

DEEP VIDEO

by

JOHN BRADLEY BAZZLE

(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

ABSTRACT

Deep Video is a literary science-fiction novel in the vein of Philip K. Dick, Stanislaw Lem, and Haruki Murakami. In particular, elements are drawn from Dick's *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. These elements are as follows: future drug technology, a future capitalist state dominated by oligopolies, and blurring the distinctions among the present, memory, and drug-induced hallucination. Other important elements include future media, fashion, subsidized housing, and screenwriting. The action of the novel takes place in and around Chicago, Illinois; the area of Northwest Indiana known as "the Region"; and Los Angeles and Riverside, California. The dissertation includes a critical introduction.

INDEX WORDS: Science fiction, Literary fiction, Oligopoly, Subsidized housing

DEEP VIDEO

by

JOHN BRADLEY BAZZLE

B.A., Yale College, 2002

M.F.A., Indiana University, 2010

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2017

© 2017

John Bradley Bazzle

All Rights Reserved

DEEP VIDEO

by

JOHN BRADLEY BAZZLE

Major Professor:	Reginald McKnight
Committee:	Elissa R. Henken
	Christopher Pizzino
	Andrew Zawacki

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2017

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 LOURDES COHEN-CARDOSO	22
3 TIM TESZLER	33
4 ALICE DURDEN	43
5 RON WAYNE TULANON	52
REFERENCES	60

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During the year before I started writing this novel, I read and thought about many stories, novels, poems, essays, folktales, articles about contemporary legend, and other miscellany in preparation for my comprehensive exams. At some point I returned to my favorite novels by Philip K. Dick, since I had an inkling they would help me with my next project, which became *Deep Video*. I thought a lot about the split-third point of view Dick employed in his novels, and about some of his tricks, like purposeful ambiguity, but I didn't pay too much attention to Dick's content. I didn't imagine androids would have a place in my novel, or aliens or precognitive humans. One upshot of returning to Dick's novels was I started using *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* in my first-year composition classes. This semester, for a change of pace, I decided to use *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, and I was surprised to find, upon rereading it, what an influence it seems to have had on *Deep Video*.

How did this happen, and why wasn't I aware of it? The only explanation I can think of as to why the similarity wasn't more apparent to me *before* rereading *Three Stigmata* is that I was reading so much so quickly during that year that the details of the novel might not have lodged as firmly as usual in my head, or might have gotten mixed up with details from Dick's other novels. Whatever the reason, I'm confronted by the question, did I accidentally rewrite *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*?

If so, there are worse books to have rewritten. *Three Stigmata* is one of my favorite Dick novels, but it came out of a very productive, and uneven, period. It's messy, in other words, and

bogged down by long passages of interiority rendered from the perspective of Barney Mayerson, the precognitive bureaucrat who emigrates from Terra (Earth) to a Martian colony, where he runs afoul of the mysterious industrialist Palmer Eldritch by way of a new drug Eldritch has brought back with him from Proxima Centauri and is marketing as Chew-Z. That brief summary of *Three Stigmata* may sound nothing like *Deep Video*, but there are some major similarities. Perhaps the biggest is that a large portion of *Three Stigmata* is dedicated to drug trips, first on Can-D, the existing drug that allows colonists to inhabit the dolls within the dollhouse-like “layouts” they keep in their Martian hovels, and then on Chew-Z, the more powerful alternative to Can-D that seems to involve a mixture of user-controlled hallucination, Eldritch-controlled hallucination, and time-travel. The nature of the Chew-Z experience is kept mysterious by Dick, and exploring it is one of the central strands in the novel. Another central, and related, strand is that of exploring the nature of Palmer Eldritch. Is he an alien from Proxima in disguise? Is he God? Jesus? Satan? Dick floats many possibilities, to confusing and delightful effect. I attempt something similar, on a less cosmic scale, with the Mitch Herman character. More on that later. First, the drugs.

The long passages of drug-induced hallucination are at once a strength and a weakness of *Three Stigmata*. They’re an opportunity for some of Dick’s most imaginative writing, as well as rare attention to descriptive writing, but at length the hallucinations drift away from the storylines of the novel and towards incoherence. Thought of another way, they become dream-like, with Barney Mayerson and Leo Bulero as the dreamers who are trying to tell us about their dreams. The strength of these dream-like hallucinations is their openings, full of the same ineffable weirdness that causes a dreamer to try to describe his or her dream. At length, however, the lack of rules governing the elaboration of the hallucinations, along with the failure of the

hallucinations to incorporate the non-hallucination plot of the novel, diminishes their energy. For an example of more effective incorporation of dream-like material, I can turn to Reg's own *He Sleeps*, a book that trades heavily in dreams. Some of the dreams are short and incredibly vivid, and capture the weird magic of dreams, but the longer dreams are rendered in a way that invites the reader to see them as having actual relevance to the plot of the novel, i.e. we get the sense that the dreams might be at least *kind of* real; and eventually the question of whether or not they're kind of real factors importantly into the conclusion of the novel. In contrast, Dick's Chew-Z trips don't really do that. What I hoped to achieve in the "zones" I describe in *Deep Video* is a balancing act: starting off as fun explorations of show worlds ("show" is the word for both films and TV shows in the novel), then growing, after the revelation that zones are contiguous with each other and with the world of everyday experience, into something more relevant to the action of the novel. By the time we come back to Tim in Part 5, for instance, he isn't just hanging out in the worlds of random shows; he's searching for Mitch Herman.

Speaking of whom, is Mitch Herman the Palmer Eldritch of *Deep Video*? A pale version, yes. What I admire about the Palmer Eldritch character is the way Dick uses the mystery of him to draw us into *Three Stigmata*. Other characters keep mentioning Palmer Eldritch (the news that he's back from Proxima, his past successes in business, etc.) but Dick holds off on actually showing Eldritch, building tension that way. The first time we think we might see Eldritch, when Leo Bulero (the rival industrialist and second highest-usage POV character, after Mayerson) goes to meet and possibly kill him, we're face instead with an "electronic contraption" that speaks with Eldritch's voice (*Stigmata* 75). Soon after, in a similar move, Dick has Eldritch appear to Leo in Leo's first Chew-Z hallucination not as himself but as a little girl (76). Much later in the same hallucination, Eldritch shows up for the first time, but Dick still holds back on

describing him, only mentioning his “artificial arm” (87). The logic here might be that the Eldritch of this scene isn’t actually Eldritch—he’s Leo’s hallucination of Eldritch, or something—but the purpose of the move is clear: by deferring the description yet again, Dick continues to build up the mystery of Eldritch’s nature, his body and, more specifically, his stigmata. It isn’t until page 161, nearly three quarters of the way through the novel, that Dick gives us Palmer Eldritch in the flesh, so to speak, when Eldritch shows up on Mars to sell Chew-Z to Mayerson and his fellow colonists. By this point, Dick has earned the page and a half he spends simply describing Palmer Edtrich’s unusual body, emphasizing the three stigmata:

He had enormous teeth, these having been installed prior to his trip to Prox by Czech dental surgeons . . . his right arm was artificial. Twenty years ago in a hunting accident on Callisto he had lost the original; this one of course was superior in that it provided a specialized variety of interchangeable hands . . . The replacement [eyes], fitted into the bone sockets, had no pupils, nor did any ball move by muscular action. Instead a panoramic vision was supplied by a wide-angle lens, a permanent horizontal slot running from edge to edge. The accident to his original eyes had been no accident; it had occurred in Chicago, a deliberate acid-throwing attack by persons unknown. (161-2)

The description of the body is dazzlingly peculiar and specific, and the emphasis on the stigmata, the most unusual features of Eldritch’s cyborg body, allows Dick to pull off the final phase of the novel in which Eldritch keeps popping up in the Chew-Z visions of Mayerson and others. Within the visions, other characters, like Mayerson’s ex-wife, show Eldritch’s stigmata, alerting the user that 1) the characters are actually manifestations of Eldritch, and 2) the user is still experiencing a Chew-Z hallucination, no matter how realistic it seems.

What I *don't* admire about the Palmer Eldritch character, even though it goes hand-in-hand with the technique Dick uses to build him up over the course of the novel, is that Eldritch is so “big,” to use Kim Stanley Robinson’s terminology. Robinson points out that many of Dick’s novels have a “big protagonist” and a “little protagonist” (Robinson 17), e.g. Leo Bulero and Barney Mayerson. The stories of those respective protagonists can be thought of as the big plot and the little plot. Usually the little plot is the more developed of the two, with a character-driven storyline in which a relatively normal person overcomes obstacles, grapples with difficult decisions, etc. The big plot, in contrast, is heavy on action, light on thought, and centers on cartoonishly oversized characters. Leo Bulero isn’t just a tycoon; he has an interplanetary monopoly on the most important product in the world of the novel, and so he’s that world’s single most important person, with the possible exception of Palmer Eldritch. By having characters read about Palmer Eldritch’s return in the newspaper, Dick frames Eldritch as a sort of celebrity, in addition to a powerbroker like Leo. And it’s the arrival of Eldritch as a possible rival to Leo that occasions the action of the novel, whose surface plot is one of corporate espionage: ruthless powerbrokers going at each other, using underlings like Barney Mayerson as pawns in an interplanetary game. Not surprisingly, this “big plot” lacks subtlety. To write such a story would be akin to writing a story in which the President of the United States goes head to head with the President of China. It’s not something I’m interested in. Nor is it something Dick seems to have been interested in except as a foil for the “little plots” of the same novels, e.g. Barney Mayerson’s emigration and search for meaning.

It was important to me, for ethical reasons, not to reinforce the idea that the most interesting stories take place among powerful or famous people.¹ Palmer Eldritch is both, and his

¹ For the same reason, I don’t use any actual movie titles or actor names even though some of the shows described in *Deep Video* are based on actual films: *Night of the Blood Beast*, *The Day of the Jackal*, *The*

conflict with Leo Bulero, though ridiculous, might be the highest stakes conflict in human history. Mitch Herman, in contrast, is only semi-famous, and his semi-fame is for something most people probably find distasteful: splatter, or blood porn. His attempts to cross-over into respectability (e.g. *The Old Neighborhood*) are meant to seem desperate. By the opening of *Deep Video*, he's professionally inactive and behaves erratically because of his drug use. It was important to me that Alice find Mitch Herman at once pathetic and charming and repulsive. And this is the Mitch Herman we get *first*, in Chapters 2.1 and 2.2, before the connection is made between Mitch Herman and Herm Schonfeld, adding layers that, I hope, make mysterious the true nature of Mitch Herman; and before Alice moves in with Mitch Herman and experiences first-hand his unusual behavior. Along the same lines, Mitch Herman is an aggressively boring name; Herm Schonfeld is a slightly less boring name; Crubby is a ridiculous name; and Yeshayahu is, I hope, outrageously self-aggrandizing. This trajectory is actually an inversion of what Dick does with Palmer Eldritch. After Eldritch has been described and begins making contact with Barney Mayerson, Dick delves into Eldritch's point of view in order to establish that, despite his cosmic nature ("With vast trailing arms he extended from the Proxima Centaurus system to Terra itself"), he feels lonely and unhappy (*Stigmata* 202). This humanization of Eldritch is one of the least effective moves Dick makes, because it comes too late: by this point in the novel, Dick has complicated and elaborated the Eldritch character to such a degree that

Beast of Yucca Flats, *Deadly Mantis*, and *Miami Connection*. The one actor I mention by name is Al "Ka Bong" Leong, and that's because I think of him less as a celebrity than as a craftsman, not unlike a stuntman or key grip. Actors are also craftspeople, of course, but the problem is that the craft makes some of them famous. Late in the novel I do mention a book by name, Lawrence Wright's *Remembering Satan: A Tragic Case of Recovered Memory*, and I have mixed feelings about that. On one hand, it's an excellent book, and I want to encourage people to read excellent books. On the other hand, Lawrence Wright is kind of a celebrity at this point, and the unevenness of his more recent books may reflect that. Joshua Cohen wrote an interesting short story called "McDonald's" in which he wrestles with this topic: specifically, with whether or not to mention that fast food chain by name. The end of the story, when the narrator gives up and names the place, is an enormous relief. Maybe there's a lesson there. But if so, I haven't learned it.

human emotions seem trivial, and Eldritch's concern about them doesn't ring true. I hope to have allowed myself room to continue to treat Mitch Herman as a human character by establishing his pathetic humanness early on, so it doesn't seem silly when, much later in the novel, he speaks at length about his mother and boyhood lover, Victor/Chico.

However, humanizing Mitch Herman had the downside of restricting the palette with which I could render his body. This was something I found myself bucking against continually, at one point even making a note to myself, "The final Biologist appearance in the Southern Reach trilogy made me think I can do more with appearances by Crubby. Really out-there stuff!!!" Lucky for me, Mitch Herman has one important characteristic in common with Palmer Eldritch: namely, that he doesn't have an actual body, or at least a body that isn't dead. Because the Mitch Herman bodies that manifest throughout the novel are projections of Mitch Herman's mind, I have room to play with the way he shows himself. His default manifestation is as Mitch Herman, middle-aged showmaker, but he also appears as an older version of Herm Schonfeld, and, more interestingly, as a slightly monstrous version of the two. The monstrosity is something I tinkered with in the most recent draft, and I plan to continue to do so. My reasoning is that, under stress, Mitch Herman would struggle to maintain the coherence of his body, since projecting that body takes effort. For inspiration I've turned to a character in another of Dick's novels: Jory Miller, the devious adolescent mastermind behind the hallucinatory world of *Ubik*. Dick doesn't reveal Jory until the end of the novel:

An adolescent boy, mawkishly slender, with irregular black-button eyes beneath tangled brows . . . On his elongated face Joe saw a smile, but it was *a misshapen smile*, a thwarted crease that became now almost a jeering leer. No two features matched: His ears had too many convolutions in them to fit with his chitinous eyes. His straight hair

contradicted the interwoven, curly bristles of his brows. And his nose, Joe thought, too thin, too sharp, far too long. Even his chin failed to harmonize with the balance of his face; it had a deep chisel mark in it, a cleft obviously penetrating far up into the bone . . . as if at that point *the manufacturer of this creature* struck it a blow aimed obliterating it. But *the physical material, the base substance*, had been too dense; the boy had not fractured and split apart. He existed in defiance of even *the force that had constructed him...* (*Ubik* 195-6, *emphasis mine*)

Jory's face is "misshapen," we intuit, because this isn't his actual shape, or rather this isn't quite the shape he wore in life. Jory comes from the death world, from which he reaches out to torment the characters in the novel. By emphasizing his "physical material" and "base substance," Dick frames Jory as a creation, but leaves the identity of "the manufacturer" mysterious, or maybe it was just a "force" that "constructed him"? For my own part, I like to imagine that Jory has manufactured himself, from memory, and that the weirdness of his body reflects 1) the flaws in his increasingly distant memory of life, and 2) the viciousness of his personality, hence the misshapen, "thwarted" and "jeering" quality. That's just my own reading, of course, but I chose to employ something similar with Mitch Herman.

If Mitch Herman is my Palmer Eldritch, then Tim Teszler is my Barney Mayerson. What's unusual about Barney Mayerson, compared to the "little protagonists" of Dick's other novels, is that he's exceptional: not just precognitive, but the top precog in the world's most important company. It's actually a little ridiculous that he's able to travel anonymously to Mars. While Dick seems interested in "everyman" characters, his everymen are often the right-hand men of powerbrokers; so if they're bureaucrats, they're exceptional bureaucrats, if only by virtue of their proximity to the world-changing schemes of their employers (Joe Chip, the protagonist

of *Ubik*, is another example). Something similar might be happening in *Deep Video* through Tim's connection to GalileeBiomath, which is part of an oligopoly not unlike the monopoly of Perky Pat Enterprises in *Three Stigmata*. But Tim, unlike Barney Mayerson, is a true underling: an administrator who could do what he does anywhere else and is, for that reason, truly disposable. It's through his wife, Maypop, that we glimpse the world of corporate espionage, distancing that world (and plot) from the main action of the novel. Adding what I hope is another level of distance, Tim leaves GalileeBiomath and lives for a while as a person unaffiliated with any of the conglomerates that control the economy (or so he thinks: GalileeBiomath turns out to own the Subzone, of course, and uses it as a test market). This is another revision I made for ethical reasons, because 1) I didn't want to glorify whatever high-stakes games might be played by giant conglomerates, even by satirizing those games as Dick does, and 2) I wanted to avoid any kind of "chosen one" narrative.² Barney Mayerson is the best precognitive around, but what is Tim? Just a guy. His only distinguishing qualities are that he's a little sensitive, hung up on fashion, and perhaps unusually devoted to his wife, considering the geographical logistics of their relationship.

It occurs to me that writing *away* from the corporate espionage story might be a bad idea.

Three Stigmata is, on its surface, a corporate espionage story, and that story might be what draws

² I was born in 1980, which by some definitions means I'm a millennial, but I didn't have access to e-mail or the internet until I went to college, which I'm pretty sure means I'm *not* a millennial. So I shouldn't pretend to speak for millennials or to have anything more insightful to say about them than Mitt Romney or Mr. T. But I'm going to anyway. What I've noticed, among peers here and at Indiana, and among students I've taught in both places, is a predilection for the type of chosen one narratives found in YA fiction, from Harry Potter to Catniss Everdeen. Maybe the rise of such narratives in popular culture goes back to *Star Wars*, or to Tolkein, but in Tolkein the emphasis was on the *fellowship* of the ring: a band of people working together for a common cause. Yes, Frodo was the only one who could hold the ring, but he was useless otherwise; he relied on the other members of the fellowship to put him in a position to succeed. Is it pollyannaish for me to suggest that great things are achieved through cooperation, not through the unearthly virtuosity of a single person? Maybe. Also, I have no idea why people are so into YA fiction. I only read the ring trilogy once as a kid and am by no means fixated on it, I like to think, but maybe it left a lasting impression?

some readers into the rest of the novel. But there's something a little ridiculous about the corporate espionage story in *Three Stigmata*. That story takes place on a vast, interplanetary scale and yet is forced into a conflict between two characters: Eldritch and Bulero. The fact that Bulero takes it upon himself to assassinate Eldritch is unbelievable. Bulero can't even explain the choice to himself in an interior monologue, despite his supposedly "evolved" mind (*Stigmata* 30-31), and so the choice comes off as contrived: a way to get Bulero and Eldritch into the same room. *Deep Video* is much longer than *Three Stigmata*, so I have more space to work with, but to render something as complicated as corporate espionage in a realistic way would still threaten to hijack the rest of the book. The strategy I employ is to offer only glimpses of something much larger, and to do so through point-of-view characters one level removed from the espionage itself: Tim, who gets his information from Maypop and Hector; and Lourdes, who gets hers from a variety of sources, since she plays the role of reluctant detective. I hope that by offering only glimpses I'm able to imply something more complicated and nefarious than I would be able to pull off if I forced myself to render it in full. Less is more, I hope.

I also take the risk of writing *away* from the terrorism story, using the same technique. By "terrorism story" I mean Mitch Herman's plot against GalileeBiomath. In this case, it's even more important to offer only glimpses, otherwise questions would abound: does Mitch Herman have child protégés in every subzone, or just the Region? If the latter, why the Region? Its proximity to Plexo2? And why Plexo2? What does Plexo2 offer that Mitch Herman needs, since he can achieve so much with his mind alone? In this case, I might be writing away from a deficiency in my own plotting, with the caveat that Mitch Herman's motives and techniques are meant to exceed the understandings of other characters. Alice is the point of view character who provides the most insight on Mitch Herman, since she has the most access, but Alice doesn't

actually research Mitch Herman. She knows him and likes him. Ron, who's worried about Alice, finds weird dubious stuff online, and his discoveries parallel those of Tim, who becomes fixated, through *Choochoo Booby Team*, on Herm Schonfeld, but it's Alice who actually sees the man and gets to know him. But as Alice gets closer to Mitch Herman, possibly coming into his "thrall," as Ron puts it, the novel steps away from her, and the Alice/Ron storyline is relegated to Ron's more limited point of view.

These choices are self-serving, since I don't want to tackle the problem of rendering corporate espionage or realistic terrorism in a novel that's already unwieldy, and the choices also reflect the reality that *I don't know those stories*. A teacher of mine, Tony Ardizzone, told me that I should know everything about my stories. More specifically, he thought that if he were to ask why so-and-so character took such-and-such action, I should be able to explain. I agree with him for the most part, but as I've turned my focus from the short story to the novel, I've given myself a different version of his advice: that I should know only what my point-of-view characters know, since they're the ones through whom I'm navigating the world of the novel. I have no doubt that Mitch Herman knows what he's up to, but Mitch Herman isn't a point-of-view character. He's the character the others are trying to figure out. While I don't know everything about Mitch Herman, I do know that Alice thinks Mitch Herman is an eccentric but brilliant showmaker, and that Ron Tulanon thinks he's a crazy weirdo with a vendetta against GalileeBiomath. Tim Tetzler knows, or *feels*, that Mitch is wrapped up in death, and that turns out to be true, but Tim doesn't know *how* Mitch is wrapped up in death. Tim hasn't seen the blood moon, or rather he hasn't gotten deep on the show that leads there. So yes, the avoidance

of these details is self-serving, but it also has the upshot, I hope, of preserving some of the mysterious dreaminess that can be ruined through over-explanation.³

On the subject of mysterious dreaminess: I've been thinking about how one writes about something inexplicable. Dick attempts this in *Three Stigmata*, and one of the book's strengths is the way Dick offers multiple theories about Palmer Eldritch, from a variety of perspectives, instead of lighting on one true explanation. Dick may actually go too far with this technique, through the long sense-making interior monologues of Barney Mayerson. Some of the magic is lost not only when Eldritch reveals he's lonely and unhappy but when Dick makes explicit the connection between Eldritch and God. The connection is there throughout, but Dick harps on it during the long scenes between Mayerson and Anne Hawthorne, a religiously minded colonist Mayerson befriends on his way to Mars. In general, however, the technique is the right one to employ: the technique of writing *around* a central mystery instead of tackling it head-on. For another example, I've turned to Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, whose central mystery is the disappearance of Kumiko, the narrator Toru's wife. Her disappearance is revealed, gradually, to be part of a larger pattern that involves her brother, Toru's brother-in-law, an ascendant conservative politician; fortune-telling sisters, one of whom is a dream prostitute; an alternative world Toru can enter in dreams and from the bottom of an abandoned well; and a war story told by an old man about a mutual acquaintance, which involves a case of miraculous survival at the bottom of a different well. Gradually, the central mystery goes from Kumiko's disappearance to the question of what connects the various odd elements Murakami has laid out

³ Over-explanation, not just authorial intrusion, is what makes me resist the omniscient narrators of an earlier epoch, as well as some of the more elaborate world-creation projects by contemporary science-fiction writers. Great writers from Kim Stanley Robinson to Neal Stephenson have written bloated books hijacked by their authors' seeming inability to stop elaborating. China Mieville's *Perdido St. Station* is a particularly dire (and brilliant) example. Maybe my refusal to know *everything* about the world of *Deep Video* will inure me to that pitfall, even if it doesn't anything to raise my imaginative capacity to the heights reached by those writers.

for us. The novel becomes the sense-making project of its first-person narrator, Toru. Not coincidentally, *Deep Video* contains two shows, directed by Herm Schonfeld, that are referred to as sense-making projects: *Choochoo Booby Team: The Reckoning* and *The Haunting at Yummy Taco #173*.⁴ By planting these shows, I hoped to introduce the idea of the sense-making project early on, since the novel as a whole becomes, like *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, a sense-making project. And like Murakami's novel, little sense is actually made. Like Toru, the point-of-view characters in *Deep Video* are flawed investigators, never quite able to wrap their heads around the whole story: Lourdes learns more and more about B281 but, as the only major character who doesn't meet Mitch Herman, never learns that this new version of B281 might be a product of Herman's mind; and Tim learns more and more about Mitch Herman but can't figure out Herman's plot before it's already underway, and by then Tim has had to start worrying about *himself* instead.

Because *Deep Video* is written in third-person, from multiple points of view, the sense-making projects of the reader and the characters may not line up as closely as those of the readers of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and its narrator, Toru, since the latter readers know only what Toru knows. In other words, if Toru has only partial knowledge, then his reader has the same partial knowledge. I had hoped, while designing and revising *Deep Video*, to create a dynamic in which one storyline informs another such that the reader has greater knowledge than any one character and is therefore engaged in a higher-level sense-making project than those characters.

⁴ This show is made up, but it was inspired by two chapters in the book *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults* by the folklorist Bill Ellis. In one, "The Fast Food Ghost," Ellis gives several fumbling first-person accounts of a haunting at a fast food restaurant, making the point that our grammar of belief doesn't allow for the supernatural in unapproved spaces like fast food restaurants. In the other, "Varieties of Alien Experience," Ellis examines popular sci-fi author Whitley Strieber's attempt to tell a similarly ungrammatical abduction experience in his memoir, *Communion*. I haven't actually read *Communion*, but apparently Strieber was led by his penis. *The Haunting at Yummy Taco #173*, which is a mash-up of the two chapters, also owes something to Werner Herzog's film *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, in which Herzog helps a troubled veteran reenact his POW experience and ensuing escape.

For instance, by the end the reader knows that Mitch Herman has given the people inside Galilee HQ a sort of death, or second life (only time will tell if the second life ends up as multifaceted and interesting as the one he has made for himself), but Tim does not. So when he reaches out one last time, via B281, into the Subzone and finds his way blocked, he has no idea what has happened to his friend Uncle Chen. So the novel has a sadder ending for Tim than it does for the reader, who knows that Uncle Chen has gone on to a new adventure. Yes, Uncle Chen might be dead (Tim's use of the phrase "maze of death" to describe his own zone under the control of Mitch Herman is meant to buttress that interpretation), and death isn't a happy thing, but the version of death offered on the blood moon is happier than what Tim is probably imagining for his friend.

While the sense-making projects of Lourdes and Tim are, like Toru's, basically investigations, the sense-making projects of Herm Schonfeld (the shows he directed, before entering his splatter phase as Mitch Herman) are of a different type. They're attempts to deal with trauma: in the case of *Choochoo Booby Team: The Reckoning*, with his own; and in the case of *The Haunting at Yummy Taco #173*, that of a science-fiction author with whom he identifies. The writer Donald Antrim once told me (along with others, in a workshop) to write *towards* trauma, and that's good advice. But it's good advice, I think, not just because trauma is interesting but because the act of circling and nipping at the edges of trauma is so familiar and central to our experience. As the folklorist Carl Lindahl writes of Katrina survivors in "Legends of Hurricane Katrina: The Right to Be Wrong, Survivor-to-Survivor Storytelling, and Healing," the narrator of a personal experience story "surrounds the central event with copious and precise details that ultimately fill in the gap between the vast body of what is known and the tiny, mysterious story core" (Lindahl 169). That's why I introduce the psychotherapist and self-help

author Busy Feldman, she of the “Feldman stages” on which patients work through trauma by staging and revising it. In a way, Mitch’s blood moon project (the B281 show and hijacking of Galilee HQ) is the logical extension of the Feldman stage: a chance to undo the trauma that he went through in the juvenile detention center. More on the blood moon in a moment. First, more about trauma.

While Mitch Herman’s childhood experience is the background trauma most central to the plot of the novel, many of the other characters are dealing with less spectacular traumas, and these traumas fall into a few categories. At the top, bearing the closest resemblance to Mitch Herman’s trauma, are the childhood experience of Jere and the wartime experience of Dennis. Both of these are delivered as monologues late in the novel, not unlike the monologue Mitch Herman delivers to Ron about his own experience. I had a hard time with these. They emerged in the second and third drafts, respectively, and it wasn’t until the fourth draft (this one) that they took their current shapes. The stories still don’t quite ring true to me, and the reason for that is, I think, that they’re too direct: very *unlike* the stories Lindahl cites in “Legends of Hurricane Katrina.” That said, I have a rationale for each. In Jere’s case, he’s a social worker, a person who has spent a lot of time thinking about his own issues in order to help others with theirs, and so he may have formulated this story over time in order to offer an unembarrassed answer when someone asks him why he was in a juvenile detention center. In Dennis’s case, he may not see his story as a traumatic memory; after all, he delivers it with a focus on the mysterious blue soldier who rescues them, not on the trauma of seeing, or hearing, his companions die. In other words, he delivers the story not as a trauma narrative but as a war story narrative whose occasion

isn't the death of his companions or how harrowing the event was but the mysterious soldier, so his story might, for that reason, be more direct.⁵

What Jere's and Dennis's stories have in common is that the two men seem to be telling the truth, which might be another reason their stories are hard to swallow. In Mitch Herman's case, we know from Jere that at least one element of his story is a lie: he wasn't in an orphanage; he was in a juvenile detention center. The one lie allows us to imagine that other elements might be lies, and that the story might not be an accurate representation of what happened. This, to me, makes Mitch Herman's straightforwardly delivered story more palatable, so I use the same approach in the less dire stories of Alice and Uncle Chen. In Uncle Chen's case, we know from the Prologue that he's had a difficult life, stemming in part from his substance abuse. The story he tells Tim about his fixation on strip clubs and strippers isn't flattering, and it might be believable, based on the Prologue, but it's a little too tidy. So by having Tim catch Uncle Chen in the Lara/Linda lie about the name of his wife, I hope to destabilize the story somewhat, and to shift its focus from providing background on Uncle Chen (we get enough of that in the Prologue, I hope) to the question of why Uncle Chen would tell this particular story. If he's willing to lie, then he could tell any story, or at least many different versions of this story, so why *this* one? What is he trying to communicate to Tim about himself? How does this particular version affirm what Uncle Chen wants to believe about himself? Uncle Chen points out to Tim that Tamitha,

⁵ That said, I know from having listened to my grandfather's war stories that the "point" of the stories was never "listen to this messed up thing I had to do, which haunts me," but always something else. For instance, he used to tell the story of flying low over a village (he was a turret gunner) after having been told, in his words, to shoot everything that moved, and seeing an old man waving a stick or cane over his head, as though to get the attention of the airplane firing on his village. The point of the story, in my grandfather's telling, was that he, my grandfather, as a young man, was confused by the old man's behavior; but that now, as an old man himself, my grandfather recognized that the old man was trying to distract the plane and its gunners while other members of his family hid or escaped. And so the point of the story was the old man's heroism, not that my grandfather shot strangers from the turret of an airplane at such close range that he could see their faces. (This particular story is referenced, vaguely, in the Prologue of *Deep Video*.)

the woman who runs the gym, might be lying about her dead child. I hoped to imply that Uncle Chen's finely tuned story is part of a pattern within the Subzone, which is why he just assumes that others, like Tamitha, do the same thing. Through Alice, whose thoughts I could show (since she's a POV character), I tried to explore this dynamic a bit more deeply. Alice admits that she has formulated the story about her grandmother over time as an answer to the common question posed to artists: *where do your ideas come from?* She has her grandmother say something strange and ridiculous because 1) it makes for a better story, a story with a punch-line, and 2) it ascribes meaning to the grandmother's death, which, in real-life, Alice didn't actually witness and may have seemed meaningless to her. Alice has told this story before, of course, but she hesitates to tell it to Ron, presumably because she likes Ron and, more importantly, can imagine working with him. When writing this episode, I hoped to imply a relationship between Alice's frustrations as an artist and her refusal to wrestle in earnest with the raw material of her own experience.

If Jere's and Dennis's stories are one category, and Uncle Chen's and Alice's another, then the third, and most mundane, is that of Tim's and Ron's and Lourdes's stories. Chapter 1.1 includes a painful childhood sports memory, the thrust of which is 1) that Tim looked like someone who should be good at soccer and was treated as such, even though he wasn't good, so he suffered repeated failures; and 2) that Tim's father seemed embarrassed by these failures. I intended this to be the kind of commonplace childhood trauma we work over again and again in our heads but might be too embarrassed, because of its seeming triviality, ever to say aloud, let alone fashion into some kind of personal experience narrative, which is why these little traumas tend to go unresolved, and why in the present action of the story, Tim still has body issues and teamwork issues that affect his ability to participate fully in the field trip and, by extension, the

culture of his workplace. I intended Lourdes's memories in Chapter 1.2 along the same lines, though Lourdes, who is more successful professionally, if not personally, has drawn meaning from the memories that haunt her. The "wolver" hands of her grandfather, for instance, remind her to be thankful for "sit-down work." But even in Lourdes's case, some memories have gone unresolved. She remains mystified by the emptiness of the interstate corridors of her youth, and by the way her mother made fun of the people who worked at rest stops, people child-Lourdes failed to see as fully human. I hoped that by including such memories I would deepen Lourdes's uncomfortable feelings about the Subzone, since the Subzone is full of the sort of people, like the rest stop people, that Lourdes's success makes invisible. She recognizes the need to treat these people as fully human but is uncomfortable doing so. Or so I hoped when I wrote those sections. Ron's case is slightly different in that he seems to have come to terms with the fact that hasn't accomplished as much as he could have and that he treated some people (like Pavan, his former writing partner) badly. This is why Ron, unlike Lourdes, doesn't mind talking about the episode that led to his termination at Galilee. I hoped to give the sense that Ron has been forced, by the sheer number of mistakes, to make peace with many of those mistakes. That said, he's basically agoraphobic, and has fashioned a life for himself wherein he doesn't need to risk making more mistakes. Ron finally takes a risk by partnering with Alice and by reaching out to Rudy Talamantez, and the results are mixed: on one hand, the novel ends with Ron and Lourdes stuck in the blood moon, possibly dead; on the other, Ron is reminded by his experience in the world outside his apartment that others see him more generously than he sees himself. Mitch Herman tells him, not untruthfully, that Rudy and the others involved in the B281 show *listen* to Ron. And Uncle Chen, in the end, sees Ron not as an uncomfortable weirdo but as a big friendly man who enriches his time on the blood moon.

Ron's adventure, minor though it is in comparison to others in the novel, represents a potentially traumatic experience that might become, with time, a traumatic memory. The same might be said about Lourdes's ensnarement by Jere and Dennis and ensuing captivity, and about several episodes involving Tim: his vision of death in the Mall Warrior basement; his drug-influenced live chat, presided over by Dennis; his move to the Subzone; and his flight from the Subzone, via double-projection. Tim is haunted throughout the novel by each of his visions, in part because of his sensitivity and in part because he has no one to talk to about them. Maypop's absence and unavailability on the phone play a part in this. The reader senses, I hope, even after Tim is reunited with Maypop, that some of his experiences will continue to be unresolved and go on to become traumatic memories. His inability to reach out to Uncle Chen, through B281, is part of what I hoped to be a larger pattern of thwarted resolution. He can't yet talk to Maypop about what happened, not wanting to indicate to her that he was so "deep" in the drug scene, and Tim missed whatever opportunity he had to speak in depth with Uncle Chen, who might have understood. In contrast, Ron and Lourdes have each other, even on the blood moon, and their communication is uninhibited. Whatever relationship issues they have are not unusual, I think, and I intended their sex (meant to replace Ron's masturbation) to be a sign that their partnership continues to grow.

When I first started thinking about the idea of partnership, I thought that here, finally, I had found something in my novel that was completely different than *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. Barney Mayerson is, like most Dick protagonists, a loner whose relationships with women are defined mostly by sex. But Mayerson, whose search for meaning beyond the corporate life he's made for himself holds together the second half of the book, finds in Anne Hawthorne a woman he's able to take seriously without trying to dominate; and in the Martian

hovel, a weird sort of community. What's different about *Deep Video*, I think, is that no one is obviously a jerk. The way Barney treats Roni Fugate, his lover and rival, and the way he treats Emily, his ex-wife, make it clear he's a selfish person with a lot to learn, and so (surprise!) he learns a lot.⁶ All three of the POV characters in *Deep Video* take action, in their own ways, but the degree to which they've learned and changed remains ambiguous, and that seems to me truer to life than the linear journey of a character like Barney Mayerson, even though Mayerson's journey is more mind-bending and exciting. By the end of the novel, Alice has begun to fashion a career for herself, though we don't know to what degree Mitch Herman still shapes her mind. Ron and Lourdes have found a new life on the blood moon, and some degree of peace there. And Tim has been reunited with Maypop, which is what he wanted, along with the promise of children, though we may wonder if he'll continue to want children in a world muddled by B281.

The one who comes out on top, it seems to me, is Mitch Herman, which is yet another similarity between *Deep Video* and *Three Stigmata*, which ends with the haunting idea that Palmer Eldritch, whatever he is, has infected not just people's minds but the galaxy itself. But while Eldritch's ending is destructive, Mitch Herman's is, I hope, *constructive*, despite the terroristic elements that lead there. While the blood moon isn't the pure utopian fantasy Mitch Herman may have imagined (i.e. a safe place for Subzone children like Chaska and Asto to experience a better version of reality), it is the ultimate Feldman stage, a place where Mitch Herman can work through his trauma again and again without being limited by the materials available in his past. In the blood moon version, Victor/Chico dies again and again, as he does Mitch Herman's memory, but he dies in Mitch Herman's arms, just as Susej (Ned Elving) dies again and again in the arms of God/Thuje. As a sense-making project, the blood moon is far superior to Herm Schonfeld's early films, which are meant to be, like Schonfeld's murder of his

⁶ Leo Bulero, we surmise from the harebrained scheme that ends *Three Stigmata*, has learned nothing.

grandparents, backwards-looking. While the blood moon project doesn't solve or undo the trauma, it does recast it on a grand, almost celebratory scale. For Uncle Chen and Ron and Lourdes, the blood moon doesn't prevent death, but it does present an alternative to death, or at least a more palatable version of death, not unlike the one experienced by Mitch Herman. That was the idea, at least. I wrote most of "Part 6: Blood Moon" *after* rereading *Three Stigmata*, and so I hope it adds to my rewriting of that book an element of revision and rebuttal.

CHAPTER 2

LOURDES COHEN-CARDOSO

Lourdes Cohen-Cardoso bought the autocar because she wanted time alone. Clarifying time, was how she thought about it. A little period to herself after she left home (and Ron) but before she got to work, where she would be thrust into daylong meetings. Lourdes was a biochemist by training but now, at GalileeBiomath, an executive too, so time to herself was at an all-time low. Before the autocar, she had tried jogging for thirty minutes right after work, but the air in the city stung the surface of her eyeballs, and when her breathing got heavy, she felt as though a residual pollutant (benzene? mercury?) was abrading the insides of her lungs—a salty, stinging feeling that reminded her of what she had felt between her gums and lip the one time, as a teen, she tried the prune-tasting tobacco all the boys dipped. Back then, during high school, she had run cross country and track, had even won a few races in the Kansas City suburbs before getting dusted at State by boobless six-footers. But those days were long gone. Lourdes was almost fifty. Her knees hurt and her hip was unpredictable. She might run and feel fine afterwards but then, the next day, be sitting at her desk for a couple hours only to get up and feel a searing pain in her hip that made her eyes water. To make the pain go away she had to stagger around like a terminal syphilitic, hoping no one would hear, then spend the rest of the day working at the standing desk they gave her, but who wanted to stand and work? Wasn't the point of being an executive to do sit-down work? That's what her grandfather had called it. He was a cement mixer. She met him only twice, in Goa, and both times he told her (in Konkani) "*Stay in school, don't end up like me,*" then held up his hands, which had looked, to young Lourdes, like

the paws of a dark wolven creature.

Her grandfather would have been proud. Lourdes was sitting more than ever. It was a sign of her modest ascendance: so many meetings to attend, so much work to review. Many of her scientist colleagues would have traded places with her, Lourdes knew, and there was part of her that felt a little superior to them for that reason, and maybe she liked that feeling, but deep down she wished she could spend more time in the lab. It wasn't that the lab's research was special to her (rarely was it gratifying, all that failure) but she did miss the feeling of being part of team, and not a fake conglomerate-style team like the committees she was on: an actual team of people working long hours to achieve a common goal.

In the autocar, during her clarifying time, Lourdes sometimes allowed herself to fantasize about changing venues. She could work for the government, she thought, maybe influence policy decisions, or for a university, which was what she had imagined for herself throughout her training. But there was a feeling among her colleagues that they had more influence where they were. The government didn't make much of a difference anymore, as the moribund FDA taught and retaught them every day. Plus there was the money. Lourdes wasn't proud to like the money so much, but it was nice not having to worry, living right in the city, eating out whenever she wanted, buying redundant shoes. Also, on a more practical level, there was the issue of her husband. Ron was barely employed anymore. He taught a couple writing classes online. Professional or technical writing, she couldn't remember which. The pay was dismal. He hadn't *written* anything in ages, or at least not anything he showed her. She had gotten him a job at Galilee writing copy, but of course that didn't work out. Ron's shy exterior disguised a true hatred of authority, of capitalism, and she was sure his colleagues had detected this and been uncomfortable around him. The situation wouldn't have been helped by his size. Though

harmless (he was too detached for violence, maybe from all the drugs he used to do), in rare moments of anger, his massive tattooed body could be threatening.

Lourdes's autocar was speeding towards the base of the Galilee HQ tower, and Lourdes braced herself as the autocar dove, without slowing, into the subterranean parking deck. This was the hardest part of the commute for her. The downward spiral of the parking deck was so thin, like a chute, and the autocar drove so much faster than Lourdes would have driven. Lourdes understood that she was safe, that the autocar knew the location of every other autocar, but still she had to close her eyes until she felt the car jerk into an empty parking space, always the closest space to an elevator (the autocar knew exactly which open space was closest to an elevator and if it would beat the other autocars to that space) but also, often as not, too close to the next car over. On that morning, Lourdes knew without trying that she wouldn't be able to open the door wide enough to squeeze through.

"I can't get out of here," she said. "Can you find another space?"

The autocar replied, in the calm unaccented voice of a woman from Omaha, that there was plenty of room for Lourdes to exit.

"Well I guess I'm just fat then," Lourdes said.

"Don't be silly," the autocar said, then explained for the hundredth time that "she" had been programmed specifically to Lourdes's dimensions and so parked only in parking spaces where Lourdes would fit.

"You're not a *she*, you're an *it*," Lourdes said, but the autocar had turned itself off.

Muttering, Lourdes squeezed out sideways, pressing her backside against the car and getting atmospheric gunk all over her dark ensemble.

At the elevator, Lourdes pressed the button for the fortieth floor and leaned forward to

allow her retina to be scanned. Her first meeting of the day would last three or four hours, she expected. Project managers were doing their monthly progress reports. She had discovered, early on, that she didn't have to read the memos sent by the project managers beforehand because the project managers simply read aloud from their memos during the meetings. Very few questions were asked. Back when Lourdes was a project manager (which she still was, technically, though her lab was mostly in the hands of her labmate Hiram), she used to spend all night making presentations with twice the number of figures that were in the memos. Her presentations had been like mini papers, the kind of thing scientists used to submit to journals. Lourdes's mentor and former advisor, Hayden Akwei, had instilled in her that *that* was what science was, no matter where you worked. So what if she was at a conglomerate?

Inside the conference room, Lourdes made chitchat with the other members of the Review Committee, all of whom except Lara, the in-house FDA rep, were senior to her. Everyone sipped coffee and energy drinks and nibbled oily pastries served by Jakob's assistant, Tover, who topped off people's coffees and kept asking if anybody needed anything else. During the meeting, Tover would stand in the corner like a butler and watch for raised hands. You just raised your hand, wrote what you wanted on your device, showed the device screen to Tover, and Tover would scurry off to fetch you more coffee or fresh grapes or, presumably, whatever else you could come up with. Lourdes never raised her hand.

The first presentation was for a property called Sooth-o-max, meant to curb anal itch. Jakob, who, as VP for Pharmaceutical R and D, was head of the Review Committee, became annoyed that the property wasn't scaling up fast enough. The nervous project manager explained that they couldn't get enough trial subjects.

"Why not?" Jakob demanded.

“Because of the side-effects.”

“What side-effects? It’s butt cream.”

“Blurred vision and liver toxicity.”

“Raise their pay, then.” Jakob meant raising the per-trial pay for the prisoners they were using as trial subjects. “What do we offer these stiffes, anyway? Can’t be much.”

“Five dollars.”

“Five bucks? That’s terrible. Who would let his liver go toxic for five bucks? Make it seven.”

“But we can’t, sir. The CFP...” CFP stood for Conglomerate Fairness Pact. It came up every meeting, usually in reference to fly-by-night pharmaceutical companies in Russia or Iran reverse-engineering Galilee properties, which violated the CFP. So did paying trial subjects too much money, apparently.

“So what, Plexo’s gonna sue us?” Jakob said. “Or Sīkōng? You should hear the crap they pull in China. I don’t think so.”

“The Chinese have been using Filipino prisoners, who’ll take drugs for half the price. Maybe we could outsource the testing to Mexico?”

“Absolutely not.”

The scientist looked confused. “But why?”

“Because we owe something to this goddamn country, that’s why.”

Throughout this back-and-forth, the other members of the Committee had sat in silence, as they often did during conversations they found unsavory.

The next few presentations were so routine that if anyone on the Committee other than Lourdes had bothered to read the memos, the presentations could have been skipped, but the fifth

presentation was for a new property that had entered beta phase, meaning it, like Sooth-o-max, was now being tested on humans. When Lourdes first learned they were testing unproven pharmaceuticals on large human populations, she had been bothered, but the vast majority of pharmaceuticals were completely harmless, just slight variations on existing pharmaceuticals so that Galilee could undercut its competitors or renew its own patents. This particular property was something new, however, and getting lots of buzz. The details were sketchy, and weren't clarified by the project manager's turgid memo. Something about heightened concentration, or memory, or maybe both.

As the project manager, a principal investigator named Kip Goldberg, read his memo aloud, Lourdes and the others paid closer attention than usual, not only because the property was a big deal but because Kip Goldberg was one of the most well regarded, and well paid, scientists in all of Galilee. As a young professor he had published articles in *Science* and *Cell*, gotten tenure, built up a lavishly funded lab that attracted the brightest young minds from Asia, but as NSF and NIH funding declined, Goldberg, like many others, had found himself drawing funding from conglomerates. Eventually, after NSF and NIH funding dried up completely, the conglomerates divvied up scientists just as the Allies had divvied up German physicists after the fall of the Third Reich. The most ambitious, like Goldberg, found it easier to move their labs from their respective universities to the conglomerates themselves, to be closer to the money, resources, and human capital required to develop technologies on a massive scale; whereas scientists who did pure or "basic" research, like Lourdes's mentor, Hayden, were left in half-empty buildings on university campuses, answering to no one as long as they didn't ask for too much money or sexually harass their employees.

There was a time when Lourdes would have found it interesting to hear a smart and

respected scientist like Kip Goldberg present his research, but the man in front of her was almost embarrassing to look at: luxuriously fat, with hair enhanced to a thickness and shade that looked ridiculous on a man his age. He mumbled half-audibly while shuffling through a handful of papers (sample trial subject evaluations, with seemingly random criteria such as “eye dilation: normal,” “reflex response: 10% reduced”) and squinting at the papers as though he hadn’t ever seen them before. Normally Lourdes might have kept herself engaged by asking a softball science question or two, but whenever someone liked Goldberg made a presentation, only Jakob asked questions. She was sure Kip Goldberg didn’t want to hear from the likes of her.

As Goldberg droned on and on, Lourdes consulted her memo and saw that the trial in question had over seven thousand subjects. Seven thousand was a big number even for Galilee, so she wondered where the trial subjects were located. A college campus? If researchers offered enough money, they could still get thousands of college kids the old fashioned way. But no, the ages were too varied. Maybe a prison? Anyway, the seven thousand people, whoever they were, had been reduced to thirty or so one-page samples that Kip Goldberg was now smearing with bits of pastry.

Lourdes was drawing winged creatures in the margins of Sample Evaluation No. 17 when Jakob surprised her by asking Tover to leave. It was a precaution he hadn’t taken before, but no one except Lourdes seemed surprised.

“Kip,” Jakob said, “how soon can we get this on the street?”

On the street? It was like he was talking about narcotics.

Kip Goldberg shrugged. “Tomorrow if you want. The issue isn’t the property but how you want to package it. I’m beginning to suspect that the longer we study this property, the more possible usages we’ll come up with.”

Cuttino Cunningham from Marketing chimed in: “There’s no reason we can’t package and repackage it several times, for different usages.”

“My thought exactly,” Jakob said, “but let’s stop right there, since Lara is in the room.” Jakob turned his pinprick old-man gaze on FDA Lara. “If discussion of marketing were to continue, I’d have to ask you to step out, so we’re stopping here as a courtesy.”

Lara thanked him.

Lourdes was disturbed. Lara’s sole purpose was oversight, but it was possible to deny her the position to see what she was supposed to oversee?

“Anything else, Kip?” Jakob asked.

Kip Goldberg pursed his mouth, as though working over an idea inside it. “Nothing specific, no, but I’ve got this feeling...”

Lourdes was curious about Kip Goldberg’s “feeling.” He wasn’t the type of man to speak vaguely, so there must have been something he was struggling to articulate, something that made him nervous. But Jakob said, “I’ve got a feeling, too. A feeling of *excitement*. What I envision is a limited release—”

“The drug is *strange*, Jakob.”

“Of course it’s strange. That’s why we put you on the case, to figure it out.”

“I haven’t, though. I know what it *does*, I think, but how it works...”

“Nobody knew how lithium worked and it made Schou Baastrup twenty mil in 1971. Now, with your approval, we’ll graduate this thing, bring in a Product Manager.”

“I’d like to be consulted.”

“Of course. Right now, what I see for this property is something very specific. A niche market. I’ll have you work directly with the PM. Maybe Danny Mendoza?”

“Danny’s lovely.”

“The best. I have no doubt you two can figure out how to activate this thing.”

Activate was one of Jakob’s catchwords, Lourdes had learned, along with *heighten*, *monetize*, and *outside the box* used as a verb, as in ‘let’s outside-the-box this thing.’

Kip Goldberg nodded, but he seemed troubled.

Lourdes too was troubled. Wasn’t this premature? Based on one trial? Lourdes quickly shuffled through the thirty sample evals she had in her packet, looking for anything unusual among the eye dilations, reflex responses, sleep patterns, possible digestive issues such as nausea. It bothered her that they had reduced these people, their trial subjects, to a short list of numbers. Where were the observations? The psychological insights? On only one evaluation did she see anything but checkmarks and numbers. It was Sample Evaluation No. 12, where, in the box under “additional notes,” there was an actual instance of one human being (the tester) writing about another (the trial subject): “*unusual affect*.” The subject, No. 308, was male, 56 years old, and only notable, otherwise, for being a recovering alcoholic and having a Nephrotron synthetic kidney. The Nephrotron was found to be flammable and banned in most states, but not before it earned JohnstonAmgoJohnston, its manufacturer, 2.7 billion in gross sales. Nothing on the evaluation sheet, or in the rest of the packet, gave any clue as to how to interpret “unusual affect.” What did it mean? Was it important? Dire?

Kip Goldberg took a while to acknowledge Lourdes’s raised hand, and after she asked her question, he stared at her a beat too long before answering: “I can’t say I remember that particular trial subject, among the seven thousand.”

Someone laughed, and Lourdes felt her cheeks get flushed. “It seems to me,” she said flatly, “that if a psychoactive drugs effects someone’s *affect*, that should be taken seriously.”

“One out of”—Goldberg looked at the memo—“seven thousand, three hundred and eight? And the man is”—Goldberg looked again—“fifty-six years old, a recovering alcoholic. He could have been hungover. I didn’t evaluate him myself, unfortunately.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Jakob said, “your time is too valuable.”

“But is there any way,” Lourdes persisted, “to tell from this memo who *did* evaluate subject three-zero-eight?”

Goldberg looked down at the memo and frowned, forcing his loose neck flesh into concentric rings. “Not here,” he muttered.

“Because,” Lourdes continued, “if one out of thirty subjects showed this so-called ‘unusual affect,’ then why not two hundred and thirty-three out of seven thousand?”

Goldberg nodded. “Let me get back to you,” he said, looking not at Lourdes but at Jakob. “Is this over?”

Jakob said yes, it was over, and thanked Kip Goldberg for his time.

There was an uncomfortable silence as Kip Golberg lumbered out of the room. Then Tover returned and started taking lunch orders.

That afternoon, at her desk, absently listening to the muffled chatter and keyboard clicks that emanated from the shared wall between her office and the lab she barely supervised anymore, Lourdes expected to be messaged by Tover about meeting with Jakob, or even messaged directly by Jakob himself, and then, in the subsequent meeting, to be lectured politely but firmly about Kip Goldberg’s reputation, trusting Kip Goldberg’s process, etc., everything couched in terms of Kip Goldberg, who was, Lourdes had decided, a total ass. The worst part was that Goldberg himself had shown hesitation about the property, but the moment *Lourdes* said anything his hackles went up: who was she, a scientist of such little repute that she was

taken out of her lab to do committee work, to ask questions about *his* research? Jakob, Lourdes expected, would allow that Goldberg *was* an ass. *A brilliant ass. A genius.* Jakob was always heaping thoughtless praise on people.

But there wasn't any lecture, or any meeting at all. Maybe Jakob had decided to take her off the Committee, Lourdes thought, but she doubted it, if only because of the Committee's unfortunate makeup: on a Committee of eight, Lourdes was one of only three women (including FDA Lara) and only two people of color. More likely, Jakob wanted the issue to blow over as quickly as possible, to avoid raising Lourdes's suspicion by making a big deal out of it. But he was raising her suspicion by doing the opposite.

CHAPTER 3

TIM TESZLER

Tim sat alone at his desk, monitoring truck shipments. He was alone because DeLawrence, his cubicle-mate, had been thronged all day by a cadre of their sportiest male colleagues, who made him describe again and again how he had triumphed at the Mall Warrior, as well as his at-home training regimen of core-strengthening exercises and reaction-enhancement via 360-degree videogame setup. Tim couldn't help overhearing DeLawrence describe how he "zeroed in" on Tim as a "possible final combatant" long before he and Tim were the only ones left, since "Tim, he's the kind of guy who's gonna hide out as long as possible, know what I mean?"

Tim's cubicle was on the fifteenth floor of GalileeBiomath HQ, a seventy-story glass tower in downtown Chicago. The whole floor was open except for concrete support columns, a shaft of elevators, and a bank of glassed-in flex spaces. Tim's cubicle was short enough that he could see in every direction, which meant that everyone could see *him*, a fact that was, at times like this, almost overwhelming. On the upside, Tim could gaze through a wall of windows at the flat gray expanse of Lake Michigan. Sometimes he wondered what would happen if he dived off Navy Pier and started swimming. How long would it take a weak swimmer to exhaust himself and drown?

The fifteenth floor was the Admin floor, where people like Tim kept calendars, scheduled airfare, arranged meetings, made reservations, ordered breakfast platters, proofread letters, maintained the dwindling hard-copy file system, and ordered supplies from the few vendors too

old-fashioned to have gone completely online, like the guy on the south side who carved rubber stamps. Whatever still required a human touch, Tim and his Admin colleagues did it. Most had been business administration majors in college, and many, like Tim, had gone to business school. They were the least skilled, and least valuable, people at Galilee, but they were a sizeable voting block so they had a VP. Whenever the Board of Directors proposed a change, they had to run it by the Admin VP, a man named Don Caruthers who before being elected VP had done message encryption in a secret offsite location. Tim wasn't sure how much power the Admin VP actually had, but he felt good knowing somebody was making sure he got the benefits he was supposed to get: sick leave, workers comp in case of carpal tunnel, 401k and IRA, and a financial adviser to advise him on what to do with the 401k and IRA. Not that Tim needed financial advice. Maypop had all of that covered. She had double-majored in marketing and finance and done a special business school program for future executives. Because of Maypop, Tim's job was safe. Unless something totally weird happened, like with Georgi.

Five months earlier, a man named Georgi who arranged travel for executives had begun behaving erratically: crying at his desk, hiding in bathroom stalls for hours, etc. The rumor was Georgi's wife had left him. But when Georgi was fired, his wife had shown up to help him gather his things (Georgi was crying too much to do it by himself), so the rumor changed to how they had a baby that died. Infant death was unusual but not unheard of, but the rumor didn't ring true to Tim. Tim didn't remember a photo of the baby on Georgi's desk, just photos of Georgi and his wife at scenic locations like beaches and waterfalls. Tim had a good memory for the way things looked. If there had been a photo of a baby, or of a baby in their arms in front of a waterfall, Tim would have remembered. And if he, Tim, had had a baby, he would definitely have had a photo of it in his cubicle. A hundred photos of it. No, there was something else. It was as though

Georgi was just *sad all the time*. Tim felt sad sometimes, but the idea that one could feel that way nonstop, and for no reason, was terrible to think about. Hadn't Georgi tried Benzosmile? Exhilaron? Fortissima? As a Galilee employee, he would have gotten a generous discount. Anyway, no one talked about Georgi after he left, but Tim kept thinking about the poor guy. Maybe Georgi's wife had a good job, like Maypop, and Georgi was home watching shows or looking for a new job, ever hopeful, or even caring for a not-dead baby. Galilee kept contact info on former employees, so Tim could have found out where Georgi was living, but he was afraid to look. He didn't want to imagine Georgi in the Region or some other remote subzone or, worse, way off in the desolate countryside, barely human.

The truck monitoring program on Tim's screen showed a map of truck routes, mostly interstates, with blue lines along the routes and yellow dots where the trucks were. There were sixty-seven yellow dots in the zone Tim was monitoring. A legend on the left-hand side identified the trucks, their contents, and the names and handles of their drivers, who didn't actually drive anymore, just sat in the cabs. Tim stared at the yellow dots and tried not to look at the clock. He wasn't supposed to do anything but stare at the dots, but the task was so aggressively boring that he almost always broke this rule. A colleague had shown him where to download software that made whatever website whose content you wanted to consume look like whatever you were supposed to be doing. The colleague had used it for porn, but Tim just wanted to check his messages and look at soccer scores. The messages and scores appeared in little bubbles that looked like updates he might get from, say, High Roller hauling PDE5 inhibitors from St. Louis to Denver. But instead the update said Liverpool was playing Tampa. The score was two-one Liverpool.

Tim would have felt bad about breaking the rules if a computer wasn't doing what he was

doing at the same time. The computer was doing it much better, he was sure, but the Teamsters Union had negotiated for human workers to get paid to do it. The Teamsters, who represented Galilee's drivers, had wanted their own members to do the monitoring, but a compromise was reached where in-house people like Tim could do it as long as they paid token dues. It was only a few bucks a month, and Tim got a letter from the Teamster President and a trucker cap that said Teamsters on it, with two horse heads and the American Flag. For a while Tim wore the cap around the apartment, as a goof, but Maypop said it wasn't funny. She said America was once home to many proud unions.

The fact that they used trucks at all, instead of drones, was also a legacy of the Teamsters. But it made sense. While the skies had gotten crowded, the highways were pretty much empty, so the speed limits were way higher than they used to be, and autocar technology made it so that vehicle-on-vehicle collisions were almost unheard of. Sometimes Galilee even paid two drivers to take turns. One would monitor while the other slept in a little compartment behind the seats. Tim used to think it would be fun to be a driver, but that was before he started monitoring, back when he thought the countryside still looked like it did in old Hollywood shows. Now he knew it looked more like it did in low-budget Australian shows where guys in leather ensembles and face paint went around shooting other guys to steal their gasoline, marauder-style. There weren't any marauders anymore, as far as Tim knew, but the landscape made it easy to imagine the days when they had crisscrossed the dried up cornfields, wreaking havoc.

On Tim's screen a yellow dot started blinking, which meant a truck had slowed down. Tim tried to ignore it, hoping he wouldn't have to get on the phone, but eventually the yellow dot turned orange, which meant the truck was falling behind schedule, so Tim minimized Liverpool-Tampa and switched his map to satellite mode, turning the bright green map into swirls of gray

and brown. He zoomed in on the dot in question. A thin cloud was skittering low across the brownish field. If the blinking dot went from orange to red, there was no way for the truck to get to its destination on time. That had happened on Tim's watch only once, when a truck hit a pothole and a back wheel came off, but there were rumors of trucks stopping for flat tires and getting hijacked, their drivers held up at gunpoint, like something out of a Mexican drug war show. The word EMERGENCY flashed, then the dreaded PLACE CALL.

Tim picked up the mouthpiece next to his console and clicked on the blinking orange dot, dialing the truck automatically. While he waited, Tim zoomed in further to get a look at the truck, but a dust cloud was in the way. He hoped the truck had gotten a flat or run out of gas, something simple, and that it hadn't overturned. The only speed limits left were to make sure trucks didn't tip over from taking turns too fast, but the autonomic driving program pushed the envelope anyway. It was also possible a tornado had struck. That was pretty much the worst-case scenario, as far as Tim knew.

"Hello?" said the trucker, whose handle was Jackknife.

"Hi, Jackknife, this is Tim at Galilee HQ."

"Hi there, Tim. I should have known you would call. It's a doozy."

"What's a doozy?"

"This traffic jam."

"So it's a traffic jam? I saw all the dust and thought maybe—"

"It's a traffic jam. I should know, right? I'm the one out here."

"Sure, of course. I just called because you're going red."

"I know, I know. I got the same damn screen in here you do, and yeah, I can see that dust cloud you're talking about. Visibility's pretty bad, I guess. Maybe some grandma up ahead is

afraid to drive in it. Just my luck, right?”

“Sure,” Tim said, forcing a quiet laugh, but the grandma theory didn’t sound right to him. He had never heard of anybody, let alone an old lady, driving cross-country in a personal vehicle.

“And look,” Jackknife said, “you and I both know I’m not actually driving this rig. What am I supposed to do?”

It was true, though the drivers could take over in emergencies. They weren’t card-carrying Teamsters for nothing. Tim had met a few at company-wide retreats, pretty nice guys, rough around the edges in a homey way that reminded Tim of his grandpa. Tim felt some comradeship with this man, his fellow Teamster, so he said “I hear you” and asked the man to call if he had any serious trouble.

“Will do, buddy,” the man said, and Tim felt good.

The good feeling faded when the shift ended and Tim realized he had to go to the bathroom, badly. He had been monitoring trucks for three hours. Before the shift, he hadn’t left his desk all morning because he didn’t want to be razzed about the Mall Warrior fiasco. But what could he do now? He had to pee.

Reluctantly, Tim rose from his chair and headed for the flex spaces, behind which a hallway led to bathrooms of various sizes and configurations, including a one-person relaxation bathroom that was always full. The cubicles were laid out to encourage collaboration, which meant Tim had to weave among them saying “excuse me” to get by, hoping not to be chatted up or even noticed, given his recent humiliation. Luckily most people were hunched over their consoles. A few were leaning back in their swiveling padded desk chairs, sipping Soygerm, too absorbed in shows to notice who was shuffling past them.

Tim had almost made it to the bathroom hallway when Chern Narong spun around holding an imaginary assault rifle and pretended to spray a few rounds at Tim's chest.

"Got me," Tim said affably.

Chern, unsmiling, drew a finger across his own throat. "Kill shot," he said. "I woulda got you like that yesterday if you hadn't been hiding like a vag."

"A what?"

"Vagina," Chern whispered, glancing at his cubicle-mate, a sixtyish woman named Mackenzie who wore big ill-fitting t-shirt ensembles with inspirational quotes about creativity and excellence. Mackenzie hadn't been on the Mall Warrior trip.

Tim laughed uncomfortably. "Sure, Chern, whatever."

Tim tried to keep walking but Chern pushed away from his cubicle so his desk chair rolled directly into Tim's path.

"I woulda got DeLawrence too," Chern said, "if Emma B hadn't snuck up behind me while I was crab-walking under the beanbag cannons. Total cheap shot. Did you see the video?"

"Yeah," Tim lied. A highlights video generated by Memory Maker (another Galilee asset) had been circulating among the Mall Warrior participants. The video was set to some kind of pop song that sounded to Tim like dying robot animals. All day the grating song had been popping up at low volume throughout the office. It had gotten so annoying that Diana, the day-shift supervising colleague, stood up from her double-sized cubicle to declare thirty minutes of quiet time, whereupon the most boisterous Mall Warrior enthusiasts gathered in Flex Space Two for a fake meeting in which they watched the highlights video again and again and gave fives.

Tim was curious about the highlights video but too embarrassed to watch it. He was told that his only appearance, before the anticlimactic execution (shown from three angles, repeated

in slow motion), was a shot of his head poking turtle-like out of the store where he'd taken cover, and that the video smash cut hilariously between that shot and a shot of an actual tortoise poking its shriveled head out of its shell before vomiting matter-of-factly.

After Chern relented, Tim sped to the bathroom and got in a stall. Even though he only had to pee, he sat on the toilet and took out his device to check his messages. He still hadn't heard from Maypop. He was starting to worry she had been kidnapped by anti-conglomerate factions in Kazakhstan or wherever she was, even though that stuff never happened anymore. Even Afghanistan was pro-conglomerate, Maypop said, and she would know. She went all around the world visiting doctors and pharmacists and heads of the insurance companies Galilee didn't own, giving presentations about new drugs and getting feedback about existing drugs. Maypop was a rising star. Tim was proud of her. She was only thirty-three (him too) but already reporting directly to the VP of Outreach. There was talk of her being transferred to Washington, DC, in which case, she said, Tim would get transferred along with her. Tim hadn't been to DC since he was a kid, on a school trip, and all he remembered about it was being tricked into rubbing Abe Lincoln's shoe for good luck then getting in trouble for climbing on a statue. But Tim had decided he would move anywhere to facilitate Maypop's career. It was because of Maypop that Tim, instead of somebody with higher scores and better grades, had gotten his cushy admin job, and he was grateful for it, for all her help, but what Tim really wanted, if he was being honest with himself, was to have kids and stay home taking care of them. He would be a good father, he was sure. He wouldn't ever yell. The kids would be smart because of Maypop (smart enough to do whatever job they wanted at Galilee, even research) and caring and sensitive because of him. Maypop made almost enough money that he didn't have to work anymore, especially if they cut back. And he was willing to live more simply, to stop buying the latest

ensembles, the fancy groceries, the deluxe streaming service, even to stop paying for servants, though it would be hard to let Yisha go. She was like family.

Eventually another man entered the bathroom and got into the stall next to Tim, which would have been fine (it wasn't the relaxation bathroom) if Tim hadn't heard that awful music. The man was watching the highlights video. Tim left quickly so the man wouldn't see him.

At his desk, Tim did his breathing exercises and calming mantra ("Thankfulness, thankfulness...") before getting back to work on the company newsletter, which he had started that morning. Tim got the newsletter job after a man named Ron Wayne Tulanon had been fired for stealing pharmaceuticals, or arranging for pharmaceuticals to be stolen, or something. Tim couldn't imagine blowing a sweet gig like the newsletter for the sake of a few pills, but addiction was a monster, as the saying went, that eats your food and thinks your thoughts and has sex using your body until the body wears out and you're dead.

Mostly the newsletter was like a show-and-tell. All day people sent Tim photos of their babies and weddings and vacations, which were interesting to look at, and also these photos called "spirit photos" for a special section, Spirit Corner, in which Galilee offices, factories, warehouses, and secret offsite locations across the country competed to show the most spirit by, for example, posing for photos in matching zebra-striped ensembles. Why zebra stripes, Tim had no idea. But the people who sent him spirit photos seemed to enjoy the friendly competition offered by Spirit Corner, so who was Tim to judge? The photos probably made their jobs more bearable, inspired camaraderie or something like that, like the Mall Warrior trip was supposed to have done. Tim glanced at Flex Room Two, where DeLawrence was performing an elaborate pantomime of violence while a handful of colleagues watched intensely, nodding. The expressions on their faces were so serious. It was as though the information DeLawrence was

giving them were essential to their survival, and heck, Tim thought, in a place like this, maybe it was. Or maybe they were reenacting something from the past, something awful but essential that no one wanted to admit still lingered in the human instinct. Tim tried to imagine a place free of those feelings. Free of competition. Free of fear.

CHAPTER 4

ALICE DURDEN

Alice had gone into her meeting with Mitch, her *attack* on Mitch, hoping for some clarity, maybe a frank assessment of why her script wasn't as good as she thought it was, but what she came away with was much more destabilizing than that. Now she wondered if there was room for anybody, let alone her, in what used to be called showbiz. She wanted to call Bryan, to tell him about her meeting with Mitch, but she hadn't talked to Bryan in a week. She hadn't told him about her plan to accost Mitch, because she'd been sure he would disapprove, but now that she'd executed the plan, and gotten valuable information, what could he say? The takeaway, as she saw it, was that splatter might really be dead, that they needed to branch out. Bryan might be amenable to that. He hadn't seemed happy with their latest script. Between drafts of *Nano Marauders*, they had finished the first draft of *Blood Curse*, about a plague of mosquito-like insects whose larvae swim through human blood until, mature, they rip through the papery surface of the sickly host's flesh. Their manager was having a hard time with it. Or so he said. Alice suspected the manager didn't prioritize them. They hadn't actually sold anything, hadn't made him any money, but how could they, if they were writing the wrong stuff? If he was any good as a manager, shouldn't he have *told* them splatter was dying? Wasn't the purpose of a manager, as opposed to an agent, to give career advice? To help "manage" one's career?

Alice tried Bryan's device but, predictably, he didn't pick up. She wasn't supposed to call his work number but she called it anyway. This was important. If Bryan couldn't understand that, fuck him. The phone rang and rang until Bryan answered in whisper, "Hey, I can't really talk

now. Can I call you later?”

Instead of saying yes, Alice started telling him about her meeting with Mitch Herman.

Bryan was surprised, then kind of disturbed. “You went to his *house*?”

“Yeah. He made me a sandwich.” Alice told Bryan she was ready to try something new. She said they should pick a new genre and study the hell out of it. Form and structure were where Bryan really shined, she said. Then, once they have a basic idea of a new genre, what really makes it tick, they could start pitching ideas to each other over e-mail. “Just like the old days,” she said.

“I don’t know, Al, that sounds pretty time-consuming.”

“Of course it’s time-consuming. Good work takes time.”

“It’s just, with Nora and all, and us thinking of starting a family—”

“Starting a family?” It was the first Alice had heard about Bryan starting a family. The idea was ridiculous. Bryan couldn’t even reheat lasagna.

“Don’t tell Nora I told you. We’ve been trying for three months. She’s taking some kind of fertility pill, but I don’t know. It might be me. I think I might be sterile.”

“Geez, Bryan. Why do you think that?”

“It’s just this feeling I’ve always had. This kinda tingly feeling. I used to masturbate too much.”

“Everybody thinks they masturbate too much. It’s the human condition.”

“I mean *way* too much. I used to do this game where I masturbated then tried to do it again as soon as I could, then again, and again. The most I got up to was eight. Anyway, I should go. My boss keeps poking his head in here. It’s Spirit Friday so we’re taking office photos. I gotta put on my costume.”

“Spirit Friday?”

Bryan explained, morosely, how the various firm locations competed to show the most spirit. The winning office got a free pizza lunch. “Berlin has an in-house performance artist,” he complained.

“What’s your costume?”

“Commodore Stephen Decatur. Long story. It’s totally embarrassing but I just can’t lose this job, not now.”

“But you hate that job.”

“I know, I know, but Mr. Felder says he’ll write me a letter. That’s the whole point of a job like this.”

“A letter? For what?”

Bryan sighed. “Law school.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Come on, Al, why would I stick around this place if I weren’t at least thinking about law school?”

“You already have a graduate degree.”

“A useless graduate degree. No offense. And I’m only twenty-six.”

“But half the law schools are closed, or on hiatus. Can you even get in?” But she knew he could get in. His test scores were probably ridiculous. He was a very smart person who was good at everything he tried, writing included. He just didn’t have the creative fire she did, which was why he needed her, was the way she saw it. And without school, without selling a script, what rewards was he getting? What praise? In that way, the law school thing made sense. He’d excel and feel good about himself. And he’d make a good lawyer, if it came to that. And probably a

good father too. She could imagine Bryan holding a baby, spooning food into its mouth or whatever, jogging around with one of those stupid expensive strollers. It wasn't for her, but she wanted him to be happy. He was her friend.

"Well," Alice said, "if you're in school, I guess we'll have more time to write."

Bryan didn't say anything.

"Bryan, are you there?"

"If I go to law school, I've got to be all in. I gotta get the right summer associate jobs so I can have a job lined up when I graduate. They closed all those law schools because there aren't as many jobs anymore."

Alice couldn't believe it. She had known for a long time that he would be the one who quit, not her, but right now? Like this? She had just met with Mitch Herman. *The Mitch Herman*. He was going to be her mentor!

"I've been talking a lot to Nora about it," Bryan said, but the last person's advice Alice wanted to hear secondhand was Nora's. Nora's idea of art was a lip-synced music routine at an awards show. Bryan said, "Nora thinks creative expression is self-indulgent, ultimately."

"What? Who says something like that?"

"I know it sounds harsh, but what's if she's right? What if I just do it because, you know, I was good at it, and it felt good just to sit in a front of a computer screwing around?"

Alice hung up, which she regretted, but she had done it almost instinctively, as though in self-defense. She didn't want to hear that stuff from anybody, let alone her writing partner, with whom she had shared so many hours on the phone, so many high and lows, not only professionally but personally. She remembered when he *met* Nora. Fucking Nora. All Nora cared about was money. Bryan cared about money too, though, and it wasn't just because of Nora.

While Alice's parents had helped her pay for show school, Bryan had been on a big scholarship. He had come from the middle of nowhere, South Dakota, or maybe it was North Dakota. Who ever met anybody from a Dakota? That everybody else was from the coasts or major cities like Atlanta and Chicago had given Bryan a sort of mystique. It had attracted her to him. Not physically. There was something kind of yucky about him, physically. He was one of those men who immediately after college starts developing an ungainly slouching mannish body. He was younger than Alice but looked much older. Maybe that helped explain his change of heart. Maybe he woke up every morning and saw his deteriorating body and thought, 'Geez, I don't have much time.'

To take her mind off Bryan, Alice stayed up all night watching shows. As she scrolled again and again through the offerings on her streaming service, she took a mental tally of what was popular. There were documentary shows, prestige shows, adventure shows. Goof shows made by people in their basements or schools. Life shows where someone confronted various people in his or her life about childhood incidents or apologized, as part of a seven-step program, for wronging them in some way; or where someone broke up with a significant other in an extremely awkward fashion then drank her/himself into a stupor or had angry desperate breakup sex. Alice couldn't tell if the sex in such shows was real or fake. The flat affects of non-actors gave everything, even arguments and sex, a deadening soulless quality. Alice hated life shows.

Apropos of her conversation with Mitch Herman, Alice tried to figure out which shows were actually ad shows, like *Planet Grandpa*. The only show she knew for sure was an ad show was *Dare to Dream*, a family drama about teens coping with addiction. And even in that one, she didn't realize what was happening until the end of the first episode, when the teenaged protagonist, sitting on his toilet looking sad and thirtyish but totally clean shaven with amazing

hair, turned an amber-colored prescription drug bottle around in hand a little too deliberately and said, “Dang, maybe Mom and Doctor Anderson are right. Maybe this stuff really *will* help me be the person of my dreams. Well, only one way to find out.” Then, after allowing the pill to be filmed sitting squarely in the middle of his well-shaped palm, the teenager was freeze-framed popping the pill into his mouth, and some text appeared: “*Will Eli stick to his plan of daring to dream? Will his girlfriend LaQuinda be supportive, or will she, too, need an intervention by Dr. Anderson? Will Dr. Anderson’s beloved basenji, Ndugu, recover from its distemper-like symptoms? Alacra™, Dare to Dream. Brought to you by JohnstonAmgoJohnston.*”

By the end of the third episode of *Dare to Dream*, Alice was drunk. She had been drinking wine then gin-and-tonics at a rate of about two drinks per hour since settling in bed to surf the stream. She brainstormed new writing partners, people she knew from show school who hadn’t had much success but in whom she had seen promise. Then she wondered if there wasn’t something pathetic about that, because what if they really *were* having success, and here was Alice, calling out of desperation, obviously, tacitly admitting that she had nothing, that Bryan had bailed on her? Everyone from show school knew she and Bryan were working together. It had surprised people, her being this kind of sophisticated person who talked a lot in class and Bryan having given off the vibe of a quiet genius or mildly autistic person. But why not aim higher? Why not get in touch with people she knew from show school who *had* made it? Why not Estrella Steinberg, who had sold two teen romance shows on spec and now wrote for the biggest teen show there was, *Horndog High*, in which a click of libidinous teens partner romantically in every possible permutation for every possible non-penetrative sex act? Why not, Alice thought, nodding, gearing up to maybe message Estrella Steinberg out of the blue. Because *Horndog High* was fucking terrible. That was why not.

Alice sprawled backwards on her bed, not even caring that the icy remainder of her last gin and tonic sloshed all over her shirt and neck. For a brief and confused moment, she considered asking Mitch Herman to be her writing partner. But no, that would be presumptuous. She didn't want to abuse his offer of mentorship, and anyway he seemed crazy. She was used to being the crazy one in partnerships. But maybe, she thought drunkenly, she should take his advice. Ads. Ad shows. How could she get into the ad show game? With an MBA? If she did that, she'd be no better than Bryan with his dumb law school. Thinking again of Bryan, and feeling sorry for herself, she fell asleep.

The next morning, Alice overslept and missed a sexy housekeeping gig. She had two voicemails from Deron at dispatch. She didn't listen to them. Maybe this time they'd fire her, she thought. It was the third gig she had missed in less than a year on the job, and there were tons of girls desperate for that kind of work, girls much sexier than she was. She only got the job, as far as she could tell, because there was a certain type of client who wanted to have a "stimulating" conversation, which meant the housekeeper had to at least be a fluent speaker of English, though the people in charge had their pick of people with advanced degrees. One of her colleagues, Shabazz, had a PhD in math. But did clients ask Shabazz about polynomials? Of course not. Though onetime a guy asked Shabazz to "talk math" while he jerked off.

Alice checked her messages and saw, in addition to three messages from Deron, a message from Creative Solutions Plus University that she, Alice Durden, had been "*selected from among a pool of millions for one FREE online course.*" Alice knew the name Creative Solutions from sidebar ads and billboards throughout the Inland Empire. The message continued, "*With your advanced writing degree plus this important coursework at Creative Solutions, you'll be perfect for conglomerate work such as: online scrubbing, technical writing, copywriting of*

ads and future media properties...” The list went on and on. Alice remembered what Mitch Herman had said about the conglomerates, how one day they would learn the power of art. The conglomerates were probably behind most ads, Alice guessed, and maybe ad shows too. She stared at the message on her device screen. What did she have to lose, she thought, beside her dignity, which was mostly lost already?

Alice was suspicious of any university that gave away classes for free, or at least of the quality of such classes, but Creative Solutions Plus University could afford to be so cheap, Alice learned (she was online and drinking coffee now, blowing off the sexy housekeeping gig and Deron too), because it was huge: part of a global for-profit online learning conglomerate that used teachers from weak-currency countries to teach students from strong-currency countries. Alice clicked on the link for the Business Communications Department, which advertised itself as the biggest and most results-driven department in all of Creative Solutions.

Now, Alice had to decide which course to take. Because she already had a college degree, she could skip Intro Business Communication, so she had to decide between Professional Communication and Marketing Communication. She chose Marketing Communication since it was a prereq for Advertising Communication. There were five hundred and sixty sections of Marketing Communication, so she narrowed them down by language (English) and time (afternoons, since she cleaned in the evenings and slept in the mornings) until there were fewer than a hundred options. From there, she browsed the bios of the instructors and weeded out those who had no experience at U.S.-based conglomerates until she had only thirteen options. She settled on an instructor named Ron Wayne Tulanon because he had marketing experience at GalileeBiomath, which, if Alice remembered correctly, was one of the biggies, and because, like Alice, he had an MFA from show school. For most students the degree might have been a mark

against him, since other instructors had MBAs and even PhDs, but Alice figured she could ask the guy how he made the transition from creative work to un-creative work. She hoped he'd level with her, and with a name like Ron Wayne Tulanon, he had to have a sense of humor (or be a sexual sadist mass murderer, but she was hoping for the prior).

CHAPTER 5

RON WAYNE TULANON

Ron Tulanon sat hunched in his favorite armchair in nothing but boxer shorts, his console propped on his bare knees. On the console screen, White House Press Secretary Nicole “Miss Nicki” Tremblax was delivering a speech on behalf of President Tice. Something about Israel. Tice was obsessed with Israel. Ron didn’t care what the speech was about; all he cared about was Miss Nicki, sitting there in her little office with its cozy loveseat and glowing hearth, portraits behind her of former Press Secretaries such as Dee Dee Myers and Marisha Slezak. Slezak had been the first Press Secretary to deliver fireside press briefings, but Ron had never gotten into Slezak. Miss Nikki was a different. Superior. Not just as Press Secretary but as a human, if she was a human. Sometimes Ron wondered. Her sonorous voice, her bewitching stare. The mirthful expressions that passed tastefully across her lovely face. She was almost too perfect. Her light brown skin and heavy round breasts suggested, to Ron, ancient fertility, while her big bright eyes and dimpled cheeks suggested youth. The tension between these two elements was, to Ron, Miss Nicki’s essence, what made her such an excellent Press Secretary and deserving of all the special attention she got.

It was three p.m., twenty minutes before Ron had to start teaching.

More than enough time.

As he began, Ron closed his eyes to concentrate on Miss Nicki’s voice. “Jerusalem,” she was saying. “Blood moon prophecy.” Ron opened his eyes just long enough to refresh his mental picture of Miss Nicki then closed them again. In his mind, her strong looking thighs were astride

him, her breasts swinging. “De-escalation is not tenable at this time.” Ron hoped one day to know the shape of her body and mouth so well that he wouldn’t need to look at her, just to hear her voice and be launched into fantasy. Now, in his mind, she was riding another man, a little white man, while Ron, big bare-chested Ron, who was Thai but often mistaken, because of his size and tattooed arms, for Polynesian, sat in a wooden school chair in the corner of the bedroom like a cuckolded husband or pervert voyeur. The fantasy was in full swing. Soon, the little white man (often as not Tice himself) wouldn’t be able to satisfy Miss Nicki, so she would unmount him in disgust and turn to her neglected love, Ron, whom she would find robotically masturbating in the corner; and Ron would rise as though absolved by her gaze of all his trespasses then ravish her, standing, just as the actual Ron, in the armchair imagining all this, ecstatically came. But it wasn’t yet time. All in due time. Time for pleasure, time to teach. Time to cook for Lourdes, time to read salacious articles about the private lives of soccer players. All Ron had, because of his stay-at-home lifestyle, was time. Or so he thought. The Q and A session started abruptly, earlier than usual, so Ron tried to finish before the whiny press corps voices ruined everything. He tried to maintain his erection through their insipid questions and Miss Nicki’s curt answers. All he needed was one long uninterrupted response, and when Sky Tomalty of PolitiZone asked, “How can the average American be expected to put his or her faith in blood moon prophecy?,” Ron got what he wanted: “The role of blood moon prophecy in President Tice’s Israel policy has been overstated,” Miss Nicole explained, “as has his belief in the possibility—*possibility*—of end-times. Now, are there questions on other topics? The President’s new play machine initiative, perhaps? A play machine in every hearth?” There. There, there, there—ugh.

Deflated and regretful, Ron rose from the armchair and trudged into the bathroom, where

he flushed the soiled tissue down the toilet so Lourdes wouldn't see it in the garbage when she came home from the gym.

Lourdes.

Lourdes was thin and stylish. She was beautiful, people said. High cheekbones, that sort of thing. Could Ron help that in fantasy he was drawn to her opposite? Wasn't that human nature? To be drawn to what one doesn't have? It was the same with his life. He was a part-time college instructor and homemaker who puttered around in boxer shorts and so, naturally, he fantasized about wearing a Mylar bodysuit while blasting through a wilderness of snow.

At 3:20, Ron logged on at Creative Solutions Plus University and welcomed his ninety-six students, via real-time message, to BC2000: Introduction to Marketing Communication. Then he fired up the video of himself in a Creative Solutions t-shirt speaking in front of a giant whiteboard. The video had been shot two years before, the first time he taught Intro to Marketing Communication. The whiteboard was part of a classroom mockup on a soundstage in Creative Solutions Plus University's Chicago campus, which consisted of a half a floor in a dilapidated tower south of downtown. The shots of Ron were complemented by stock footage of a lecture hall full of riveted students at whatever ethnically diverse public university had sold footage of its students to Creative Solutions. Ron took a moment to admire himself gesticulating. He had more hair back then, he was convinced, though the wavy black hair in the video wasn't yet long enough to pull back in the compensatory ponytail that was his current style. In the video, the hair looked like a sort of greasy black octopus whose tentacles were resting on his shoulders.

When the questions started appearing, via message, Ron answered them methodically, e.g. this, from a student with the handle "Jukingeo":

Jukingeo: when is 1st paper due?

RonTulanon: There are no papers in BC2000, just projects.

Jukingeo: when is project do then

RonTulanon: Is that a question?

Jukingeo: u know what I mean

RonTulanon: u have been added 2 my list

Jukingeo: ???

RonTulanon: Of pestilential nuisances and irritating cats, of people who have flabby hands and other types like that. They'll none of them be missed. I've got a little list.

Jukingeo: ?

When the video was over, Ron cut-and-pasted messages from Jukingeo and others onto the VirtualBlackboard for the rest of the class to see.

"The first thing you market in business," Ron typed, "is *yourself*. Use punctuation. Spell words. Capitalize where appropriate. Now, the rhetorical triangle." Ron fired up an explanation of the rhetorical triangle (logos, pathos, ethos) using a program that took big pieces of text and dispensed them slowly, haltingly, as though he were typing them live.

Meanwhile, Ron leaned back and sipped kombucha soda through a straw, resting the tall sweaty glass on his stomach as he scanned the messages at the bottom of his screen for anything important. None of it was, as far as Ron could tell, though a few of the students seemed to be flirting in a mixture of English and Chinese. Probably the flirts would exchange photos of their genitals as soon as class was over, if they weren't doing so already. Other students had already logged off. Ron could tell from the graying of their avatars. A few years ago, he would have written down the names of these students.

After the rhetorical triangle nonsense was over, Ron gave the students their first assignment: to send him a message of no more than fifty words explaining why they were taking BC2000. Ron explained that the word-limit was an exercise in the type of concision appropriate to marketing as well as to the business world more largely, but really he just didn't want to read anything longer than fifty words. He didn't want to read anything at all, but a few of the messages would stand out, he knew, and he could limit his efforts for the rest of the semester to the students who had written them. Messages that began "Dear Professor" or even "Dear Mr. Tulanon" had particular promise, as did those that featured paragraph breaks.

The most interesting message came from a student in Riverside, California:

Dear Professor Tulanon,

I hope this finds you well. I'm taking BC2000 because Mitch Herman told me splatter is dead and the next big thing is ad shows. Maybe that's a secret, though.

Don't tell any of your MFA pals.

Thanks for your time, and get well soon.

Best,

Alice

Get well soon? Was he sick? The answer depended on which types of eccentric behavior were considered pathological (an answer that changed every day, along with which drugs could be prescribed for, say, agoraphobia) but even so, how could this girl have known he was suffering? More likely, she had used the phrase as an attention-grabber. A cheap but effective way to stand out among the hundred students.

Not that she wouldn't have stood out by mentioning Mitch Herman. Of all the names to drop, why his? Was it really possible she knew the bizarre horror auteur? Rumors swirled about

the man's blood orgies. Rumors, Ron suspected, drummed up by Herman and his publicity team to generate buzz around his increasingly crappy shows. Not that Ron didn't admire Herman's early stuff. A scene in *Blood Gremlins* had caused Ron to flee the theater and vomit, though Ron had been so sped up on phenmetrazine at the time that he couldn't remember which scene.

The girl's name was Alice Durden. It was a generic enough name that Ron didn't expect to find anything when he searched her, let alone a photo, but her scrubbed profile appeared on several professional networking sites. She had an MFA from Show Arts University, which wasn't top-tier but not terrible either. Her work experience was sketchy: admin, clerical, even some custodial. The sheer number of types of experience made him wonder if she was an addict, unable to hold down a job for as long as was necessary to build a career. Or (and this was the more intriguing possibility) maybe she was so dedicated to her art that she dropped out of the workforce for months on end. Suddenly, and without thinking, Ron had begun to admire her, this spunky young woman who had decided on a professional compromise and chosen him from among the hundreds of communication teachers. He started to imagine an online rendezvous, teacher and student, both writers, bearing their souls and their bodies, via photo, maybe even video. Ron had some doctored videos he kept for just such occasions, based on the leaked sex tape of a Filipino soap show star who bore a dim resemblance to Ron, minus the tattoos. Eagerly, Ron combed through images of Alice Durdens. There were many, but the one that appeared most often was thin white girl with flinty eyes and long straight hair the color of wet sand. Ron was disappointed. She wasn't his type at all. Still, he was intrigued, and flattered, by the idea of a fellow writer reaching out to him.

Ron decided to answer Alice Durden personally, not with the auto-response he used on most students, but as he set about typing, the words didn't come. This was unusual. Ron didn't

consider himself a great writer, but he could always sit down and spit out words with minimum fuss. He wrote with the fluency of thought, was the way a former teacher had described it. But he was nervous, he realized. He felt clammy, sort of shaky. Maybe the problem was that Alice Durden was young and pretty, but no, that wasn't it; he had fantasies about almost every woman, men too sometimes, and had written plenty of messages to handsomer people than Alice Durden. Only later, as he had begun tentatively to write, did he realize it was her career that was clamming him up, meager though that career almost certainly was. The idea that she wrote scripts, as he had done, and in California no less, where he too had lived, was like something coming out of his past. The *something* was at once a part of himself that he didn't want to be reminded of, was frankly embarrassed by, and a sort of nightmarish claw that might rake him loose from his semi-comfortable life. Just thinking about those years caused his body to shudder from a cocktail of bad memories and tiny remnants of all the drugs he had taken, along with an olive or cherry of shame: whereas Alice Durden had made sacrifices for her art (moved to Riverside instead of LA proper, taken odd, probably awful jobs) and made it far enough, apparently, to get career advice from the likes of Mitch Herman, Ron hadn't written a single script in the twenty years since he and Lourdes left California. Here in Chicago he could have taken a stab at writing ads or even shows, but he just didn't have it in him anymore. Instead, his creative outlet was the occasional erotic sci-fi story he wrote and sold to an online clearinghouse that gave them classy titles unrelated to their content ("Stormy Night," "Heavenly Milkman," etc.) before selling them, at a tiny profit, to the handful of people left in the world who preferred reading their pornography to seeing it. So who was he, Ron Wayne Tulanon, amateur pornographer and part-time instructor at the cheapest for-profit university on the planet, to write a bloviated message about how writing ads really could be a creative enterprise well worth her

time and, in his experience, required such transferable skills as blah, blah, blah?

Ron stopped typing. He got up and rinsed his kombucha glass. He put on a shirt. He carried his console to the little desk he kept in a corner of the living room. There, sitting upright in an office chair, he nibbled a marijuana ranger cookie while waiting, for the first time since he could remember, to be inspired.

REFERENCES

- Cohen, Joshua. *Four New Messages*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2012. Print.
- Dick, Philip K. *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Elritch*. 1964. New York: Vintage, 1991. Print.
- . *Ubik*. 1969. New York, Vintage, 1991. Print.
- Ellis, Bill. *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults*. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 2001. Print.
- Lindhahl, Carl. "Legends of Hurricane Katrina: The Right to Be Wrong, Survivor-to-Survivor Storytelling, and Healing." *Journal of American Folklore*, 125.496 (Spring 2012): 139-176. Print.
- Little Dieter Needs to Fly*. Directed by Werner Herzog, performances by Dieter Dengler, Werner Herzog and Eugene Deatrick, Werner Herzog Filmproduktion, 1997.
- McKnight, Reginald. *He Sleeps*. New York: Henry Holt, 2001. Print.
- Murakami, Haruko. *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. 1997. Trans. Jay Rubin. New York: Vintage, 1998. Print.
- Robinson, Kim Stanley. *The Novels of Philip K. Dick*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984. Print.
- VanderMeer, Jeff. *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy: Annihilation; Authority; Acceptance*. New York: FSG, 2014. Print.