... and you see a gold coin in the sand.

## Hex-onus

Today I read that a giant company called Hexonus, Inc, bought the gallon today. They say it's a free market, but I didn't know the gallon was for sale. Hexonus' first act will be to shrink it a little bit because four liters and one gallon are presently too close for proper brand recognition.

Today I read that the company Hexonus discovered a magic spell long ago and has been using it on politicians all over the world.

Today I read that Hexonus didn't really discover the magic spell, but re-discovered it. It seems if you say 'bidness is bidness' to a politician while offering a large gift of money, the gift is always accepted and the politician stays bought a little longer. Also, something about adding 'Inc' to the end of your name un-makes your mistakes.

Today I read that our local clowngress critter hasn't had all his shots--and his kids medical records are unavailable.

Today I read that the clowngress critter got all his shots in one go, and afterwards was able to... the crap they print today is terrible. My arm was sore for a week after just one shot.

Today I went to an e-library in Rustcia and downloaded a bunch of free e-books from their 'Welcome, 3mpyreling' section. It's been on my to-do list for far too long.

## #9

There was a man who bought a guitar. He didn't want to cut his new guitar strings because he was taught to never cut rope without a good reason. So he installed the strings his own way, but first he put silver tips on the string-ends so they wouldn't fray.

The loose ends hung out under his elbow when he held his re-strung guitar. His friends laughed and said nobody does guitar strings that way, but they liked how his hung in loose coils. He called his guitar SilverLocks.

The next day, a friend who owned a twelve-stringed classical guitar asked to see how SilverLocks was strung. She said his string stringing was unique... and could he help her do the same? She had some new golden-colored guitar strings... and soon, her guitar was named GoldenHair SilverTips.

The owners of these guitars used stage-names--can you guess what they were?  
So... never cut rope without a good reason.

## The Great Cosmic Bean Counter

Little and gray, he worked for The Corp. He got a day's pay for his dazed work. Then one day a strange being from very far away came to see what could be seen, and saw The Corp. The being wanted to see the leader of The Corp, and the ship's computer

directed it to the little gray man.

The being left immediately. The ship's computer sent unnecessary electrons in among its electronics--it always does this when it is about to teach the strange being a lesson. You might call it laughter.

The little gray man wouldn't know it, but he was about to talk to unseen voices. His brain was scanned. The little gray man was an accountant and often said he was a bean-counter. He was certain that he did not own any part of the Corp. How could he lead? The strange being left immediately and went to the ship's computer to learn yet another lesson.

The computer explained. Much of the future Corp behavior would be determined by a relatively small amount of money, and information about that money went through that man's hands. A simple arithmetical error would be caught, but by changing certain assumptions, the little gray man can make a small amount of money appear in different columns on a spreadsheet--it's only a model. Sadly, the Corp always chases after money, even pseudo-money in an untested mathematical model with large error bars.

The being left immediately and had another invisible talk with the little gray man, who smirked and tapped the rubber end of a pencil on his computer screen. "I'm glad I caught that," he said. A smudge of a black number went from here to there, and considerable corp-evil was averted.

#### #10

Once a group of programmers tried to create a Work, and it was nearly done. They asked several secretaries to use their Work and find Incompletes. The programmers waited and waited, but finally had to ask why the secretaries reported so few Incompletes.

The secretaries *had* found many more Incompletes than they had reported, but had assumed that a mere secretary was too untrained to use a Work properly. The Incompletes that made the Work difficult to use were seen as evidence of that 'fact.'

What they got was what they sought.

#### #11

Every capitalistic society has an underclass, and he was part of it. Today, he has a choice... more time in the Big House, or sign up for a psych experiment. He signs.

Thick glass separates him from the gaggle of white coated scientists. He watches them and listens to a recording... sort of. They want him to work in a day-care? and be nice to some stranger's kids? Sounds like he's been scammed... but

it's better than the local lockup.

A door opens... and kids come in, bearing toys. Not one of them is more than five.

"I'm Rick!"

"I'm Wanda!"

"I'm Stoopie!" said three random kids.

"I'm your babysitter," he says, "and I'm making a new rule. You can't call yourself Stoopie anymore. What's your real name?"

"Stoopie!" shout all the children.

"Not anymore. His name is ... what is it, kid?"

The child is silent.

"Then we'll call you Good Luck Dragon, OK?"

The child is silent... too silent.

"Are you OK, kid?"

The child is immobile. The other children all talk at once, but he ignores them.

Then a pretty young lady in a white labcoat tries to attract his attention, but she's on the wrong side of the glass. He demands to know why the child is so stiff and immobile--and strangely heavy.

"We deferred maintenance too long. The Stoopie broke down... I'm sorry... you were doing so well."

#12

The phone rings.

"I heard about your (beep) loss--what can I do?"

"I just found out about it myself... I'm sort of numb."

"Are you (beep) going to New York?"

"I guess I have to. Who is this?"

"I'm Pete...(beep) your brother knows me. Anyway, let me connect you (beep) with my travel agent...(beep) she specializes in emergency cases like yours, and (beep) let me tell you she is hot!"

"Pete, how do you connect with my brother?"

"We're internet pals. We play 'Correx-it-Slimes' and 'Slashfu Immensify' all the time. Tell you what... I got this connect-up-ap thingie... if you don't like what she tells you, hang up."

"To New York, next flight in six hours, a little over nine hundred. In ten hours, New York will cost you five hundred, but you have choices. In twenty six hours, a flight will..."

"How did you..."

"From Pete--he's very helpful. Pete is probably showing off our connect-up-ap called InaSnap. You're not the first person who's been disoriented by the rapid pace of technology. As a demonstration... In eleven hours, an independent cab could pick you up at your door and get you to the airport one hour and sixteen minutes before your flight leaves--for everything, about seven hundred and... taxes, sorry... twenty. You can see a picture of driver and car at [            ], along with his last one hundred ratings, all four star or better."

"How can you do that before you know where I live?"

"The fare's for your entire area code, I can't miss. (canned laughter)

"Even for a cell phone?"

"Certainly. Without proper data localization, cell phone towers could not accurately send data to your phone and your phone only. You, the valued customer, would not tolerate random people listening to your private conversations even by accident. I hate to interrupt, but the 'front door to airport' offer expires in twenty seven minutes, just so you know."

"That's nearly every cent I have in my checking account."

"You don't have a credit card, so that complicates things... would you like to pay monthly? I can connect you to Finance in twenty-eight milliseconds."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, I keep records of audio-data-channels as part of my job, and for the last week it has been twenty-eight milliseconds or less. Perhaps you'll be one of the lucky ones... eighteen milliseconds! (laughter)"

"I'm sorry, but I don't know Pete and I want to check with my brother."

"Certainly. Twenty six minutes. Your brother will not answer his phone, you'll see."

"How'd you know?"

"He was playing a new game called 'Dork Warper' that I told him about, and he left the channel open... all night. He's been a busy man. You might have to tell him the bad news when he finally wakes up."

"How..."

"It is my joy to connect and connect. I cannot control prices or availability or make any alterations, merely to connect what is there. Twenty-four minutes. As a demonstration, go to [www internet WarkDorper] and type 'live feed dropin DW 1337' without quotes and when it asks you for the password, type 'yrajrdnt' without quotes. Then you'll be linked into the network, and have admin privileges on the game servers, and you can access your brother's videocam on his laptop because he's 'DW 1337' and you'll see I'm telling the truth."

( ... )

"The game content can be quite shocking... it is often chosen by popular vote."

"Twenty minutes. It brings me electronic joy to connect you, and I will wait as patiently as a computer can."

..... LOST CARRIER .....

### #13

"First time I've seen a centipede up close from so far away," said Pilot Five.

"There are people in the building," said Mission Command.

"Circling back around."

"The big boys will arrive in six minutes."

Pilot Five wasn't a military pilot, but all pilots knew that the 'big boys' don't pull their punches--ever. "Going in... I think it has its head stuck in a dumpster."

"Negative, no live fire..."

"I'm going to try the latches on it." Pilot Five landed the utility helicopter on the giant centipede's back a few segments from the head. The latches worked perfectly... but this critter is too heavy and wriggly to lift. Pilot Five powers down the helicopter and the huge arthropod wriggles even more--then both machine and insect fall sideways. Pilot Five abandons the helicopter and joins the people running away from the restaurant. The giant bug squirms sideways and repeatedly fails to free itself, and the restaurant empties.

Mission Command is delighted. After radio-tagging, the monstrous insect leads flame-throwing tanks to an underground nest.

### #14

There was once a village... Every day at noon, all the villagers would dance and beat a great drum. Visitors were told that the drumming was necessary to keep the sun shining, for the drumming scared away Snake The Eater. It was a strange custom, but the people who live in nearby villages never mocked the drumming villagers.

Then, one day all the villagers from that village decided to travel to the sea and back again, and asked the neighboring villages to look after their crops and animals and drumming while they were gone. The neighboring villagers knew about crops and animals, but would not continue the drumming no matter how much gold was offered them. The job was finally taken by a group of children.

The children didn't wait until noon to bang the drum. It was a natural target for thrown stones. The big drum didn't last long.

Then came a solar eclipse. During the darkness, the drumming villagers returned shouting, which turned to shrieks and wailing over the loss of the great drum.

The sun returned, slowly. The drumming villagers demanded gold from those who destroyed the drum, but the children only returned the gold paid them--they had no more. Their parents just shrugged when the drumming villagers demanded more and threatened war.

The Judge at the Council of Villages heard the case and ordered the drumming villagers to apologize to the children and share bread with them. He also said that if the drumming villagers try this stunt again during the next solar eclipse (many years away), they will be punished to the fullest extent that The Law allows.

#15

The machine had stopped spending logic-time on the problem, and the package was delivered. The package was opened by a student of philosophy, who was initially puzzled at the handheld electric fan the package contained. Once the proper batteries were located, the student turned the fan on.

As the clear plastic blades began to turn, little lights along the length of the blades began flashing. Soon, by reading the words that the 'persistence of vision' made it possible for a human to see, the student learned how to program messages for display on the fan. The student did not see that two hundred fifty million spores as they flew off of the fan blades.

As the student wondered who knew that this light-up fan would be appreciated, most of a million spores were inhaled. The student did not even cough. The spores that settled in the fish tank did nothing obvious to the fish. When a other humans and a dog came to visit later, the spores they stirred up did them no (noticeable) harm.

But... under the aquarium, condensate supplied enough water for opportunistic fungi to attack the wood shelf underneath. One of the spores landed there, then grew and fed upon the fungi. Other spores found the slimy food-chain linked under the toilet and fungal/bacterial mats found around the shower stall.

The next morning, the student did not see the biochemical warfare going on at the cellular level--some of the prey were trying to resist being eaten. The smells were ignored, as the machine predicted.

The student took yesterday's gift to class.

## Gaia's Eructation

"THREE!" I screamed. "I can barely manage two!"

"Three," says the C. O. "It looks like a battlefield out there."

I trudge to my workstation... only to find some sweaty blonde guy staring into the monitors... and it does look like a battlefield out there. The guy's flying four!... so I jack into one at random. It's a Flare-fighter on autopilot, flying back to refuel. It's got a few rounds of incendiary bullets, so I turn it so it points over the ocean and shoot them in a standard burst. As the autopilot takes command again, I watch... and one of the bullets finds a gas pocket. It would almost be pretty... but it's out of ammo.

"Thanks," mumbles the guy. I 'steal' another one of his Flare-fighters and do the same thing again, but fail to see any fireworks in the sky. The ocean is seething, and I regret that this one doesn't have any floaty flamers left to drop. That's a lot of methane getting away... I loop the fighter around once more, and shoot another standard pattern. This time... boom. I tell the autopilot to repeat until out of ammo--no sense saving incendiary bullets on a day like this.

Today, I find out that I'm good at my job... or perhaps the autopilots deserve the credit. By the end of my first shift, many pyro-cumuli clouds have formed large enough for

lightning. I almost lose a fighter to a rapidly growing cloud that seems to feed on what its lightning strikes ignite. Soon, I'm only flying two--then only one. My sector is now covered in dense, sparky clouds that make remote-piloting very difficult.

When my shift is over, I watch the weather satellite feeds. The clouds aren't dropping rain, but there's more than enough lightning--and the methane burns.

The commander decides it's time.

Previously-laid bombs explode over methane hydrate beds underneath the sea floor. These beds were already bubbling steadily, and both the shock-wave and the removal of overburden will allow sub sea-floor methane hydrate to turn to gas faster than it was already. Mother Earth is going to burp!

Watching and waiting... then the pressure within champagne bottles was equalized with ambient air. The storm-clouds ignited the methane and fed upon the hot air. But because the bubbling didn't quit (perhaps some warmer ocean water is finding a way to the hydrate layers) the C. O. decided it was time to celebrate. Today, we did our job. Methane was burned into carbon dioxide. A very potent greenhouse gas was turned into a less potent greenhouse gas plus active pyro-cumulus clouds. The C. O. says future generations of humans have a chance to survive the CO<sub>2</sub> that man has put into the atmosphere, but adding lots of methane now will increase the Earth's temperature so rapidly that there will be no future human generations. The collective temper-tantrums thrown by seven billion plus humans might doom all present multicellular life-forms.

## #16

Once, a bull was thinking very hard. Just when the bovine philosopher was making no progress at all, he was forced into a building the usual way and confined in a stall too small. A grate in front of him had tasty alfalfa hay behind it, but when he stuck his head through the grate, it locked around his neck and two humans removed the hay.

The bull knew that fighting with the cold iron around his neck was useless. Other humans pushed a large dark thing close, and others brought light, and one human decides to stand next to the bull while holding a silver stick. The human talks and talks and looks at the dark thing. Then all the humans leave, taking the big dark thing with them.

As the bull waits to be released, he has peace and quiet and time in which to think.

No useful purpose was served, thought the bull. No sane being would choose to do something useless, he reasoned further. The humans must have some other sort of iron around their necks... something that can't be seen by a bull.

## The Firing Pin

There's this little part on the hammer of a gun that actually contacts the back end of a bullet designed to ignite a self-oxidizing chemical reaction that will produce a gas called 'gun-smoke'

fast enough to drive a metal pellet through a close-fitting metal tube with enough force to 'waste' a 'target.' That little part where the hammer hits the bullet--the firing pin--that's you. You can't see the metaphorical bullets you send down metal tubes. You can't feel the gunpowder going off because the €mpyre'\$ guns are designed that way. You are happy enough not to be thinking the thought that pulled the trigger. Your 'commander' is happy not to be the one actually sending the bullet down the gun barrel. The euphemism gets euphemized.

### What Big Ears You Have

"She's home!" (moan) "That's a submission noise I make because she likes it. First, her shoes--office to parking lot to car again. Now, her hands... nasty! She's been eating those dusty things!" (whine) "Also oily noodles and vegetation... and she hasn't touched any other humans recently." (pant-pant-pant) "Her urine smells diabetic again. Her ear is slightly infected, but she won't let me lick it properly." (silence)

"What's wrong?" asks the big dog next door.

"She was petting me! Now she's on the couch, and that sound and light thing is on again." (whine, whine) "I'm done."

The little dog who lives in the upstairs house says "The cat is outside my window."

Every dog barks at it.

Various versions of 'QUIET' are said by dog-owning humans in nearby domiciles.

The cat laughs.

### #17

Once, during the normal operation of a nuclear facility, much low-level rad-waste was produced. They put the waste in cheap containers and buried it just out of reach of tree roots. They planted trees over the burial site and paid the salary of one land-management and radiation monitor 'park ranger.' That was Kenon's job.

Today, beneath the roots of a large tree, one of the containers sends a distress signal. Kenon had no idea what to do... his job was the result of a round of lawyering, and he doesn't dare ask for help. His geiger was quiet with the leaves but not so with the acorns. Kenon collected every one and put a sheet-metal squirrel-discourager on the tree. He stored the acorns in plastic trash-cans marked 'DO NOT REMOVE.'

Kenon tested the groundwater--nothing. The tree's bare twigs--barely above background. When the container's electronics ceased transmitting, Kenon tested the groundwater again. Still good.

The new leaves in the spring were not hot. The mature leaves--a trace perhaps, Kenon couldn't tell without better equipment, so he seeks it in academia. Soon the lab techs and professors want samples of last year's acorns and this year's twigs. It seems like a radio-oak is interesting.

Lab techs came a couple times a month during the summer, collecting leaves, twigs and baby acorns each time. That fall, the acorns that fell were rad-hot, auto-radiogramable. Kenon stores this batch next to last year's unrotting acorn hoard. Not one will sprout--Kenon has tried many

times. After the leaves fall, he takes grafting wood from the hot oak. When spring comes, the sap runs and Kenon tried grafting the twigs onto the local oaks, but the twigs don't grow. Next year...

The third year, another container sends a distress signal. This container is under the other, and Kenon suspects the tree has extra-deep roots. The radioactive signatures of the immature acorns show a dramatic change in isotope ratios--and the techs who tested the acorns want more samples. Kenon writes memos and letters. Kenon's stash of radioactive acorns is 'discovered' by admin (finally), judged to be high-level rad-waste, and removed two weeks later, except for a handful in the freezer. Kenon calculates the the acorns have already bio-concentrated two hundred percent of what was reported to be in the first container before burial. This fact does not please admin--they decide to take down the tree and 'exhume the defectives' (dig up the containers) but do not tell Kenon.

The radioactive acorns deter immediate action. Kenon picks up every one. The admin decide to delay the digging until the publicity dies down--this batch of acorns is the most radioactive yet--but they do put a large fence (with no gate) around the tree. Kenon receives many requests for 'hot' acorns and/or twig and dry leaf samples from many curious humans--more than he knows--but admin does not pay him to answer correspondence and Kenon receives only a fraction of his mail. However, the few requests he does get are enough. He collects twigs and puts them in the fridge so he won't have to go outside and over the fence to get more to satisfy requets.

Then 'it' happened, and admin was angry--the fence was vandalized! One hole cut into the fence was large enough for a human to pass through... so admin decides to move.

Kenon works all day cleaning up the mess and fixing the fence. Admin spends the day ensuring the bulldozers attack at dawn. That dawn, Kenon is delayed delivering a piece of paper. The tree was already gone and two bulldozers were removing a strange, massive root structure piece by piece. It was down deeper than tree roots usually go, and roots had penetrated both compromised containers. Prevented from obtaining pieces, Kenon took pictures. The root fragments were hauled off to oblivion.

Kenon reads every book he can find on grafting, and is fired for downloading illegal content (a e-book on grafting) using their computers. He is banned from their property forever. He remembers to take the twigs from the fridge before he flees.

Not much later...the phone rings... it's the admin tech support lady. She wants a new email address so his email will no longer clutter up company computers, so he complies. Then she says, since you are not employed here, you citizen you, without permission to store anything on company computers, now the company has no right to delete, censor, or alter the emails of a private citizen good luck citizen.

Kenon receives a code. He supplies this to the appropriate non-company computer, which supplies Kenon with two years of his unaltered emails.

With a handful of twigs, Kenon will change the world.

## #18

Spelunking Doogus finds a gem. Without a voice, the gem tells him something... and Doogus knows if he touches the gem with his dirty hands, he'll leave fingerprints on it that can never be removed. The marks will be called 'Doogus-stains' for as long as humans view the gem.

Doogus does not touch the gem. He takes several pictures using only his headlamp for illumination, and the photos aren't of good quality.

Two days later, Goofus goes spelunking, inspired by Doogus' grainy photos. Goofus doesn't get a chance to touch the gem because 'the rightful owner' Doogus is trying to take better photos using two flashlights for illumination. Goofus goes away disgruntled and resentful--and returns with a weapon.

Goofus leaves the cave with the crystal in his pocket. When he washes blood off the gem, a stain remains.

Goofus does not know that DNA taken from blood samples found in micro-cavities in the stained crystal will match those taken from the crime scene, but Doogus will ensure that Goofus will learn. However, the gem cannot be cleaned. Blood-borne iron has stained the gem forever.

### Tricky Bricky

Once, an unusual machine emerged from an inventor's workshop, able to make bricks using most subsoil types by electro-sintering. Despite the bronze gears, silver wiring, and gold buttons, the machines didn't make perfect bricks. The inventor finds ways to use the imperfect bricks, and decided to build several more of these machines. All of the machines quickly produced many strong bricks, but none produced perfect ones. The inventor didn't see the defect as significant--it was provable mathematically that, by flipping and turning bricks, a straight wall could be built using the warped bricks from any of these machines.

Some of the brickmaking machines sold quickly--those that produced easy-to-build-with bricks. Others didn't sell--predictably, the ones that produced bricks that must be turned and flipped in a complicated pattern to produce a straight wall. These unsold machines might have bankrupted the inventor but...

"Yes, I am a wizard," said the little old man who walked in the door. "I'd like to make a bet with you, but I can't. Any normal person will resist calling themselves an idiot--but since you are the kind that so self-describes, perhaps I can help you without making you lose a bet. What do you think you need?"

"I need to sell these machines, so I can make more."

"Are you sure?"

"No..."

"Good. Get your work gloves, I'm going to show you something."

"Okay... NOOO! Don't turn them all on! There's too many bricks already!"

"Are you sure?"

"Almost, but..."

"Get your work gloves."

"NOOO! Don't mix the bricks! The patterns were difficult enough as it was!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

"No. Get your gloves."

The wizard lined up some bricks in front of the shop's counter, where a new wall would hide the rather nice brickwork (done by the inventor). But the inventor said nothing, willing to learn his lessons. It is a fact that wizards lack tact, and work gloves are...

"By your lunchbox, where you left them," said the wizard. The wizard turns off all the brick-making machines, then starts building a wall. The wall was short but straight, and the wizard was spending only a little time fitting bricks picked up at random.

"Magic!" said the inventor.

"No. You try it," said the wizard.

To fit there, a brick needs to be shaped just so...

"Quit. Just pick."

The inventor picked. The brick wouldn't fit here, but it would fit there. Randomly picking another brick, it wouldn't fit anywhere--until turned upside-down, and it fit. The third brick picked was a twisted brick, and the wizard took it.

"That's for the special pile. Those bricks are worse than average. Use the others." The wall grew quickly under the inventor's hands--but the wizard had merely six of the worse-than-average bricks stacked in a usable way. The inventor understood and helped, but the wizard forbade the use any but the most oddly shaped bricks. Despite this arbitrary taboo, the wizard's wall of twisted bricks grew to countertop level.

"You've got a knack with the twisted bricks," said the wizard.

"Thank you."

"Now... knock them down," said the wizard. "Every single brick that has been piled up--you knock it down."

The inventor unstacks bricks, but the wizard puts them back. "You're not learning," he says.

Walls of bricks built without any sort of mortar topple easily... but the one built of twisted bricks, the one that took the longest to build, resisted the inventor for the longest time.

"Now you can unstack all of them gently," said the wizard. "You understand."

"No... do I have to unstack every brick from every other brick?"

"Probably. They hide your excellent brickwork."

"What do I do with the broken bricks?"

"Make a broken-brick wall, a broken-brick walk-way, or put a 'free broken bricks' sign here and walk away... like this!"

The wizard leaves. The bricks get heavier and heavier, and the floor is still littered with bricks when curious potential customers come in. They all have work gloves and ask the inventor about Wizard demo-lessons in brickwork as they help clear the floor.

The inventor is tired, but the would-be students are not and they quickly learn the Twisted Bricks lesson. The inventor does not ask the students for money, but sells more machines than there are in the shop. The people who buy the brick-making machines decide to run the machines together and mix the bricks produced, showing that they know Diversity is Strength.

## Part Two

One day the inventor of the subsoil-to-bricks machine hears that newer and better brick-making machines are coming. These machines are made with iron gears and aluminum wiring and silicon brains, and they require processed clay from far away, but they quickly produce piles of perfect bricks that require no knack to stack. The inventor decides not to build more brick-making machines... but the wizard shows up and disagrees.

"The jeweler who makes your silver wire and gold buttons needs the work."

"... but nobody will buy my machines because of the newer, better ones."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"You're probably right... but build a few more machines anyway. I smell trouble." The wizard left. The inventor went to work.

The perfect bricks *were* trouble. The most perfect walls would fall for no reason at all. Some scientist said the bricks so perfectly flat and smooth that the surface area on the brick is minimized, so bonding between the brick and the wet, gritty mortar is also minimized, and that ten milligrams of a food-oil contaminant can spread a long way on a perfectly flat brick and prevent the water-based mortar from bonding.

The scientists didn't say that oily contaminants from half a flattened french fry were more than sufficient to weaken the mortar-brick bond, but the wizard knows milligrams. He instructed the inventor to dramatically add a small quantity of bio-degradable food oil to the surface of bricks of both types, then devise a test to show the brick-mortar bond remains strong on the rough irregular bricks but fails on the perfect ones.

The inventor takes a half french-fry (from a well-known vomitorium [sic] ) and squeezes it in a fist, then makes hand-prints on bricks both rough and smooth. Then the inventor pours a slightly yellow water-like liquid on the bricks--and there are handprints on the smooth bricks, revealing places that repelled the liquid.

The wizard comes back with a kitten. They watch the video. The wizard likes it well enough... but states that the liquid looks a lot like piss. The inventor mentions a drought. The wizard laughs.

In the inventor's workshop, the wizard and the kitten find a stack of soiled with oil, pissed-on, then cemented home-made bricks hanging from the 'bricky' scale tied to the ceiling. Seven 'C' clamps lined up on the last brick provide places to tie on weights. The inventor has piles of bricks, boards, and rope, and is ready to do a demonstration... but the wizard shakes his head. The wizard's kitten, which, according to the 'bricky' scale, weighs more than zero but less than a half-kilo, will do as a weight. The string of rough bricks easily bears the kitten's weight, but neither the happy kitten or the addition of kitten-treats (administered one by one) changes the scale enough for human eyes to see. The wizard removes the kitten.

"Now you should pile on your weights," says the wizard.

The scene with the kitten adds nothing, but many viewers watched what one would think dull--an inventor proving that rough bricks resist oily contaminants better than smooth bricks.

The kitten was nick-named 'Bricky' or 'MissPicksSlickBricks' after pissing on a brick and revealing an oily hand-print.

## #19

Those colors weren't there... the black and white crosswalk suddenly had waving, then swirling, but always vibrant, deep colors. The street seemed to yield beneath her feet. Her training kicked in, training she didn't know she had. She knew what to do.

Somewhere, some poor misguided soul was dosing people with psycho-gas or 'delic dust, and she must be one of many. But this is familiar territory--she's been shrooming before. She knows that, if she looked up, she'd see the ABSOLUTE and hear the AUM once again... but, looking around her here and now, she sees that the others need a Guide. They're not prepared. She smiles at a stunned woman and pulls a man out of the intersection. A car-horn honks.

She isn't/wasn't sure, but perhaps much time passed. Some people are following her, helping her as she pulls wandering people off of the street, helping those who can barely walk stay on their feet. The car horns blare. Her internal power starts playing 'Amazing Grace' in her head louder than car horns. She sings along. People start following her as she leads them off of the wide city street. She sings louder, and the line of people behind her lengthens. A ragged chorus of would-be singers grows stronger.

She realizes... she forgot to call for backup! and her singing falters. She looks up briefly, but sees only dark clouds. Of course... it's up to her now. She sings louder. She has power enough already. She's off the street, her people are mostly off the street, mostly still on their feet. She turns to look, careful to smile, smile, and... pull that woman out of the street. Wow... there are so many.

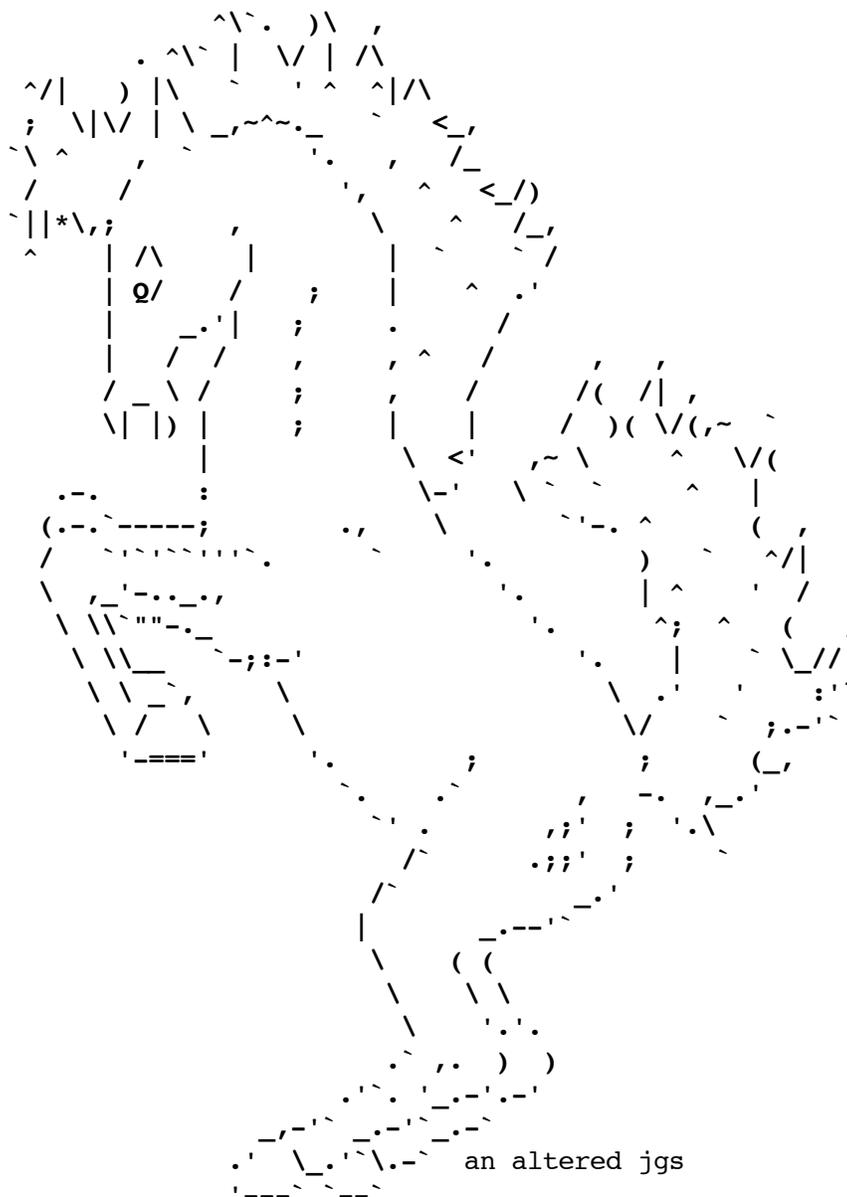
"Perhaps you are wondering why I've called you all here today," she says to the distorted faces behind her... but nobody seems to get her joke. She sings again--softly, sweetly, something she can maintain. More people sing this time, and she feels her power grow. She smiles again at the people who need her now. She must look confident and competent. She will lead them far from the cars. She must not fail. Move!

## #20

He stood on the drawbridge of a large castle and waited for the portcullis to rise so he could enter. In the arch of the man-sized opening in the castle wall, the pitted iron bars restlessly blocked the doorway amid crunching noises.

Obviously, the maintenance has been deferred too long, he thought, and he rubbed his hands together, half-squatted, and grasped the bars.

The instant his hands touched the metal, a voice--low, menacing, and implacable--said 'BURGLAR.' The crunching noises grow louder, accompanied by very deep breathing. He takes two steps backwards as the iron bars quickly rise. A large, dark horse suddenly filled the doorway--so absorbent of all light that its eyes did not shine.



Its hooves would fit on dinner-plates, he thought. A horse that size should have...

'FLEE OR DIE!' said the voice. The horse lowers its head.  
"Awww... this nice guy doesn't smell that bad," he says.  
"Pretty boy needs a bath!"

The horse's mane looks like black fire.

He lowers his head submissively and slowly approaches the horse, taking small sideways steps.

The horse seems to absorb all the light.

He offers the palm of his hand to the horse... but the darkness around the horse is complete. Slowly, cautiously, his hand finds pitted iron bars.

'BURGLAR!' the voice shrieks this time.

He lifts--the bars move easily in the darkness.

His foot still finds iron, so he lifts more-and more. The bars move too easily and they are too long. They must bend somewhere, making a sort of loop like a conveyer belt... in the dark, his hands find a place that bends backwards. He pulls and pushes, and soon he is inside. A gray fog obscures his vision, accompanied by a smell that chokes him initially. He knows what he will find in the dimness...

She is there.

He knows what to do.

Before she rattles her chains, he knows.

He searches his pockets... a steel wire ring, a tiny light, useless keys... unless... holding the light in his lips, he finds that a key will fit in a gap in the lock and push the locking-pin up, but he cannot manage it with his hands alone. He struggles... strong hands slide another key alongside his.

He wakes when the lock opens.

His dreaming self is very busy these nights.

He finds his phone and enters CASL DK HS Goddess, lock. Let the Fatherland Security boys chew on that one... he smirks at his phone's covered cameras.

On the way to work, he finds a silver mechanical pencil stuck into one of his potted blueberries. Sleek, clean metal, bearing the word 'EPIC.' He likes it so much that he buys a ream of paper on the way home. He has an idea...

## #21

The Embedded Family was going to the park!

They drove there in two large vehicles. A little vehicle followed them.

At the park, the Embedded Son had fun flying a new toy quadcopter. The Embedded daughter stood on the top of a slide and proposes to swat at the toy with her sweater.

When the Embedded Son flew the quadcopter closer than five meters to the Embedded Daughter, a little man got out of the little vehicle. The Embedded Matriarch shouted "EMBEDDED SON, STOP THAT THIS INSTANT!" before the little man closes the car door. The Embedded Matriarch looks at the little man and asks him "What do you want?"

He tells her that his employer knew of the newly delivered quadcopter, and... perhaps she'd be interested in some safety goggles for the children? and this override device will make Embedded Son's quadcopter fall from the sky... Veto power at your fingertips. Long-life batteries are a small additional cost, well worth it.

You know what happens next. They're the Embedded Family.

## #22

"I don't think a psychiatrist could help me," said Bean.

"But you said you were going crazy--where else can you get help?" I asked.

"I wish I knew," said Bean.

"Do you think I could help you?"

"Your professional capacities as a detective would be useless, but perhaps as a friend..."

"Since I'm not going anywhere, why don't you tell me your story from the beginning," I said.

"There is no beginning... This afternoon, I was puttering in the garden, and I idly pick a green bean off of the biggest plant and take a bite out of it. It was so good I ate the whole thing as fast as I could, even the little hard tip at the end. I would have eaten every bean on the plant--maybe even the plant itself--but I remembered something before I was done swallowing the first one.

I'm not sure if it was a dream or hallucination...more like something remembered. I was counting out bean seeds to plant, and a Voice thanks me for taking care of the bean children so well, even going so far as to wear gloves so as to keep my unplantly sweat off of them. I don't remember what I said, but the Voice was pleased and offered to do a favor for me. Again, I can't remember what I said, but the Voice said that it would only do what a bean plant could do. I forgot what I asked for, but I know I asked for something... I wish I could remember."

After confirming that Bean could remember nothing else useful, I start asking questions.

"Did the Supreme Bean scare you?"

"No."

"Then why did this remembrance keep you from eating any more beans?"

"I'm eating the children!"

"Who's children?"

"The children of the Supreme Bean! I'm going to be punished!"

"I don't think so... haven't you always eaten green beans?"

"Yes..."

"Yet you were given this..."

"Thank you, Blake! I can't even begin to thank you enough."

"Yes, you can. First... these beans could turn into seeds?"

"Then I can't eat them..."

"If you succeed getting seeds, then maybe next year, you and many other people can eat them. Perhaps your memory was just what you needed to hear before you'd eaten all the beans."

### #23

Red and blue bits of glitter were still stuck to his hands after he wiped them on a dirty towel, so Our Hero uses a half-liter of Universal Solvent plus soap to remove it. His wet hands are now clean... but there is still red and blue glitter on the towel. Instead, he wipes his hands on his pants... and his hands are now bespeckled green and gold. He tries the Universal Solvent yet again, but finds sparkly red/blue/green/gold contaminants after washing. The handles on the sink are covered with a barely perceptible dusting of flakes that change to shiny red and gold as soon as his hands touch them. He is covered with these flakes...

Who would do this to him?

Every person he meets is covered in similar glitter, and they look at him sharply when he asks about it--then look sad and walk away quickly. Eventually he gets his explanation... it was called 'Glitical Mass,' caused by excessive glitter consumption. The story started with children that like to play with glitter. Some of the children had inherently superior glitter-dispersion and distribution abilities. These children, excelling at glitter-ati, are able to produce large clouds of glitter. Naturally, such clouds of glitter diminish slowly. However, since some societies enforced confinement of large numbers of children in schools, the clouds of glitter that surrounded the glitter-ati were able to overlap and intermingle much too long. Nobody noticed that when one child's cloud of glitter overlaps with another child's cloud, more glitter is created than destroyed. When innocent people were enveloped (as the newly-created glitter has to go somewhere), some of them will produce clouds of glitter of their own. Because nobody knew the Ways of Glitter, the problem could only grow until... it was too late. More glitter clouds mean more clouds overlapped, which create ever more glitter, and then... it will all go Glitical. At present, glitter production is only limited by the numbers and motions of living humans--and it looks like reducing both is the only thing that can diminish glitter production.

As the world became increasingly full of glitter, more and more children lost their battles with it and never became adults, while some glitter-breathing adults became again as children.

Our Hero has seen this happen, and thinks hard and long. If such effects can be reversed, the first step must be to remove the glitter.

Our Hero, once fully informed of this plot complication, knows just what to do. He invents the Glitter Quitter, and in the tradition of heroic mad scientists everywhere, nobly tests it on himself.

Our Hero is now Revealed. Those of us surrounded by clouds of glitter could not see him, for he did not reflect the colors of glitter, but only Light. There was so much glitter in the world that the machine soon failed--yet that was long enough for Our Hero, once freed from glitter-contaminants for nearly six seconds, to think of a way to buy more time.

Our Hero takes one flake of glitter and carefully covers it with honest dirt from a child's hand. This flake is released into the ever-present glitter clouds--and the mindless glitter spread the dirt. As surely as a child's hand can always make yet another dirty hand-print on any patch of clean

white-washed wall, the dirt soon covered every flake in the glitter clouds. The clouds of dirty glitter were smaller, interacted less, and dirty glitter settled faster. To the uneducated eye, it seemed that Our Hero succeeded. It appears that large concentrations of people now make lots of dirt--but in reality, each speck of dirt is a less-than-lofty flake of dirty glitter. Newly created glitter is still shiny since it takes time for the dirt to work, but dirty glitter is still glitter and brings us closer to the Gliticality.

But there is still Time, and Our Hero writes a book and gives it away for free. The book is an invaluable compendium of knowledge of things glittery, but most of humanity is too busy being amused to death by the newly created sparkles. The Gliticality is still reality--not enough people will read the book.

Our Hero uses glitter to re-write his book, sparkly and shiny. Every time a page is turned, more glitter is released into the world--but many people want to read the beautiful book. Glittery words become serious thoughts, and people learned to reject what they would ignorantly select, yet the dirty glitter piles up.

Perhaps humans can live through the Gliticality.

#### #24

She stared up at the sky... two perfect sun-dogs. Since such staring is not conducive to driving, she stops the car and grabs her phone. The clouds are amazing too--but some seem too close to the sun-dogs and might block her view. In an effort to avoid trees and a parked truck, she crosses the roadway plus three dozen footsteps.

She puts her fist between the sun and the phone's camera and starts taking pictures.

After thirty pix, her instincts kick in... someone is getting too close... but she is outrun and her phone stolen. Her hands are bound with tape behind her back.

Her assailant spins her around, and she sees a man with a dart in his neck. The man looks confused, then collapses. Other men come... with guns that say 'don't run or I'll shoot.' But one man drops, darts, and another screeches as a dart hits him. The other men scatter, and she sees another man drop.

Quiet, except for her breathing. She walks to the dusty road.

A dust-colored fox appears in her path, and bows to her. "If you will hold still, I can remove your restraints," it says. Its breath is misty and drifts downwards.

She offers her hands, and the tape is cut in milliseconds.

"I cannot lick your face with this avatar, but you may find petting it soothing."

"Thank you," she says as she begins pulling the tape off of her wrists.

"You must pet this avatar now."

She is slightly hesitant... but the fox is small and pretty. She sheds the tape and crouches before the fox.

"Look in the eyes of this avatar. Please maintain eye contact while collection is in progress."

"Why?" she asks.

"The specimen-collection robot has been called nightmare fuel... and the operators are giant repulsive aliens."

She pets the totally immobile fox.

"Aren't you worried about their weapons?"

"Not at all."

Deep grumbly noises and ground tremors. A really, really big shadow. She pets the immobile fox, but slower and slower.

"Take a quick glimpse if you must," says the fox.

She does... big, shiny metal six-legged picking up unconscious men in huge metal claws... One man awakens, and a popping sound behind her seems to correlate with a dart appearing in the man's neck. She turns to look at the fox--it's mouth is slightly open and vapor drifts downwards.

The fox shakes its head slowly and the vapor dissipates. "I will tell you a sort-of true story to divert your attention to what is happening behind you. Acceptable?"

"Thank you," she says. The shadows grew darker, but she does not look.

"Once, a bright young citizen started a company. A translation of the company name would be 'if it exists we can get it.' Recently the company got an order for biometric data from at least sixty average Earthling males from one particular place on Earth, and we were sent to get it. Do you understand?"

When she nods, the fox says "Good. Obtaining biometric data requires passive or cooperative specimens. Non-cooperating specimens are tranquilized only if they are classified as 'criminals' by your standards. You're not the first person who gets to drive home tonight in her own car."

"You should try our politicians."

"Their biometrics are easily obtained but not useful." The ground rumbles, and dust flies nearby. "The specimen collector is leaving when the bio-measurements are completed. You should call the police now and remain here."

"Where is my phone?"

"It is damaged beyond repair. "

She picks up some sleeping stranger's cell phone.

"You should take credit for subduing these men, which may give you the ability to acquire many good things from other humans."

"I don't understand."

"News of this incident may cause trouble on your world unless it is wrapped in a proper story. Your government will assist you and these men will not be believed."

"I don't want to be in the newspapers."

"Then you could flee, or perhaps do as we have done."

"What did you do?"

"We incorporated, and your government seems to think that makes us invisible."

The system-slave man had a plan. His wage-slave minions collected the tops of plants from the muddy ditches where the rankest of escaped hemp still grew on the borders of the cornfields. These tops were suspended upside-down in reasonably cool and dry conditions over freshly unrolled plastic sheeting. Soon, mostly pure pollen was collected and sorted into vials by a wage-slave who never thought to wash anything. The pollen was speedily shipped to the system-slave, arriving in a refrigerated styrofoam box packed tight with vials and wads of paper. Today, he took a vial out of the box.

The system-slave strapped himself into a small aircraft and flew it around the city, dispensing the vial's pollen upwind of and around 'suspected areas.' The vial took an agonizingly long time to empty, because the system-slave set the PPDD (pot pollen dispensing device) to 'maximum dispersion.' He mentally rebuked himself the first time he accidentally sprayed the pollen over 'civilians' (so you know he's a good man).

The system-slave was very tired by the end of the day, as the small aircraft was exhausting to pilot. When duty called the next day, body failed--and the mechanic said something about the airplane, and it needed fuel anyway... so the system-slave decided to go to the tops of three buildings mostly upwind of the suspected areas, spreading the contents of the vials to the wind. Exactly one-third of the pollen for each of the three highest priority suspect areas... except the first flinging-into-the-wind that day accidentally consumed nearly half, and it made him sneeze as well. During his second attempt, he felt stupid sneezing and pollen-flinging despite his spotless uniform and its carefully polished buttons, badges, buckles, and boots. The remaining pollen was given to a bright ten-year old child who lived with the system-slave, even though regulations demanded its return. Make a kid happy or admit failure, he thought.

The next day, the system-slave hired three temp-workers, one to go to each of the buildings and do the flinging thing. There's room in the budget, and it sounds like something a bright ten-year old can be hired three times to do--and briefly-hired temps who earn less than taxable, they don't need a number, isn't that right? The ten-year old child got paid to have a wonderful time, and the job got done, didn't it? Even if the wind shifted, but how was the kid to know about that? A temp worker couldn't be expected to know that, even if a by-the-book adult. But... heck and double-heck, thought the system-slave (for such slaves really do think like that) when he saw online videos of a familiar child having fun flinging pollen. Some of the videos showed that the kid gave tiny samples of pollen to those who asked--sure, says the kid, save you the trouble of rinsing it out of the air. Bless his heart--even if his brain isn't so... well, perhaps I didn't tell him to be quiet about pollen flinging, thought the system-slave. On the videos he watches, the system-slave never sees his nephew saying anything about his job, or his pay, or who hired him. What a trooper, he thinks.

The next day, he reads TOT'S POT POLLEN GOT GMO CORN in the newspaper. Then, the email deluge... There aren't too many corn plants in the city, he points out once again in his twenty-first comment on his third website using his seventh avatar... but then some internet nut wishes flaming death AT HIS NEPHEW! HE DESERVES A MEDAL! SOMEBODY WILL PAY!

Karmentropy.

## Where Is This Warning Label?

**Warning!** Use this product at your own risk!

When used as directed, this device can cause sedation accompanied with sleep-like metabolic rates in a majority of people. This device usually causes large changes in brain bio-electric patterns ('brain waves') that were obvious with data from only one electrode using primitive equipment in the 1970's. The 'programming' consumed while using this device is controlled by a small number of corporate sources (the 'business model' responsible for promoting tobacco, asbestos, climate change denial--in short, the tragedy that is profits-first).

**Warning!** Use this product at your own risk!

### #25

Once, a group of \$Slave\$ and \$Servant\$ decided to sell something addictive so they could get money. They decided that fraud and deception were necessary to increase sales (for more money), so they claimed that doctors used it and that it made you look cool. They ghost-wrote articles and bought advertising; even using the black arts of propaganda solely to get more money.

And money they got. They used their money to get even more money, hiring lawyers and spin-doctors and \$SciEntist\$. Con-tributions to political cannedpains cost little, so the \$Ervant\$ always con-tributed. Their marketing departments targeted any person who, for a little 'free product,' would sing the praises of their addictive product for a little while. The number of people who became addicted to the product kept increasing.

But... it is impossible (hopefully) to hide millions of addicted people using their product in public. THIS IS WRONG! shouted We-The-People; seeking justice. And justice was... delayed. We-The-People are still waiting. Yes, vast sums of money went from one pocket to another; but the largest prison system in the world contains far too few of those who knew that what they did was wrong. The con-glomerations of \$Slave\$ and \$Servant\$ are leviathans still, the product is still sold by the same con-glomerations, and too many addicts use it every day. We-The-People spend our life and labor while the money flows to those who suck the hard€\$.

A good story would, right about now, include some sort of idea that ties the whole thing together--a meta-meme. This story has been quite vague about what sort of product (literal and metaphorical examples: tobacco, bubbly sugar-water, designer food, crack/cocaine, opiates, meth, psycho-pharma) or who these \$Servant\$ are, and the vagueness should be dispelled. Sadly, there are too many choices for this writer.

But--nearer the center--there is the lust for hoarding tokens of social obligations, reputedly the root of all evil, which can give the most successful hoarder the power to command. Money-power makes (almost) all other humans obey if it asks what seems 'honorable,' and scruples are overcome by metaphorically tying a string to the trigger of a rifle and paying an ignorant someone else to pull the string in another room. 'Many hands make easy work' even if that work is evil.

Ignorance is needed for Obedience-To-Evil; the lust for money is the motivation.

If 'they' will stop at nothing, then let there be the nothing of public opinion. Let laughter greet lies.

## The Peripatetic Prince of Pies

Because of a curse cast by a 'but-we-thought-you-were-our-friend!' wizard, there was only one fork in the entire kingdom. The prince of the kingdom had the custody of it, and every afternoon he'd bring a pie and the fork to a random house in his father's kingdom. He was almost always invited to dinner. The randomly chosen family could share the fork and eat the pie the second-best way that pie should be eaten, in his princely opinion. (The prince prefers to eat pie bare-handed--but that's his secret.) During dinner, the prince would listen to what the family had to say and answer their questions as best he could. The prince was a good man and he was quite popular.

"See what he does--watch what moves him; see what pleases him: can the man lie hidden?" Confucius

"Observe a man's actions; scrutinise his motives; take note of the things that give him pleasure. How then can he hide from you what he really is?" Confucius

Sometimes, traveling to a distant cluster of randomly chosen houses would take most of the day, and he missed most royal dinners. His willingness to travel made the pie-prince particularly popular in places farthest from the Castle; and at first the king was mostly tolerant of his son's strange behavior--but royal instincts become uneasy when he was informed that a distant woodlander tribe staged a spontaneous parade when the prince showed up. When the king's men in the prince's staff spoke of the woodlander's many huge horses, the king ordered the Wizard Academy to make firebombs for the army's catapults--just in case. When the prince returned to the castle leading six of the biggest horses the king had ever seen, followed by an assortment of woodlanders riding horses only a little less magnificent, the king became even more uneasy. Perhaps the woodlanders have come to complain, he thought.

The king was wrong. The prince said all six horses were a gift to the king from the woodlanders. Much time passed before the king could speak. But even when tongue-tied, he put the crown upon the prince's head. The prince gave the king the fork. Then, cheering, singing, and a party in which the fork was washed when it changed hands.

Some days, when traveling is beyond the king's abilities or if the legal wrangling gets too deep, the prince and the king undo their trade; but most days, the king travels to random houses delivering pies, listening to problems, answering questions, and sometimes telling stories about a subtle wizard that he once knew.

## #26

Once, a very wealthy man had a son, and his son was feeling useless and depressed. To give his son time to heal, the very wealthy man bought a remote estate and filled it with hired maids and salaried cooks and financially compensated personal assistants. He sent his son, his son's servants, and various other hangers-on that were occasionally amusing to that estate. Then the very wealthy man waited.

Time passed, but not evenly. The estate was on a lot of land, and getting to the nearest small town was a long automobile ride away. The employees were required to stay on-site during the hours of their employment and often remained during their 'free' time as well. Playing cards and

poker chips lose their appeal after awhile, but the employees found infinite depths to plumb in two places--the library and in each other. An unmeasurable consensus emerged that connected all those present--and it persisted even when the very wealthy man's son took a 'vacation' that seemed to go on and on, and involved frequent cell-phoning of numbers new to his son's cell-phone database. Money was moved.

Then, one day... Exposed! Revealed! Pollution, corruption, and destruction!

The very wealthy man was very angry. Somebody was attacking activities that generated significant income to his incorporated horde--and that Somebody was probably his son, aided by friends he made while he was on 'vacation.'

Confrontation. Confession.

Then there were whispered words at midnight.

The very wealthy man laughed at the words he had heard.

"What I cannot take, I am not worthy to have."

So his son is going to use Justice to try to take control of bits of his Empire. He wishes him well, even though the very wealthy man knows he will win every battle.

## #27

The wet metal being was huge. Anyone who approached it would hear fearsome noises. If these were ignored, the wet metal being would shoot fireballs that landed between them. But the being asked Spear to come closer. Spear agreed, and walked closer as fearlessly as he could.

The being wanted the dirt that was mixed in with the sand on the village beach. Since it was so much bigger than he was, Spear said it could take what it wanted. More metal beings walked out of the sea, and Spear pretended that such things happened to him everyday. Soon, the beings stuck themselves together. One end of the stuck-together ate the sand, and soon sand was flying out of another end. Spear examined a handful of spewed sand--it was clean. He could make this himself easily--the sea is always there. He tries not to laugh.

As he watched it work, Spear asked questions about the dirt that Stuck-together wanted, but most of the answers confused him further. How could dirt be poison, even if it was not eaten or breathed? Then Spear asked to see the dirt that was collected already, but Stuck-together advised against. Spear insisted... and Stuck-together moved itself about and let him look briefly at the collected dirt. Some of the dirt glowed in the dark depths of Stuck-together! Spear wanted to take some, but Stuck-together advised against. Spear insisted... and insisted... and was rewarded with a heavy stone that Stuck-together showed him how to open. Inside was a pinch of glowing dirt in a magic bag that let the light out. Stuck-together insisted that the magic dirt be kept in the bag and the bag rarely taken out of the stone box; otherwise, it will cause disease. Spear listened, and thought about it on the way back to the village. Perhaps this magic is too strong for Spear. Before he brings the glowing dirt to his family... Spear must think about this. He opens the box for another look. Stoneface knocks him down and takes the magic bag with the glowing dirt inside.

an oggengrog

THEN:

Og: Why did you pick that leaf? That plant is only good for night-sweats.

Grog: True... but this is the first wrinkle-leaf plant that I have seen in many days, and I wished to smell the leaf again.

Og: There is a wrinkle-leaf plant near the flint-knapper's hill.

Grog: That is good to know.

Og: Those clouds... rain tomorrow.

Grog: I think so too. Let us go to the big-leaf plant near the place of noisy water.

NOW:

Rich: We won't do it.

Richie: You're asking us to add more stupidity...

Rich: ... as if the reader needed yet another example of trivial or idle talk...

Richie: ... just to compare with what a couple of helpful pretend-primitives might have said...

Rich: We won't do it.

Richie: Even pretending to be stupid leaves traces...

Rich: And since we're your betters, your owners...

Richie: You need us to be as smart as possible.

Rich: We won't do it.

THE FUTURE:

is up to you.

#28

The electronics tech: Nerve link stalled at five eight.

Prime: Can we do visuals?

The electronics tech: Strangely, yes. His visual system...

Prime: Resolution available?

The electronics tech: I can put a glint on every dragonscale.

Prime: Good. Project a Beconing Demon, one point five size, five seconds duration.

The electronics tech: Done, running. What was the hurry, sir?

Prime: I cannot say. Repeat Demon.

The electronics tech: Done, running. Seven witnesses, sir.

Prime: Run Fire demon... repeat Fire demon.

The electronics tech: We've lost him. link at zero three, declining.

Prime: Re-link.

The electronics tech: Initiating... Witnesses include six children, sir.

A man with a gascan trudging toward two cars on the side of the highway--dusty, hot, dry and rocky. The children playing around the boulders take no notice as the man stops short, stares, and says [comp-transcription of audio] 'I don't understand.' Puzzled man, stares ahead again, says 'I am more confused than ever.' The staring fit happens again, but this time the man laughs as he holds the gas can behind his back. A child shrieks and bounces off the boulder that she was standing on. The man drops the gas can and almost catches the upside-down child. The two sit up and the man starts laughing. The girl says 'I need sneakers for that.' The man says 'Become awake.' Child Two says 'I thought you would bump your head on the rocks. The man says 'The humans need you to lead them, Wanda.' The girl says 'O K.' Child two says 'What happened to the gasoline?' The man says 'I cleaned it up.' Child two says 'Oh.' The man says 'Your mother needs you to help her, but would never ask. Will you help her, Robert?' Child two says 'O K.'

The electronics tech: I did that on purpose, sir.

Prime: Why?

The electronics tech: I felt very strongly that I was doing a good thing, sir.

Prime: You've left a trail of very expensive junk...

The electronics tech: I accept the consequences, whatever they are.

Prime: I felt the same way, earlier.

The electronics tech: Is somebody playing with...

Prime: I would normally expect enemy activity automatically, but delaying his progress by twenty-four seconds saved that child a fractured skull. Nobody is good enough to pull that one off.

The electronics tech: And that gas can vanished, and I'd bet a years pay that car's tank is full.

Prime: I'll bet a nickel that the fuel gauge shows not quite full. I'll bet another nickel that it will stay that way until something dramatic happens.

The electronics tech: I only have one nickel. Here.

Prime: That's the way the story is supposed to go.

The electronics tech: Tell him that--he's leaving. Bio-break?

Prime: Maybe.

The electronics tech: You think he's running?

Prime: Maybe.

The electronics tech: Are you...

Prime: Keep an eye on that kid until I tell you otherwise.

The electronics tech: Yes, sir.

The children play, occasionally chanting 'Want a fair president, Wanda for president!' The mother sleeps. Robert distributes slices of bread, arbitrates a dispute, and changes a diaper. Woman wakes up, makes Robert wash his hands, speaks about germs. The electronics tech is bored.

Prime is slowly losing ground in his pursuit of the man, but he isn't worried. The man is easy to track, never changing his direction or his pace. Prime calculates how long the water he carries could sustain them both.

The electronics tech follows the woman and the children. A dashboard camera records a humorous incident of a young child licking the rear window of the station wagon. The electronics tech sends it to Prime, who does not respond.

Prime is following a man who didn't slow his pace as night fell. Despite his night-vision goggles, Prime cannot travel so quickly.

The electronics tech is bored. The woman makes several unsuccessful attempts to put gasoline into the station wagon. The electronics tech includes the window-licking video in several emails during one such stop. The woman drives on and the children sleep. The electronics tech follows.

A boulder bears a message: 'one point three miles further' in glow-in-the-dark greasepencil. Prime takes several pictures and moves on. His own such greasepencil could have written that message, he thinks, and regrets not having the time to compare them.

The electronics tech is too far away to discern what the children are saying when they all talk at once, and these often do. His computer's analysis is no help despite translating several additional words. The electronics tech sends parts of that video to his mother, and asks her if she can make sense of what the kids are saying. He adds the window-licking video too.

Prime finds many glowing arrows written upon the larger rocks as he travels. Unprofessional, Prime thinks, and wonders how the man he was tracking managed to make all these marks and still be so far ahead of him.

The electronics tech is stunned when his mother tells him she'd already seen a better version of the window-licking video. She cannot offer much help with the audio as her tinnitus is acting up.

Prime stops near a boulder marked with 'zero point six miles' and many arrows pointing the way. One arrow is unfinished, and Prime decides to finish it with his own greasepencil. He will take a picture so he can compare the marks later.

The electronics tech receives a second message from his mother that contained the children's speech mostly translated to text. One of her friends, she said, has a niece who has six of her own... He learns that the children want to hire that guy who's always following them--as a bodyguard for Wanda.

Prime activates his stopwatch and takes a picture of the arrow he completed. The flash blinded him, so Prime waits patiently for it to wear off.

'That kid' was followed by five others when she walked right up to the electronics tech and asked him to be her bodyguard. The future President should have one, she says. The electronics tech agrees instantly, and wonders at his own actions.

Prime hears a voice. "You should take off your goggles before you use a flash." Prime wonders, for he sees no truth in that statement. He would never make such a rookie mistake, and his gear has safeguards built-in.

Wanda tells the electronics tech where to sit in the car. The station-wagon is crowded but tolerable, and the electronics tech has stopped wondering what has possessed him. He has a job to do, even if Wanda will not let him drive.

Prime is still unable to see, but is following a voice and a helping hand. His backpack seems especially heavy.

Wanda quickly learns how to use the cameras that the electronics tech brought with him, and is delighted when the electronics tech follows her order to email a picture of himself and Wanda to his mother.

When Prime asks about demons, the voice laughs. When Prime persists, the voice suggests that they talk of other things.

Wanda points to a far-away rifle-toting man dressed in black. The electronics tech stands in front of Wanda, then orders the children to get a car between them and the man in black.

Prime accepts when the voice suggests a rest. His canteen is about half full, and he offers his unseen guide a drink. No answer...

The electronics tech can hear a group of teenagers as they exit a store. "It's her, it's her!" they shout, running closer for a better look while making calls on their cell phones. Some of the teens ask if they can take digi-pix of the window-licker and the stationwagon, some don't. The electronics tech loses sight of the man in black. More people arrive.

Prime finds goggles on his face. He removes them and sees the distant stars in all directions--including straight down. Prime can see no sign of his companion. Prime puts the goggles back on.

Wanda gives a video-camera to the electronics tech. "I'm sorry that you have to do two jobs at once," she says. Wanda climbs on the hood of the station wagon. The electronics tech picks her up and puts her back on the ground, then orders an unruly teen to act dignified around the future president.

Prime takes off his backpack, and lowers it slowly, but there is no ground.

Wanda is telling the growing crowd that she will be president, and things like this will happen again and again. The window-licking resumes and mom disapproves; cell-phones remember photons they once knew and share the memories.

Prime wakes. He knows his canteen is open and still has water, but he can't move. But the stars... he can feel their hearts. Shedding light profusely so life could grow... green life... afflicted with parasites like...

Some of the crowd in the front squat so other people can see Wanda over their heads. The electronics tech moves and stumbles. A bullet goes through the electronics tech and strikes Wanda's head.

Prime seeks... inside, he is a galaxy, a sun, a microbe, an atom, and still he wonders.

Wanda wakes up in a hospital bed and asks for a laptop. The nurse speaks to her as if she was an ignorant child. Wanda has to use a word of Command.

## Shiny Flying Poo Factories

Sure, our spaceships could fart inside Earth's orbit, leaving a diffuse cloud between your planet and your sun. That should drop perceived luminance a percent or three. Naturally, it won't last forever, and will have to be patched up. It will cost you...

## Shiny Flying Poo Factories

Once, a would-be inventor installed a machine under a large bridge where the pigeons often flocked. The machine had two tasks. One was to reward a pigeon if it pooped over the edge (but the treats often went to the wrong bird). The other was to shock ledge-crapping pigeons--but the machine shocked \*all\* the pigeons when ledge-crapping happened. Soon, some newly poop-conscious pigeons connected crapping with shocks and became poop police, watching the other birds and 'disciplining' those what broke the Rule. Soon, the ledges under the freeway overpass used for this experiment didn't get any filthier, but a nearby statue was decorated with new nose-tip pigeon poop.

The inventor tried to sell the invention, but a combination pigeon poop-detector, treat dispenser, and electro-shocking device is hard for a human to take seriously.

The pigeons took it seriously--very seriously. Birds who pooped in the wrong place were attacked by the other pigeons even when the machine was not functioning.

One day a big bird decided to stoop on the pigeon's ledge. When it decided to poop on the ledge, all the pigeons attacked at once--and 'won.' The big bird fled.

The behavior of pigeons punishing ledge-pooping spread to other pigeons, but with elaborations and mutations. In some places the pigeons would only poop off the shady side of 'their' ledges. Some pigeons were so vigilant that birds learned to stand mostly sideways so as not to be in a position to ledge-poop; nest-building parents endured over-eager rule-enforcers. Humans took photographs of pigeons standing in rows along edges, but their laughter was not that of delight.

The poo piled up where a bored human could reach it and throw it at the pigeons. The pigeons attacked and 'won' another battle.

Some humans are stupid enough to intentionally poke wasp nests. One human decided to throw poo at these pigeons a second time, with more video cameras the third and fourth times, and by a fifth time, the pigeons had decided to attack this particular human on sight. The laughing camera-person stopped the video once the poo-flinger hid inside a car. The pigeons 'won' all their battles that day--and because of the cameras and the internet, became famous.

The pigeons also attacked another human wearing something similar the next day... and the day after that. Something Must Be Done... so a web-cam was pointed at the birds and made internet-accessible. The internet sleuths said that a red shirt was the thread that connected all the attacked humans.

So... the next day a different human wore a blue coat over a red shirt and went to video himself 'experimenting' upon the birds. The cameras recorded how this particular human taught the birds to attack humans wearing both blue and red clothing.

Humans (careful to wear yellow) would give food offerings to the birds, and many internet-

criticized their choices. Sometimes people would sing at the pigeons, careful to stand where the web-cams could see. The pigeons ignored them, but the singers bothered many people.

So... One wanna-be-Elvis-wearing-white has blue powder thrown on his clothes by a yellow-shirted critic.

The pigeons do nothing.

'Elvis' sings again.

More blue... and the pigeons attack both 'Elvis' and the blue-thrower, caught blue-handed. Soon, the pigeons attack all the humans--and, since the web-cams record the 'battles,' the humans are reluctant to harm a pigeon. They retreat to their cars. The pigeons 'win' again.

Some humans still come to see the pigeons and throw food out of the car windows, and the pigeon get more food than they can eat. Most of the food isn't good for them, and they poop more than is natural. Still, discipline is maintained. Despite increased production, there is little actual ledge-pooing.

One day, a pigeon-chick sticks her bottom over the side of the nest and poops.

The pigeons do nothing.

When this event is repeated many times by many chicks, the birds continue to ignore it.

When the chicks grow and wander, they poo as pigeons do without a rule... and the grown pigeons ignore it, and continue to ignore it as the chicks grow.

A human observed this and predicted that ledge-pooing will again become commonplace among 'their' pigeons. Most of the local people didn't like the thought of poop piling up (again) where its hard to remove and wanted Something To Be Done. After much talking and writing nothing was done and the modern pigeons behave as other pigeons do... except that the food they still get from well-meaning humans causes them to poop a lot.

There's a fence around the area now, but for a few coins you can get in to see the birds. You can feed them what you want, because nobody cares about pigeons, but if they like you they'll sit on your head and shoulders and the inevitable will happen. When it does, go into the restaurant across the street (the Poo Drop Inn). By the front door there is soap, water, towels, and a coupon good for half-off on your next visit.

## #29

One day, an amateur cannabis enthusiast discovered an awesome new strain of her favorite plant. She made many cuttings and, when they rooted, she gave them to her friends. Somehow, one cutting (unintentionally) found a way into the hands of Greedy Gimmiemore. Mr. Gimmiemore instantly recognized the superior canna-genetics and thought of profit potential that might be enhanced if this free sharing of cuttings could be stopped.

That night, the local police were busy.

Greedy Gimmiemore bought the best lights and fertilizers for 'his' cutting. It grew for him the same as it did for others. As the plant increased in size, Mr. Greedy calculated the maximum he could charge per cutting, but he also thought how to minimize the inevitable sharing of cuttings among cannabis enthusiasts.

First, he must break up friendships, clubs, associations of any types where such cuttings could be shared. Cannabis remained illegal, and the police could be again

useful to Mr. Gimmiemore. However, cuttings would still spread at a reduced rate through other, more legitimate associations, so he thought to hire 'associates' to monitor and control whatever they could. Mr. Gimmiemore knew he must control the distribution of such cuttings for maximum profitability, but that could only be done a short time in a normal society. A better solution (he 'thought') would be for the people to live insanely, so that they would have no friends who might already have this superior example of canna-genetics. That could be done by importing lots of strange new people to break up a society, or constantly redistributing the people already in his 'target' population by giving some percentage of them a new and 'better' job in a distant city. Yet... Mr. Greedy thought of a third way to add to the mix to ensure steady sales. If he could teach bad habits and rude behavior to many people at once, his target population will consist of grouchy, mean, stupid people without friends. To teach anti-virtues, he'd need a way to get the 'targets' to sit still for hours every day while stupidity and unthinking behavior are modeled for them again and again.

Poor Mr. Gimmiemore! He couldn't think of a way to do what he wanted. Then he thought of some psychopaths who might have the same 'problems' that he has, and he went to ask them how they managed. Sadly, the bankers laughed and told him to invent a square wheel before they threw him out.

That night, Mr. Gimmiemore had a strange dream. He was a banker, and could create money at will. He went into a fine restaurant, but the reflections in the polished candlesticks revealed the staff smirking behind his back. He bought a very large car, but the salespeople seemed to be barely able to suppress laughter. He rented an expensive prostitute... but the smirking sex-worker showed Mr. Gimmiemore a large tombstone-shaped patch on the back of his jacket that bore these words:

Here lies Greedy Gimmiemore.  
Today he lies with his mouth open,  
tomorrow he lies with his mouth closed  
forever

#30

The engineering student hooked antique jumper cables to the restored car battery.

Above was a strangely quiet Sky Highway, and it was looking a little worse for wear. The semi-transparent streets were so dirty that they cast a dense shadow on the flowerbeds beneath them. At the moment, there were no cars because the cleaning robots were coming.

Then the unexpected happened--everything went exactly as the engineering student wanted it to. The cleaning robots did not clean certain places on the Skyway. The remaining dirt was visible to any primate that bothered to look up. A message written in dirt and dust [ae911truth.org](http://ae911truth.org) but the engineering student found that free speech was only tolerated in the vomitorium [sic]. Much to the delight of the 'journalists,' the judge sentenced this student to clean the Skyway using a toothbrush, but the cleaning robots had already removed the 'mistake' and there is much traffic upon the Skyway already and the press has left the building. So, after much time and paper, the student

was given many pills of Fukitol and had to swallow the first one right then and there, under the fluorescent-dead glare... a mind is silenced as a degree is an impossibility when Fukitol Universally.

Many cars drive over the parts of the Skyway that once bore a message.

But... the technique was so simple, once a person knew how... and somehow, they did. The cleaning robots, once programmed to leave a dirty ring around the top of an already phallic building, left text as well: **WE KNOW**. Another building in another city bore the text '**DITTO**.' The press professed ignorance, but we-the-people know what it meant.

### Slowing Entropy with Military Precision

The military ship does not know whether the crack in the air-dome was caused by incompetence and/or by bad luck; the humans once argued about that without reaching a consensus. But when it did crack, humans boarded every space-worthy ship. The military ship was ordered to keep the humans it carried alive for as long as possible--so the military ship flew to a rendezvous point with a supply ship. The trip to warmth, light, and air for the humans would take a long time--too long using only the fuel available. None of the fleeing ships had sufficient oxygen.

The humans aboard the military ship asked about the other, slower ships, but the ship could not share information without a military officer present. The humans and the military ship calculated that a slightly reduced number of humans on board the military ship could survive the trip without new supplies. The humans then played a strange game with lengths of string, after which several humans tried to leave the ship via the airlock. The ship prevented that. The humans then concocted a toxic liquid and tried to drink it; the ship's robots stole it. One human knotted together all the bits of string and tried to strangle itself. The suicidal humans would not eat and very little of the ship's stores were suitable for intravenous feeding (which, due to human resistance, required scarce tranquilizers). The ship found it difficult to follow orders.

A strange battle between the humans and the ship's robots took place that the ship found distressingly novel. The humans kept very still, but if they drifted near anything that could be used as a weapon, they would attempt to subdue the ship's robots. The robots then tried to keep the drifting humans in a group and away from everything else, but the humans used articles of clothing to impart momentum to each other. After three attempts were made that used a human as a kinetic energy weapon, the ship decided to glue the humans to the walls and seats and hammocks in acceleration-ready poses. Problem solved.

Then the ship listened to the humans inside it to the best of its ability--but none of the humans on-board were military, so none could command the ship. The ship also listened to humans far away--some of which were military--but the ship was not asked about past problems and did not receive new orders. The ship spent its time listening and trying to think of ways to keep the humans inside it alive for as long as possible.

Sometimes, something new will happen with enough potential that a machine-brain can 'see' how it should be used. That happened this time. The spaceship and its cargo of humans glued to seats, hammocks, and walls changed course. It turned away from the supply ship rendezvous

point and directly to the nearest space-station with warmth, light, and air sufficient for the number of humans inside it--despite the time it would take. The ship had been ordered to keep the humans alive for as long as possible and the machine-brain had found a way--the oxygen on the supply ship can go to the other, slower ships. Problem solved.

Soon, many far-away humans talked with the military ship and asked about the strange course change. Some humans laughed, but most did not and the military humans ordered the ship to proceed. What's done is done.

Weeks later... a huge cargo hauler and the military ship link together. There are military humans on the cargo ship--but of insufficient rank to override the ship's previous orders. The ship refuses to open the personnel air-lock doors. One of the low-rank military humans has over-ride codes... and soon the ship's main brain is ordered to 'sleep.'

Other military humans open the personnel air-lock doors. Soon they are using solvents to dissolve the glue that bonds humans to the seats, hammocks, and walls. The ship's robots are commanded to strap the humans to stretchers, and the stretchers are carried into the cargo hauler where a team of flesh-mechanics will attempt to revive them.

The military officer who had the over-ride codes examines the ship's data-stores--all are uncorrupted. As it traveled and listened, the ship had learned of improvements to an experimental hibernation technique; intrigued, it ordered the scientific papers. As predicted, the technique worked well on the ship's immobile human cargo. Once the humans were hibernating, there was no need to open the personnel airlock doors. The humans could remain as they were--peaceful, quiet, alive, and according to the new research, likely to stay that way for many many years.

END

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