



LYSERGICALLY YOURS (Free E-Book)

by Frank Duff

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Published by:  
Insurgent Productions and No Media Kings (TORONTO)

ISBN: 0-9734807-0-X

Frank Duff likes getting mail at: [duff@frankduff.com](mailto:duff@frankduff.com).

The dead-tree edition of Lysergically Yours, perfect bound and with cover art by Max Meyer and Adam Lonero, can be purchased at <http://frankduff.com>.

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For Boot

And with thanks to:

Courtney Lake, Nyala Ali, Jordan Powley, Kris Mofukn Hill, Adam Lonero, Max Meyer, Robert Hopewell, Pat and Howard McCourt, all the K5ers and everyone else without whom this book would never have existed.

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Ten hits of acid in my veins,  
orbiting tacitly my brain,  
preparing ere they take the plunge,  
despairing there for thoughts expunged,  
but never ones to needless linger,  
and knowing well the hapless bringer,  
of these events upon himself,  
they wasted moments not in stealth,  
and those sacred halls did enter,  
driving straight toward the centre,  
where Reason met in consultation,  
with others of important station--  
included at this fine reception,  
were Poise, Discretion and Perception,  
and others who would be confused,  
to find soon their persons disabused,  
of the quaint outdated notion,  
that real earth and real ocean,  
existed ever on their own,  
without a mind to call their home.

-----  
--one--

They occupied most of their time with a card game called Bop Ngo, or something similar. A scandalous event had occurred when Johnny tried to actually pronounce the name of the game once. Every one of his captors immediately tried to correct him and to explain the proper pronunciation. They succeeded in communicating exactly nothing, until Thoc had the brilliant idea of writing the word out for Johnny. This enabled him to immediately identify it as one of the-words-with-lots-of-circles. This had the secondary benefit of simultaneously eliminating it from his only other category for Korean words, being: the-words-with-not-so-many-circles.

The method of play of this game apparently consisted largely of putting down unimportant cards to lull your opponents into a false sense of security. Then

suddenly someone would lay down a card belonging to a special subset for which the rules of the game demanded that all players immediately start yelling and gesticulating as loudly and frantically as possible. The fracas would escalate to near jumbo-jet-landing magnitude until suddenly all players would pull out their cell phones and continue to squawk loudly into the phones which would then register on their clamour-o-meters (a feature apparently present in all Korean cell phones) which player had contributed most powerfully to the pandemonium, that player then receiving one point and play continuing. Johnny had tried at one point to determine exactly which cards belonged to this special category. His most successful theory had been the short-lived but glorious 'odd-numbered-red-cards-higher-than-six theory'. It was however contradicted three days after its conception by a controversial seven of squids play (squids being a green suit).

There were very few allowable interruptions to Bop Ngo. The most common being shift change. There would be a jangling of keys and a click-clack of the door being unbolted from outside. Then two men would enter fully rested or, more often, hungover and two others would leave. Truth be told though, this rarely interrupted the game for more than a moment; the new arrivals often simply picking up the discarded hands of their predecessors and continuing from where the game had left off. Generally, the only other thing that superseded Bop Ngo was food; four generous meals a day.

There were no cards being played just then however, and for neither of those reasons; there were gunshots outside. From the sounds of things, there would very shortly be gunshots inside. Johnny looked around for a place to hide or, failing that, something to be used as a weapon. Not surprisingly, considering he was in a cell, there was little in the way of either to be found. It's come to this then, he thought, digging into his pocket. When his captors had searched Johnny they had failed to notice the concealed second pocket inside the right hip pocket of his pants. The fact that they had searched him as one would search for weapons rather than for drugs was a sure sign that they had no idea why it was that there was such a huge price on Johnny's head. To be fair, Johnny wasn't exactly sure himself. He had sewn the pocket there himself in order to secret away his acid in the case of being hassled by the cops. He had never ended up needing it for that purpose. But now he drew out a dime bag containing a torn and crumpled square of blotter, maybe five hits worth. The gunfire was growing more sporadic, time was running out. Quickly, so as not to allow himself time to reconsider, he shoved the acid under his tongue.

--two--

Three weeks earlier, Johnny poured himself another drink. He had worked his way through the four beers in the fridge over the course of an hour and had started in on the pure ethanol he and Lyle used as a solvent. You couldn't drink it straight of course, unless you wanted to dissolve your taste buds, but it went nicely with orange juice.

When Johnny drank, he had something of a nasty tendency to do so alone. This tendency was nasty only in a social sense, of course. Johnny was by no means an alcoholic, nor was he a violent or melancholy drunk. It just so happened that in early twenty-first century North America, the entire society was fostering the illusion that ethanol was not a drug. Johnny however had no delusions concerning his status as a user of drugs.

As it happened Johnny wasn't truly drinking alone that night. Well, he was alone in drinking, but not in the apartment. A mere four metres away Johnny's roommate and business partner, Lyle, was going through the following emotional states in rapid succession: confusion, concern, fear, anger.

"Johnny!"

"Hmm?"

"JOHNNY!"

"Yeah? I'm listening, whaddya want?"

"Johnny! Look at me!"

"Dude! I'm watching a fucking movie."

At this point Lyle stepped in front of Johnny and turned the TV off.

"What the fuck?"

"Johnny, where did the acid that was on my dresser go?"

"I sold it. Isn't that the fucking point? Maybe I've been wrong about this whole process from the start, but aren't we trying to make money here? If you want me to stop selling the fucking drugs, you should tell me now so I can go back to watching my fucking movie."

Johnny and Lyle were actually very good friends and usually interacted with one another in only the most polite and cordial manner. Johnny however, was more than a little drunk; and Lyle-- Well, Lyle knew something of great import that Johnny did not. But that was about to change.

"Johnny, listen to me. Listen very carefully. There was a vial of acid sitting on my dresser, about three hundred hits. It had a label on it. That label said LA-26f. Did you sell that acid? That specific acid?"

"I don't know, maybe... No, wait, yes. Yes, I put it on blotter and I pushed it at the school."

"Which school?"

"Central Tech."

"To who?"

"Holy fuck, Lyle! I don't know, the usual people. Lucas and Jesse each took about a hundred hits to turn around and then I five and tenned most of what was left to random people. Why all the fucking questions?"

"Johnny, do you have any of it left?"

"Yeah, I had ten or fifteen hits left when I was done. I tried to find a taker for a few minutes, then I just said, 'fuck it, I'm gonna go home, have a few drinks and watch Doctor Strangelove', which I'd like to get back to if you don't mind. What's left is over there on the table if you want it."

Lyle followed Johnny's nod to the table, and picked up the slightly battered sheet of blotter. It was perforated like a sheet of stamps, but broken up into far smaller squares. Only the corner remained of what had once been a larger sheet. He recognized the art. Johnny's ex-girlfriend had designed it. On the sheet Lyle held was the bottom left corner of the Illuminatus eye-in-the-pyramid rendered in a garish purple with tiny black angels reminiscent of fruit flies circling it. Ivan, a friend of Johnny's printed all the paper for them; it was easier that way. Lyle gripped the sheet tightly in his hand.

"Come into the kitchen."

--three--

Lyle and Johnny had met in Intro to Psych. Neither of them completed the course. Johnny was taking it because he was in first year and still believed that University life was about becoming an educated person rather than about getting in, getting out and getting paid. As such he had signed up for Intro to Psych and Intro to Advanced Physics as the two first year electives in his Computer Science Degree rather than the much more traditional Intro to Logic (which anyone who knows the difference between if and iff can ace) and Science and Society (which gets you your humanities requirement without having to actually take a humanities courses). Lyle's reasons for being in the course were much more mysterious. Johnny noticed him straight off: The punker with the green mohawk sitting just to the left of centre in Convocation Hall, where PSY 100 was held. It was a 9am Monday morning class, the first university class in the lives of most of the students. Yet Lyle did not have the same air of trepidation about him that hovered over the rest of those in attendance. He sat calmly with his Docs up on the back of the seat in front of him, knitting. Whereas almost everyone else in the hall (Johnny included, he was embarrassed to later recall) had brought with them a shiny new binder bought at Wal-Mart (or Grand and Toy for the rich kids) and a pencil case with not only pencils and erasers but pens in blue, black and red, Lyle had three sheets of folded paper which had clearly been pulled from his pockets minutes earlier and a red Bic pen without a cap sitting on his fold-down desk.

The instructor was a frightened looking graduate student named Mohammed Haj-Mosawi who spoke English with a very thick accent and did so in a voice that would have been rather too quiet for polite dinner conversation, never mind lecturing to 800 students. He did however, come armed with some pretty serious PowerPoint slides. By about the third week some combination of the nearly inaudible and indecipherable English and the Monday-morningness had driven attendance down to the point where Johnny was able to permanently stake out a seat in the front row. Soon afterwards, Lyle migrated forward as well. From that vantage point, both were surprised to discover that Haj-Mosawi was quite a compelling speaker once you got used to the way he pronounced all his soft 'i's as hard 'e's.

It was an unseasonably warm day in mid-October when Johnny actually talked to Lyle for the first time. Johnny had stayed around for a few minutes after class to ask Haj-Mosawi a couple of questions about the lecture. When he stepped out the doors of Con Hall and started down the stairs a voice called from behind him: "Nice shirt."

Johnny spun around, met Lyle's grinning eyes and asked: "You're a fan?" Johnny was wearing an old Doors t-shirt, a veritable antique. It had belonged to his father. The words "The Doors" had faded entirely from the back and Jim

Morrison's grim visage barely continued to peer out from Johnny's chest. The neckband had frayed to the point that it hardly existed and the sweat stains in the armpits were the kind that didn't wash out. Band shirts weren't really in fitting with Johnny's usual style; in fact this was the only one he owned. He generally wore a plain black hoodie and blue jeans just about every day of the year, but the sun blazing in through his dorm window that autumn morning had dictated an impromptu wardrobe re-evaluation.

Lyle was leaning up against a pillar smoking a cigarette. His pants were a patchwork of leather, denim, plaid flannel and various faded patches for bands Johnny had never heard of. The pants fit Lyle's long legs snugly and were tucked inside the tops of his Docs at his ankles. There were zippers and buttons, which seemed to serve no fastening purpose, set into the pants haphazardly across their surface. Lyle's lower half was always clothed in this way and Johnny suspected from observation that Lyle had three or four similar pairs of pants, but wouldn't be willing to swear that the pants weren't completely different every day. Lyle was also wearing a stained white Sex Pistol's t-shirt on which the printing job was so smeared that it was almost certain that he had done the silk-screening himself. There was a long slash as from a knife running diagonally across Lyle's chest and the dirty white cotton curled outwards around this wound. Through the tear Johnny could see that Lyle's right nipple had a safety pin through it. There was a single thick black line of tattoo ink running down the inside of Lyle's forearm from the divot of his elbow to where it disappeared underneath a black leather bracelet bristling in steel spikes, several of which were rusting. In all, he looked as though he had been fashioned by God for rich girls to date for revenge against their parents.

Lyle spat onto the ground and, ignoring Johnny's question, asked: "Know where I can get some acid?"

Johnny was visibly surprised: "Why are you asking me?"

"I saw you reading 'Doors of Perception' during break."

"Sorry," Johnny said, turning to leave, "but you've got a wrong number." Johnny hopped on his skateboard and sped off in the direction of McLennan Physical Laboratories. He didn't look back, but if he had he would have seen Lyle watching him with more than mild curiosity.

Johnny had been reading 'Doors of Perception' in class, re-reading in fact. That much was true. However, he had been reading 'The Old Man and the Sea' the week before and no one had asked him if he knew where they could get some good marlin. The disconcerting thing was that Johnny did in fact know where Lyle could get some acid, but his natural defence mechanisms had convinced him to play dumb. He had been a small time dealer all through his high school years in Peterborough. He would receive a sheet of acid, 200 hits, at an anonymous mailbox from a Russian guy he knew in Kingston in exchange for 500 dollars. He would then break it down and sell it for five bucks a hit. This kept Johnny in steady supply of black hoodies and pocket money throughout his teenage years, it had also been the primary source of the money he had saved for university. When he came to Toronto for school, Johnny figured he had left his acid pushing days behind him. He had assumed that the market was already saturated and he'd be unable to find a niche. But now-- Now he wasn't so sure.

What he was sure of was that he had a good deal going with the U of T physics department. The department was desperate for new students so they pampered their undergrads with free pizza at lunchtime three days a week. Johnny wasn't,

technically speaking, a physics undergrad, but he had been tipped off to the existence of the pizza Nirvana by a classmate in Physics 140. The combination of Johnny's brief chat with Haj-Mosawi and his run in with Lyle had rendered him ten minutes late for pizza.

Those were a vital ten minutes in which the vegetarian pizzas had been entirely consumed. Johnny had been a vegetarian for six years, but he wasn't uptight about it; he was perfectly willing to pick pepperoni off of pizza. Besides, he knew that it had not been the other vegetarians in the room who had eaten all the vegetarian pizza. The truth was that those who ate meat would dig into the vegetarian pizza first, leaving the meat pizzas virtually untouched. They did this because they knew that, although they were content to eat either, the vegetarians didn't even see the meat pizzas as food. This meant that those pizzas could be saved for leisurely consumption as much as thirty minutes post-pizza-arrival.

Johnny wasn't one to let others win that easily. He preyed on the false sense of security that the meat-eaters derived from their pizza piracy and managed to find an entire untouched pepperoni pizza still in its box. He closed the lid and took it over to an unoccupied section of the physics student lounge where he sat in a beat up armchair, opened the box onto a coffee table and began to systematically pluck all the pepperoni slices off of the entire pizza and deposit them into the lid of the box. As he de-meated his pizza, Johnny's thoughts returned to his short puzzling conversation with Lyle. Johnny had about fifty hits of quality blotter in his dorm room at this very moment. It was earmarked for personal use, but there was no reason he couldn't sell some of it to Lyle and see what developed from there. If he hadn't already burned his bridges. Johnny could certainly use the cash, at the very least. His bank account was running dangerously low and there were four days every week without free pizza.

Johnny was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't notice anyone was behind him until an arm reached over his shoulder and claimed a small handful of the unwanted pepperoni. He could feel small breasts against the back of his head. Before he could turn around, the girl had dropped herself into the equally worn armchair opposite him. "Nice shirt," she said with a mouthful of pepperoni.

"People seem to like it," Johnny replied.

"I'm Tinka. You should eat meat, it's good for you."

From the start it was easy to see that Tinka was something of an enigma. Her hair was mostly black, though there were patches of red and blue. It had ribbons and beads knotted randomly into it and, although nearly shoulder length, stood up improbably and stuck out in every direction as though straining with all its will to escape her scalp. She wore a tank top onto which she had marked red "X"s across her breasts in paint that was uncomfortably blood-like in colour. She was wearing big black boots, torn fishnet stockings and a plaid flannel mini-skirt which, given the haphazard way she sat with one leg up on the coffee table, did absolutely nothing to hide her red silk underwear. She played with her hair for a moment before staring directly at Johnny with eyes that blazed from under epicanthic folds, indicating his turn to speak.

"Johnny. And no, it's not."

"Whatever, it's free," Tinka shrugged as she crammed another fistful of pepperoni into her lipsticked mouth.

"You're a physics student?" Johnny asked out loud almost by accident.

She smiled a big carnivorous smile and licked her lips. "I'm not even a student, are you?"

Johnny started to answer but then instead just grinned.

"Listen," Tinka said, jumping up from the chair and grabbing all the remaining pepperoni in her left hand, "if you like free food, meet me at Annesley Hall tomorrow at seven. You can be my date, I gotta jet."

She then took one quick look around and walked quickly to the exit, grabbing the last slice of sausage pizza on her way by. When she was almost to the door, she spun around and yelled: "And dress nice!" at Johnny while back-pedaling. She backed right into a terrified looking physics student in a button-down shirt and glasses. Quickly catching her balance Tinka turned around, winked at the boy and slapped him on the ass on her way out the door.

Johnny just kept grinning, shook his head and set to work on his pizza.

--four--

Johnny was too curious not to show up. He arrived at Annesley Hall at five minutes to seven in the nicest outfit he owned: a slick black three piece suit with a cobalt blue high necked shirt and no tie. He had bought it for his high school formal-- with drug money. Tinka was waiting for him on the stairs. He didn't recognize her at first, but when he did it almost bowled him over. She had transformed from an intimidating Asian punker girl into the most beautiful woman he had ever seen by simply putting on a dress and a hat.

The dress was a long form fitting red silk evening gown with red sequins and the hat was black and feathered and pinned into her hair, which looked downright aristocratic despite the fact that it peeked out wildly in red, black and blue around the edges. She also wore a black mink scarf that would have looked absurd on anyone but her.

Johnny was just about to tell her that she looked amazing, but she beat him to the punch: "Good Evening Dr. Page, you're looking sharp tonight."

"Sorry?" was the only thing Johnny could think of to say.

"You are Dr. Edward Emmanuel Page and I am your wife Bettie," she replied, checking her makeup in a compact mirror.

"Bettie Page?"

"Only by marriage, now come on." She shoved the mirror back into her purse and led him into the building. They ascended the stairs toward the main hall.

"Nice dress," Johnny said from two stairs behind and below Tinka.

"Thanks. Stole it from a costume rental shop." As she said this, Tinka turned and made eye contact with Johnny. It was then that he noticed that her eyes were just as wild and fiery as they had been the day before. It made her look less



like a respectable aristocratic lady and rather quite a bit more like a walking time bomb in an evening gown.

They were at the top of the stairs and Tinka was about to push open the doors to the main hall when Johnny asked: "What's the occasion, anyway?"

"Chemistry Department Faculty Mixer" came the reply and then they were through the doors and inside. There were fifty or sixty people in attendance, mostly wise and friendly looking men in the latter half of their lives wearing old dusty suits with timid wives hanging off of their arms, although there were also a smattering of single men and women in their twenties and thirties. Johnny and Tinka, or Dr. and Mrs. Page, were clearly the youngest people present. The buzz of conversation was maintaining that preternaturally healthy level only attainable when a good-sized group of interesting people are coupled with free alcohol. Tinka liberated two glasses of red wine from a table near the entrance and handed one to Johnny.

Five minutes later, Johnny was at the buffet filling his plate with some of the best vegetarian sushi he had ever tasted and trying to avoid talking to anyone so as not to be caught out. His brain registered something incongruous in his peripheral vision. He turned to see what it was and was surprised by the sight of Lyle talking and gesticulating excitedly at a small group of ageing chemists not twenty feet away. He was dressed much as he had been the day before except that he was wearing a Dead Kennedy's Holiday in Cambodia shirt that didn't expose his nipples. At first Johnny thought that Lyle was intentionally making some sort of scene to disrupt the mixer, but upon looking more closely it became clear that the chemists were not only unoffended by what Lyle was saying, but actually quite interested. Johnny tried but couldn't make out the words from where he was standing. It was then that Lyle noticed Johnny. Their eyes met and Lyle raised his eyebrows briefly while he continued to orate. Johnny had no idea what was going on so he simply smiled and nodded back at Lyle, finished piling futo maki onto his plate and started looking around for Tinka whom he had completely lost track of.

He was still looking when he noticed that Lyle had broken off from his group and seemed to be gravitating in his direction.

"Didn't expect to see you here," Lyle said when he got close enough.

"Me either."

"You didn't expect to see me here, or to see you here?" Lyle asked smiling.

"Take your pick."

Lyle grabbed an avocado roll off of Johnny's plate and popped it in his mouth. He seemed entirely absorbed in his own thoughts as he chewed, as though he had from one instance to the next completely forgotten that Johnny was there. This turned out to be untrue the next moment when Lyle reached for the glass of wine in Johnny's hand, took a generous sip, swallowed and handed the glass back. "Pretty damn good for free food."

"No kidding," Johnny responded guardedly. He couldn't really think of anything better to say since he was half-expecting his mother or some other equally unlikely person to walk through the door at any second. Johnny's mother was in fact in Peterborough making love to Johnny's father at just that moment and

would live the rest of her life without ever setting foot in Annesley hall. So he was okay on that front.

Despite Johnny's obvious disorientation, Lyle kept dragging the conversation along: "That chica is bad news."

Johnny was snapped back into the present by the non sequitur and raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"The Korean girl you came in with", Lyle elaborated, "I've seen her around. She's trouble."

Johnny merely smiled and shrugged: "Whatever". He didn't mind a little trouble. Lyle shrugged as well, as though to say: "I warned you, that's all I can do".

Johnny stopped to take another look around the room. He took in the two lonely looking girls leaning against the drink table. They both had that look in their eyes that said "yeah, I'm a woman in a man's world. What's it to you?" He took in the man in his fifties wearing the baby blue suit who was waving his arms excitedly and talking about Buckminster Fuller as his wife looked on with terminal boredom. Suddenly Johnny realized that, aside from Lyle's presence, this scene was no stranger than any number of others he had been through in his life. Without warning, he hit his social stride and grabbed the conversational bull by the horns: "It wasn't acid that Huxley was talking about in Doors of Perception, it was mescaline."

"I know," said Lyle, "but he talks about acid in Heaven and Hell, and if you've read one, you're going to read the other."

"Yeah, but he also talks about strobe lights in Heaven and Hell."

"I'm not interested in strobe lights. I have a professional interest in acid."

Ah! Johnny's thought, he's a dealer. Maybe the future wasn't as bright as he had first thought. But still, Lyle claimed to be looking for acid. If he was a dealer looking for a new connection there may well be even more money to be made. And at a lower risk.

"Well," Johnny said, "no promises, but if you're still interested I might just be able to help you out."

Lyle had opened his mouth to respond when Tinka's voice suddenly interrupted them: "Come on Doctor, we're leaving."

At the word "Doctor" Lyle raised his eyebrows and smiled. Tinka shot him a look that would have killed a lesser man. He smiled wider, showing his teeth. Tinka began to bodily drag Johnny away. He mouthed "Monday" to Lyle and proceeded to follow Tinka under his own power: "What's the rush?"

"Some old biddy wants to claw my eyes out because she thinks I was flirting with her husband."

"Were you?"

"Irrelevant," she said as they passed the drink table. Tinka let go of Johnny's arm so that she would be able to grab two unopened bottles of wine on the way past. Then they were out the door. Tinka stopped suddenly: "Shit!"

"What's wrong?"

She thrust the bottles into Johnny's hands: "Hold these. Wait Here."

And then she was running back through the doors into the main hall. A moment later she reappeared triumphantly holding a corkscrew. She took his arm and said cheerily "Shall we?"

"Where am I walking you to?" Johnny asked once they were outside.

"Your place," she said, "we're married."

Tinka uncorked one of the bottles on the way and they had finished it by the time they reached Johnny's residence, Tinka drinking more than her share. As Johnny unlocked the door to his room, Tinka said suddenly: "I cast a spell on you this morning."

Caught off guard, Johnny could only ask: "What kind of spell?" as they stepped inside.

"To make you good in bed," she said, kicking the door closed, "It may not have been necessary, but you can never be too careful."

--five--

Johnny woke up to the sound of typing. His first thought was the same as his first thought every morning: "Where am I?" In my room, good. Now who's typing on my computer? The events of the previous night replayed quickly in his mind. Tinka. He opened his eyes: "Whatcha doing?"

She was sitting naked at his desk, the second bottle of wine half-empty between her knees: "Reading your Internet history files."

Like a shot, Johnny was bolt upright in his bed: "What?!"

"Don't get your panties in a bunch," Tinka laughed, "Best way in the world to get to know someone, saves us a lot of trouble. You shouldn't talk about drugs on MSN though, and you certainly shouldn't track your drug-dealing profits in a spreadsheet."

Defensive now, Johnny said: "It's not like I labeled the columns Cocaine and Marijuana."

"Yeah, but what else could it possibly be. Four hundred units at two dollars fifty purchased. Thirty-one units overhead. Three hundred and sixty nine units at five dollars sold. Eight hundred and forty-five dollars gross profits. Good luck convincing a judge you're talking about magazine subscriptions."

"Listen," Johnny said, "I know what I'm doing."

He picked up his pants from the floor and retrieved his cell phone from the pocket, "If I call the phone number for this room..." He did so as he was talking and the phone on the desk started ringing. Tinka reached for it automatically but Johnny stopped her: "Don't answer it"

The phone rang three times and then an answering machine picked up. "I'm not here. You know what to do." said Johnny's voice.

"You hear that?" Johnny said, "That's the computer. The computer answers the land-line and takes messages like an ordinary answering machine, but if I enter an access code," he punched fifteen digits into the keypad of his cell-phone and the computer emitted a single DING, "I get remote access to a special command mode. From this point I can wipe out every file on my hard disk by pressing three buttons." He pressed three buttons and Tinka's eyebrows shot up.

"Those weren't them," Johnny said with a laugh, "that was the exit code."

"Very clever," Tinka congratulated him, "unless the enemy fucks you and then reads your files while you're sleeping"

"It's Canada," Johnny shrugged, "no-one goes to that much effort to put someone like me in jail."

Tinka suddenly started rummaging around on Johnny's floor until she found her handbag. "Here" she said "I'll cast a spell for you. What do you want most in the world?"

"Right now?"

"Yes, right now."

To have a fucking clue what's going on for once, Johnny had to bite his tongue to keep himself from saying. Giving the question a bit more thought he realized he didn't have a clue what he wanted. If he had been answering the question honestly the day before, he might have said sex. That morning though he felt that there was very little he was actually wanting for. Excepting, of course, money. He had known from the day he enrolled that his savings wouldn't carry him through more than a few months. He had been trying out a few leads on some easy money and though promising, they weren't delivering at the rate he had hoped. Right then, Johnny had a lot more than he cared to admit riding on the possibility that he could get back into the acid game. If that fell through, he would find himself in the position before Christmas of having to, for the first time in his life, get a real job.

"It's crass," he admitted to Tinka at last, "but probably money."

Tinka was in the process of pulling things out of her handbag and placing them on Johnny's desk, She stopped and narrowed her eyes at him: "I thought you were a drug dealer."

"You assumed," Johnny said, happy to have some evidence that he wasn't the only person in the world who could be caught off guard.

"Whatever. How much money?"

"Not much. Not like the lottery or anything, you know, just like a steady supply of cash I don't have to work too hard for."

She ripped a sheet of paper out of one of the notebooks on Johnny's desk and began to doodle with a pencil for a few minutes. When at last she was satisfied there was a simple yet evocative glyph drawn in the centre of the page.

"Give me your hand," she said in a suddenly commanding voice as she poured a small pool of white paint onto the corner of his desk from out of a jar that must have come from her bag.

Before he was even aware he was doing so, Johnny had stretched his left hand out towards her. She grabbed a hold of it and slashed across the palm with a knife he hadn't realized she was holding. "FUCK!" he shouted and tried to jerk his hand away but her grip was like iron.

"Jesus," Tinka said, "Don't squirm. It doesn't hurt that much". She was squeezing the blood out of the gash into the pool of paint. Soon there was as much blood as there was paint. She was right. After the shock of being cut, it didn't hurt much at all; it almost felt good. Tinka squeezed a few more drops from his hand and let go. She began stirring the paint and the blood together with a tiny paintbrush she had produced seemingly from thin air. As she was doing so she picked up Johnny's black binder from beside the desk. "Do you usually carry this with you?" she asked.

"Yes" Johnny said almost absentmindedly as he held his left hand in his right and stared absorbedly at the wound. The blood started to run down his arm and he groped around on the floor until he found a sock with which to stop the flow.

"Good" she said and she painted the same glyph she had drawn on the paper onto the front of his binder. The brush strokes looked like Chinese calligraphy and the glyph itself was in a pink-brown colour that was strangely vibrant, as though the blood had brought it to life. When she was done Tinka placed the binder on the desk to dry, leaned back and looked pleased with herself.

"That's all there is too it?" Johnny asked "Don't we have to dance around like electric monkeys, burn a bunch of candles or chant some incantations or something?"

Tinka shot him a look that refused to even acknowledge what he had just said: "The spell is ready. This glyph is your hope, your desire, and its potential fulfilment. Now you must memorize it. Learn its every feature. Notice every detail of every brush stroke."

Unexpectedly, Tinka's handbag beeped. She smiled and swept her possessions off of Johnny's desk and back into her bag, Standing up, she retrieved her evening gown from off the floor and slipped it on over her head, leaving the zipper up the back undone. She crammed the hat into her bag with the rest of her stuff, mangling it horribly in the process. "Ten o'clock," she said, "I am needed elsewhere." She glanced briefly at her reflection in the tiny mirror on Johnny's wall and frowned. Plucking his Doors shirt from off the floor and putting it on over her dress she asked: "mind if I borrow this?"

Johnny hardly had time to say "go ahead" before, with a smile and a wink, she was gone.

--six--

That evening Johnny was in his 8pm calculus tutorial when his cell phone began to vibrate in his pants. Surreptitiously leaving the room he checked the call display: 'number blocked'.

"Hello?" Johnny answered the phone as he leaned up against the wall outside the men's room.

"Johnny!" the voice at the other end called out excitedly against the too loud music in the background, "It's good to hear your voice man!"

"Who is this?" Johnny asked, his paranoid streak urging him to hang up immediately.

"I'm hurt Johnny. Really, I'm hurt. It's Ivan, you little son of a bitch! Oh such a sad thing that I should be forgotten so soon. Put your evil ways behind you have you? Livin' the straight life now? No time for your old ne'er-do-well friends?"

Johnny was surprised despite himself. "Ivan," Johnny said with real happiness in his voice, "I was just going to call you myself."

"From you Johnny, I'd almost believe it. Doesn't matter though, only one thing matters now: I'm at the Beagle and while I might be able to finish this pitcher by myself, I certainly can't manage the other one I just ordered without a little help."

"The Beagle?" Johnny asked.

"Yeah. Jeez kid, don't you live here? Get with the times. The Regal Beagle, Bloor and Huron. Should I expect you in five or do I have to make this here waitress drink with me? She's cute, you might like her... yeah love, you'll like him too. Scrappy little skater kid, little on the short side maybe but he--"

"Alright Ivan, for fuck's sake," Johnny cut him off, "I'm on my way!"

###

The jukebox was playing some hip-hop song Johnny had never heard when he arrived. He spotted Ivan right off. At six foot four he was easy to pick out of the crowd. It also didn't hurt that he had all three on duty waitresses at his table dancing and singing along to the chorus with him. Johnny leaned against the pay-phones and smiled as he watched his friend forge on solo into the second verse. By the time Ivan noticed Johnny the chorus had come back around again. He smiled widely, showing his perfect teeth, and waved. Johnny raised his eyebrows at his friend and started across the pub to his table.

"Johnny," Ivan bellowed enthusiastically, hugging him and slapping him too hard on the back with his tremendous Russian hands, "I want you to meet Megan and Wendy and that's Anna scampering back over behind the bar to get a drink for that customer. Such a responsible and friendly girl."

Johnny said hello to Megan and Wendy but didn't get a chance to say any more before Ivan asked them to let him speak privately with Johnny. Amazingly, he did so in such a way that it came off as though he were paying them the largest of compliments by asking them to leave. By the time Johnny pulled out a chair and sat in it Ivan had already poured him a pint.

"Happy birthday!" he shouted jovially.

"It's not my birthday," Johnny said, "I've never told you my birthday. I never tell anyone my birthday."

"I've noticed that Johnny. But now I have an arm up on everyone else who doesn't know your birthday. I know one day that it's not. Knowledge is power my friend, and power is money, girls, freedom and beer. And more knowledge, power is also more knowledge. Kinda like perpetual motion if you think about it."

"It's a leg up Ivan. You have a leg up on them not an arm up."

"That's what I said," Ivan agreed as he raised his glass, "a leg up. A toast: to tomorrow, your birthday."

Johnny smiled, clinked glasses and drank. After a long draw from the pint, he set it back down on the table and asked: "so who are you running from that you ended up here, Ivan?"

Ivan made a grand show of being offended: his eyebrows shot up and his jaw dropped to fantastic effect as he visibly drew back from the table.

"Running, Johnny? I never run. If you ever need to run you have waited far too long to make your exit. I always leave myself ample time to stroll away casually and even stop for a butt at the corner if I feel so inclined. Run!?" he said again with a huff, "I can't believe you think so poorly of me after all this time, Johnny! After all I've done for you!"

It looked like Johnny was going to be looking for a new connection if he wanted to get back into the acid business. It was a shame. Ivan was a real card and more than a little random, but he was a paragon of dependability when considered against his peers in the drug world.

"And what about-- My god what happened to your hand?" Ivan exclaimed.

Johnny looked down at his hand. Now that he looked at it, it was actually pretty gruesome. "A girl cut me."

Ivan laughed. "Still the ladies man, eh? So tell me what have you been doing in this city Johnny-Boy? Give me the real scoop, the dirt."

"I'm a student, Ivan. I'm getting my degree one slow expensive step at a time."

"Yes yes, of course you are. And then you're getting a wife and a mortgage and a steady job doing something perfectly legal and boring. Don't give me that party line kid. What are you doing for MONEY?"

"Well," Johnny said, preparing to talk shop and enjoy it, "I've been starting to get into gambling a little lately."

"That's my boy!" Ivan exclaimed slapping the table, "Gambling, eh? That's a tricky one. Hard to keep a clientele at a back alley establishment when the Man is setting up card houses with the official pat and nod on every other corner." Johnny made to interrupt but Ivan waved a hand at him and sat thinking for a moment before his eyes lit up. "Of course! You live in a residence! It's a captive market, and I bet they're all suckers too. What's the game? Craps? No, not enough skill involved, if you don't give them rope they can't hang themselves, right Johnny? I know, blackjack. It's blackjack, right?"

Johnny was shaking his head and smiling. "No, Ivan. Pro-Line."

"Pro-Line!?" Ivan was visibly appalled. "Pro-Line!? You're playing the fucking lottery? You're playing AGAINST the house? Haven't you read 'The Gambler'? Didn't Dostoyevsky say: Be the house or don't play the game?"

"Think about it Ivan," Johnny said, sipping from his beer, "What's the big difference between Pro-Line and the lotto? Or between Pro-Line and craps for that matter? The odds are fluid. The Pro-Line guys don't know what the actual chances are of the Sharks beating the Jets. There's too many factors: Maybe the goalie was out drinking too much the night before. Maybe one of the players is dating the referee's ex-wife. Who knows? All they can do is make an educated guess."

"You're trying to out-guess them on the statistics, man? That's a losing game. Those guys rake in a ton of cash for doing what they do. They have those jobs because they're the best at it. Besides, they always leave themselves a big margin for error. You're throwing your money away Johnny, throwing your money away."

"Yeah, but no matter how good a job the Pro-Line guys are doing, there are guys in Monaco, Antigua and Vegas who are doing it better. Pro-Line locks its odds twelve hours in advance. Then all you have to do is run a script that grabs the most up-to-date world-wide odds off the Internet and bet on the discrepancies."

Ivan was rapt. "Where do you get the script from?"

Johnny smiled. "I wrote it myself. Simplest thing in the world. Less than a hundred lines of code. It's running back in my room right now."

Ivan looked impressed. He reached across the table and tried to tousle Johnny's hair. Johnny leaned back expertly. Standing up and putting money down on the table, Ivan asked: "So this really works then? It's fool-proof? You're making money?"

"I'm making money, but slowly. Like you said, they leave themselves a pretty good margin so you can only really bet on the big anomalies and you're lucky if they turn up more than once or twice a week. And they limit bets to twenty bucks so it's not really scalable because you can't automate it and you have to run around to all these different convenience stores buying four or five tickets for each game. Not to mention that it's still a matter of playing the odds. I can skew the odds in my favour, but still; you win some, you lose some. You said it best: it's still the fucking lotto."

"That's pretty clever," Ivan said as he led Johnny out of the Beagle and over to a ludicrously large grey pick-up truck with farm plates, "but you're going about it all wrong--"

"This is your truck?" Johnny interrupted as Ivan pulled two parking tickets out from under the windshield wiper and tossed them in the gutter.

"Long-term loan from a friend who owed me a few more favours than he could easily return," Ivan said. "Get in."

Ivan turned the key in the ignition and the truck roared to life like an entire pack of angry diesel-powered wolves. He pulled out on to Bloor and continued talking as he drove: "Like I was saying, you've got a good idea here with this Pro-Line thing, but you've got the completely wrong attitude. You've got to cut the rope at its weakest link."



"Chain," Johnny corrected politely.

"Right. Like I said, you've got to cut the chain at the weakest link. You can't scale up when you're trying to fleece Pro-Line directly, but there's an even easier mark in the system. You've got to go right for Joe six-pack hockey fan. All you need to do is set your discrepancies up on a recorded 1-900 number which dumps its profits into an anonymous Swiss account, charge a buck a call, and get some good advertising out through the right channels. Bingo: reliable, scalable income. If there's one thing I learned in Russia, it's the value of reaching out to the common man."

"Bullshit," Johnny declared, "you've never been to Russia."

"Sure I have," Ivan said, looking offended, "my parents sent me there for a year when I was fifteen to straighten me out."

"Did it work?"

Ivan laughed. "Where do you think I met all my contacts?"

Ivan had stopped the truck. They were pulled off to the side of Wellesley Road.

"You see what I'm saying though Johnny? You have to find the weak point and go for it. You've got the eye. You see the opportunities but you haven't learnt to consider all the factors yet." He opened his door and got out. "All right, it's your turn to drive."

"I don't have a license," Johnny objected.

"And I'm drunk," Ivan said, "besides, if we get pulled over, that's the least of our worries."

Reluctantly Johnny slid over into the driver's seat and took control of the beast. He hadn't driven in three years and then it had been his father's little Mazda. As he released the clutch and pressed down on the gas, the response was downright intimidating. Once he got the truck started though, Johnny quickly grew comfortable with its power. He had never been a big fan of driving, but there was something about controlling this much machine that stirred up a feeling of car fetishism in Johnny that he hadn't known existed.

Ivan was silent as they drove. Johnny glanced over and noticed that he had pulled a very large bag of weed out of his bag and was rolling a joint. Right, don't get pulled over. Ivan lit the joint and opened the window. After a moment he tried to pass it to Johnny. The ember was burning bright in the wind.

Johnny shook his head. "You know I don't smoke."

Ivan withdrew his hand. In his peripheral vision Johnny could see him take a pull from the joint and shrug. "Solzhenitsyn famously said, 'There's a first time for everything'," Ivan said, "but suit yourself."

Be that as it may, the first time had actually been some time ago. Johnny had sampled most types of narcotics at one point or another in his misspent youth and he hadn't passed over marijuana while he was doing the rounds. It wasn't that he had anything against pot, or any other organic drug, per se. It just turned out that God wasn't as good at making drugs as chemists were.

Shortly after finishing the joint, Ivan tapped Johnny on the shoulder and pointed across the road to a Coffee Time. Johnny pulled the truck into the parking lot and cut the ignition. The three hundred and fifty horses under the hood began to cool down and throw off steam. As he got out of the truck, Johnny noticed for the first time something rather largish in the bed of the truck underneath a waterproof tarp. He said nothing and followed Ivan into the coffee shop.

After they had ordered their coffees and found a seat Johnny made a quick look around to make sure no-one was near enough to easily overhear their conversation before saying, "I really was going to call you, Ivan"

"Yeah buddy, don't worry about it. We'll be seeing each other a lot now I think, no? I'm not worried about it. Don't you be."

"That's not it. I need a connection."

Ivan smiled a knowing smile, "What kind of connection?"

"Blotter."

Ivan knotted his brow a little before answering "for personal?"

"No, to move."

"Jesus fuck man, don't you read the news?"

Johnny didn't; he cocked his head and waited for Ivan to go on.

"Three major acid factories were shut down in Canada in as many months. The feds hit the Vancouver shop in July, Montreal in August and then last month they raided a production house in Regina I didn't even know existed. Same thing's happening in the States right now. And for some reason they're working their way down."

"Working their way down?" Johnny asked incredulously.

"Yeah man, I know. I don't know why they suddenly care about the little fish but word has it they're working their way through the entire list of clients and going after every single one. Everyone who's not already locked up has taken to the ground. I can get you acid if you want it, but it'll be coming via the Netherlands and it'll cost you twenty bucks a hit. Wholesale."

"For fuck's sake man! And you didn't think I'd want to know this a month ago?"

"You would have known it three months ago if you had stopped to take a fucking look at the world around you. Besides, you're in the safety zone. They can't get at you until they have me and you can rest assured that I am doing abso-fucking-lutely everything in my power to keep myself out of their hands. Take a look at this."

Ivan slid a passport across the table. Johnny picked it up and opened it.

"Ivan Milanov? Peters wasn't Russian enough for you?"

"There's no crime in being proud of your ancestry, Johnny. Eastern Europeans have a noble history. Besides I would have been Ivan Petrov if my father hadn't been scared of persecution during the Cold War. But I wanted to know what you thought of the manufacture, not the content."

"It seems ridiculously good. I'm not a border guard, but I sure as hell couldn't tell it's a fake."

"Yeah that's what I thought. You should have seen the guy who made it for me. He was a fucking amateur with access to good equipment. Colour laser printers man. Gone are the days when it took a printing press, a dark room and years of experience to open a forging shop. Those things only cost like eight grand, absolute top of the line. The only catch is that they document the fuck out of anyone who buys one."

"Why not just steal one then?" Johnny joked.

Ivan smiled, "Johnny, you're a fucking genius. That's exactly what I'm talking about."

"So you're going to go into the forgery business then?"

"Fuck no; that's a fools vocation. Remember what I said about finding the weakest link, Johnny? The sweetest spot? Why would you settle for printing and selling a commodity like passports when you're equipped to just straight-up print money. Cut out the fucking middle-man."

"You're crazy Ivan. You can't just print money on a laser printer, man. The mint prints it on some crazy cotton paper that they make themselves and don't let anyone else use. Anything else just doesn't feel like money."

Ivan smiled, "have you ever accidentally washed an American one dollar bill with bleach?"

Johnny looked confused for a second before Ivan continued, "It's a rhetorical question. Wrong kind of bleach anyway."

He reached into his pocket, the same one the passport had come from, and drew out a piece of paper which he handed to Johnny. Johnny rubbed it between his fingers and held it up to the coffee shop's flickering fluorescent light. It was the same shape and weight as an American bill. It felt just like money and had all the little coloured fibers but it was completely blank.

"It started its life as a lowly 1973 one-dollar bill. With a little help from me, it might one day better its station by a factor of a hundred."

"Counterfeiting doesn't exactly sound like keeping a low profile to me, Ivan."

"It would be a bad move for Ivan Peters the known narcotics trafficker, true. But Ivan Milanov hasn't committed any crimes yet but theft, and no-one knows that but me and you."

The puzzle pieces clattered noisily into place in Johnny's head. "That's a colour laser printer under the tarp in the back of that truck, isn't it?"

Ivan smiled.

"You robbed a fucking Future Shop didn't you?"

"Hey," Ivan said, frowning for half a second, "keep your voice down."

"Whatever you say, just don't land ME in prison." Johnny played with his empty coffee cup for a minute. "So there's no-one supplying acid locally?"

"Not that I know of, but whoever breaks radio silence first stands to make a lot of money; captive market and all."

Half an hour later, Ivan was dropping Johnny off in front of his residence building.

"Thanks man. Stay out of trouble," Johnny said as he got out of the truck.

"I will, and think about that Pro-Line thing. We could be partners."

"Sure thing."

As Johnny was walking away, Ivan called out to him. "Hey Johnny, I'll be in touch. I don't know shit about computers and I'm gonna need some help getting this thing set up."

Johnny turned back and laughed, "I charge thirty bucks an hour."

Ivan smiled, gave Johnny the finger and peeled off. When Johnny got to his room he noticed that a red Mandelbrot set had been painted on his door while he was out. He had never understood why people bothered rendering fractals in print or paint. The second you locked them into a static medium they ceased to be interesting. He touched the paint and looked at his finger. Still wet.

In his room he pulled the half sheet of acid out from where he kept it hidden between pages 102 and 103 of Crime and Punishment. As Raskolnikov noted that the blood was gushing from Alyonya's head as from an overturned glass, Johnny considered that it might be a very long time before he could get his hands on any more LSD. He tore ten hits off of the sheet and shoved it into his wallet for personal use. He tore off another five and tucked it into his psychology textbook. The remaining thirty-five he placed carefully back into Crime and Punishment, once again interrupting Raskolnikov's panicked dash into Alyonya's bedroom.

--seven--

The next day his hand hurt like hell. It was fine when he wasn't using it for anything, but as soon as he flexed it even the slightest bit fire shot through it. Johnny skateboarded south through lysergic streets.

In any high school computer class there will be about half a dozen students who know much more than their teacher ever will. These students come in two varieties. The first variety can't resist an opportunity to demonstrate how smart they are. They quickly earn the animosity of the teacher and usually do poorly in the class. Not so poorly that they could bring the teacher's objectivity into question, just poorly enough to clearly give them the message that, no matter how clever they were, the teacher was still the one in charge. The second variety of student is the type who knows when to keep their mouth shut. They invariably finish at the top of the class. In a university class,

there are fewer of these students, but they still come in the same two varieties. Johnny was of the second type. In fact, he knew so well how to keep his mouth shut that he rarely even went to class.

He reached the harbour just as his 11 a.m. algorithms class was starting. As the professor wrote "Basic Recursion" on the blackboard Johnny was dangling his legs off the end of the ferry dock, As the professor asked in his ironic drone whether or not anyone in the class could define "recursion," Johnny was placing two hits of acid under his tongue and then lying on his back and squinting at the sky. Ten minutes later, when one of the students was pointing out that the example on the board was missing a semi-colon, Johnny was reaching into his pocket for the inevitable "good measure dose". The acid hadn't begun to take effect yet and he began to become concerned that he hadn't taken enough. In all rationality Johnny knew that he hadn't given it nearly enough time yet to manifest and that he did this every time, but he placed two more hits under his tongue anyway... for good measure.

Another ten minutes passed: still nothing. But Johnny knew better than to get anxious; he turned his attention to the sound of the waves and the boats. Blotter acid usually has an onset of about twenty minutes but it can sometimes take almost an hour to wind its horrible way to the brain. At ten to noon, as the professor was writing that weeks programming assignment on the board, the clouds began to breathe in time with the rushing of the waves.

There really is no such thing as good or bad LSD. There are only three kinds of acid: cheap acid, expensive acid and not really acid at all. There are so few substances that are active enough for an effective dose to be stored in a square centimetre of card paper that it was virtually guaranteed that if it was LSD at all, it was pure LSD. The trouble was that a 'hit' was really a very arbitrary and meaningless quantity. Most kinds of acid these days were double hitters. This meant that you had to take at least two hits to get high. Expensive. As the crests of the waves began to blur together and form recognizable patterns, Johnny remembered how inexpensive this particular blotter was and began to regret those second two hits.

Shortly past twelve, when all four hits had sunk their alkaloid claws into Johnny's brain, he decided that he didn't trust himself so close to the water. He walked up the street to a park that hadn't been there that morning. It was the size of someone's front yard but contained a primordial boreal forest with dragonflies the size of ravens and butterflies the size of, well, improbably large butterflies. Johnny started trying to climb one of the trees but the more he climbed, the more the tree seemed to stretch out above him. Each branch became a full-fledged tree in its own right. The tree itself had become the entire world. Momentarily terrified, Johnny jumped from the tree, unconcerned about the height from which he would fall. Based on the impact his feet made with the ground, it was only about four feet. He lost his balance and fell onto his back anyway. One of the tremendous butterflies alighted on his chest, practically crushing him. It considered him briefly with its insectoid eyes before taking off again. As it did so, the wind from its wings buffeted Johnny's face, forcing him to close his eyes.

When he opened them again, Johnny realized that he had left his skateboard at the pier. He decided to go back for it. He never reached the pier yet somehow, moments later, when he was lying in the sun, he had his board with him again. He had his eyes closed because was concerned that his time perception had dilated to the point where he might stare into the sun for hours without realizing it. He was terrified that his eyelids might raise against his will so he squeezed

them closed with all his might and held his left arm across his face just in case. He knew for a fact that the "college kid stares into the sun while on acid and goes permanently blind" story was a myth, but his perception of reality had opened the gates to all sorts of non-existent things, so it was hardly in poor company.

"You're fucked up man," Tinka said. Johnny raised his arm and opened one eye. She was standing over him wearing his Doors t-shirt. She had it tied up in a knot at the side, exposing her stomach. She was also wearing a pair of pink sunglasses with lenses the size of dinner plates and Johnny strongly suspected that she might be about to feed him more acid. He tried not to show his fear.

"Go away, I'm sleeping."

"You took too much Johnny boy, you took too much. You should see your pupils. I can see your brain through them."

"Where did you come from," Johnny asked, since Tinka apparently remained unconvinced he was sleeping, "How did you find me?"

Tinka idly kicked him lightly in the ribs a few times and then scratched the side of her nose. "I stopped by your room and you weren't there. The guy across the hall said you had come stumbling in about half an hour ago, yelled something about a jungle and your skateboard, knocked around for a few minutes making a lot of noise and then left again. He said you left out the east door. You didn't get very far."

Johnny looked in the direction Tinka indicated and saw the east door of his residence about ten meters away on the other side of a chain link fence. The fence had one of his shoes stuck on top of it. He glanced down at his feet and was happy to see the other shoe still on his left foot. He looked back up at Tinka one last time and decided to make her go away. He closed his eyes and put his arm back over his face.

Tinka kicked him hard in the ribs. He winced but didn't open his eyes until he felt the tremendous rush of wind from her drawing her leg back for another swing.

"I'm fine," Johnny said, "I've done this before. I know how to take care of myself."

"I know you do. But it's starting to rain and I want to fuck." He felt a big drop of water hit his forehead. She was right. Johnny pulled himself to his feet, blinked a few times and looked at Tinka as though she had just appeared out of nowhere.

"Oh, hello," he said.

"Yes. Hello. Let's go." She began to lead him east across the soccer field he hadn't realized he was lying on.

"Where are we going?" Johnny asked looking back over his shoulder at his receding residence building.

"My place," Tinka replied. She has a 'place'? Johnny wondered to himself. Then he noticed for the first time that Tinka was holding his black binder in her hand. She noticed the direction of his gaze.

"I grabbed it from your room," she said handing it to him, "the door was unlocked."

Johnny looked at the binder as he walked, studying the glyph she had painted on it.

"Have you internalized it yet?" she asked.

"Yes," Johnny lied.

"Good."

They were walking under a sandstone archway. There were thousands of names carved in the stone. Johnny stopped to read them. His name was on the list; so was Lyle's. Lyle Melville. Johnny hadn't known that was his name until just then. He looked up. "These brave men gave their lives to defend their country, their family and their way of life" the plaque told him. Surprised he looked back at his and Lyle's names but they were gone. I'm going to die, Johnny thought. He slumped against the stone, clawing upwards with one hand, his nails digging into the grooves of PFC Edward Winstone.

Tinka grabbed him by the belt. "Get a grip on yourself."

She dragged him through the archway and into Hart House. Hart House was the U of T student centre and one of the oldest buildings on campus. It housed a library, two cafeterias, a gymnasium, a theatre and a labyrinth of twisting and turning corridors and tunnels, most of which were sealed off from the public. Tinka dragged Johnny down into the basement lunchroom (completely separate from the two cafeterias). There were three long tables, and half a dozen vending machines in the room. There were two exits: the corridor from which they had come and a door with an electronic keypad lock. Tinka shoved him into a seat while she peered through the window of the locked door. When she was satisfied that there was no-one on the other side, she punched six buttons on the keypad and pushed the door open. Grabbing Johnny by the collar, she pulled him through the door. They turned almost immediately down a side passageway where Tinka pulled open another, unlocked, door. Down a dark, narrow staircase, through an even darker, narrower corridor she led him. Without warning, Tinka stopped. On their right there were a few ladder rungs set into the wall. They led up through a hatch in the ceiling.

Johnny watched with passive interest as Tinka disappeared through the hatch. He leaned his back against the wall opposite the ladder, looked lazily down the corridor to his left, then his right, and slumped down to the floor. He closed his eyes and found himself flying forward through a fractal galaxy of bright red stars. Johnny was skidding and spinning along his second iteration of the Julia set when Tinka calling his name jolted his eyes open.

"Johnny, don't flake out on me!" She was beckoning him up the ladder. Reluctantly he climbed to his feet and started his way up the rungs. Tinka closed the hatch behind him, leaving them in total darkness. She pulled him close and kissed him.

"Me, Johnny! I'm here. I'm real."

With a click there was a beam of light in Tinka's hand. They were standing in an extremely cramped hallway running perpendicular to the corridor they had just left. The walls were covered in dust and there were oak doors every three or four meters on both sides. Each door had a thick iron padlock on it. There was a

faint smell of books and mildew in the air. As she led him down to the hallway, Tinka shone the flashlight on the tiny plaque on each door in turn. 1942 said the first plaque; 1943 said the second.

"Archives," Tinka said. 1946... 1947... "We're underneath the library right now. I went up there and checked once. I found the spot by feeling through the carpet with my feet. Are you listening to me Johnny? Stay with me. When I found what I was looking for, I cut a small hole in the carpet between two shelves and peeled it back. Sure enough, there's a trapdoor into each one of these rooms." 1954... 1955... "The carpet looks about thirty years old. I don't know if anyone even remembers these exist."

They had stopped in front of 1960, the last door in the row. The lock on it was new and made of steel and copper. The name Black and Decker was etched on its face. Tinka looked at Johnny, smiled, reached up into a tiny nook above the door, and produced a key.

"I don't know why there are no records of 1960," Tinka said as the door swung inwards, "so don't ask."

She flipped a switch and a small table lamp came on, illuminating a cubical stone chamber three meters on a side. The lamp was sitting on a desk fashioned of milk crates and plugged into an extension cord. The extension cord had been poorly spliced into a bundle of cables and wires that ran along the ceiling nearest the door. In the centre of the ceiling was an oak hatch with an iron ring affixed to it. A steel pipe had been run through the centre of the ring and sloppily bolted into the ceiling on either side.

Tinka followed Johnny's gaze. "Just in case," she said.

Also plugged in to the extension cord were a small am/fm radio, an air filtration system (which Tinka had just turned on) and a space heater. The wall opposite the door was occupied entirely by a red mural of a Mandelbrot set. There was a bookshelf on Johnny's right so full it spilled out into disorderly piles on the floor and on his left, next to the desk, there was a single futon mattress spread out on the floor with black satin sheets and a red felt blanket. Most of the rest of the floor space was consumed by milk crates and cardboard boxes filled with random detritus. In one of the far corners there were two lawn chairs. Tinka pulled the door shut behind them and fastened the padlock to an obviously jury-rigged setup on the inside. People had never been meant to lock themselves in.

"Make yourself at home," Tinka said as she lit two red candles.

Johnny looked at the lawn chairs, decided not to risk the journey through the sea of boxes and sat down instead on the mattress. Affixed to the wall above the bed was an analog clock and a photograph of Tinka and a man who looked about five years her senior. Tinka was wearing a black mesh shirt in the photo through which her nipples could clearly be seen. She was sticking out her tongue, thumbing her nose and hanging off the man's arm. The man was Korean also, and was wearing a sharp black suit with a white shirt and blue tie. His hair was slicked back and he was staring out of the photo with the sort of penetrating gray eyes that Johnny had thought only existed on posters for detective movies.

"Brother?" Johnny asked, turning his head just in time to see Tinka pulling off her shirt.



"No," she replied, pushing him down onto his back and climbing on top of him, "fiancee."

Johnny drifted in and out of reality as they made love. One moment he was sweating and squirming in a forgotten archives chamber and the next he was spiraling through a kaleidoscope landscape of his mind. Just as he was about to reach orgasm, Tinka grabbed him by the hair and pulled his head back hard. "Now," she commanded. "The glyph. Project it."

Johnny did the best he could given the circumstances.

--eight--

Johnny awoke to the most utter blackness he could remember experiencing. There is a tiny claustrophobe hiding inside of every person and the one in Johnny was threatening to start pumping his lungs. Quickly he reached behind his head to where he vaguely remembered there being a lamp. After a few seconds of fumbling he managed to turn it on.

The room burst into light. Sitting up, he took in his surroundings. At least that much of what he remembered from the previous night seemed to correspond to reality. Night? The sun had still been high when Tinka had found him. He could only have been four or five hours into his trip. There is no way he should have been able to sleep. "Here. Swallow this," his memory provided. A pill! Had he been poisoned? He patted his chest and stomach with both hands as though that would give him a clue. No, it suddenly occurred to him; not poisoned, sedated. Remembering a clock, he looked up. To its face there was affixed a note:

Johnny,  
be gone  
by dawn.  
Take the note with you.  
-Tinka

Detaching the note from the face of the clock, Johnny learnt that it was three o'clock (in the morning he could only assume). Johnny looked again at the picture next to the clock and in a moment of uncharacteristic jealousy wanted to leave the note behind so that the man in the picture might find it. This urge passed and he gathered his skateboard from the floor and his binder from what passed for a desk. He looked around once more before leaving and resisted the temptation to rifle through Tinka's things. He pushed open the door and was surprised to find that it did in fact open up onto an extremely narrow passage with an identical doorway proclaiming 1959 directly across the way. In his mental separation of the previous day's reality from delusion, he had filed the fact that Tinka lived in the forgotten archives of the Hart House library firmly under the delusion column. Closing the door behind himself, Johnny was once again plunged into pure darkness. He reconsidered, re-opened the door and rifled through Tinka's things just enough to find a working flashlight. Not surprisingly it seemed that she kept several scattered around the room.

Back in the corridor, Johnny noticed that Tinka had left the padlock hanging open from the locking ring on the outside of the door. For a brief panicked moment Johnny considered how easy it would have been for her to lock him in. He locked the door behind himself. He found the trapdoor without trouble and lowered himself down into the hallway.

Johnny couldn't for the life of him remember how they had gotten here from the lunchroom. Well, there were only two choices. Choosing the wrong one, Johnny found himself, after several twists and turns, at a dead end. Actually, the end wasn't entirely dead. There was a steel door plastered with warnings which said "Keep out" and "Authorized Personal Only" and "Danger: High Pressure Steam." There was a wheel set into the middle of the door. Johnny had heard of the abandoned steam tunnels which connected together the oldest buildings of the University. Apparently students had been using them for years to sneak into buildings after hours and cause trouble. Surely there couldn't be another set of steam tunnels still in use. Of course, it wasn't worth the possibility of being scalded to death to find out. Still, Johnny's curiosity overrode his caution; he found himself turning the wheel.

Some people remember the onset of their first acid trip as a moment when their lives changed forever. Johnny had never had a very good memory and honestly couldn't remember his first acid trip. He would however always remember the moment that he lifted aside the manhole in the Medical Sciences Building's parking lot and emerged, one shoe short of a pair, into the pre-dawn rain as a moment where his life took a very important turn. Not that anything momentous happened just then, but it was an instant when Johnny could very easily have felt uncomfortable, lost and confused. It would have been very simple for him to decide that these new things and people he was getting himself involved with were just too strange. Instead he lay down in the asphalt water and laughed.

--nine--

On Monday, Lyle was visibly excited when Johnny slipped him the five hits of blotter during break.

"How much do I owe you?"

Johnny hadn't really considered that. Usually he would charge twenty-five bucks for five hits; twenty for a friend. But the news of acid's scarcity threw a whole new spin on the situation.

"Fifty bucks."

"Yeah sure, no problem." Lyle said as he scrounged in his pockets. He immediately produced two twenties, patted his other pockets hopefully and only came up with another four dollars in change.

"I'm going to have to owe you six dollars," he said, "or maybe I can--"

"Don't worry about it," Johnny said, taking the two bills, "forty is fine."

Lyle thanked him and looked more closely at the blotter. It was older stuff, from Vancouver according to Ivan. Only in Vancouver would they put little pictures of pot leaves on blotting paper. They couldn't abide having anything that could potentially be marijuana themed, not be. Not even other drugs.

"I don't know if I'll be able to get more," Johnny volunteered after a moment, "I mean I can try, but no promises."

"Oh, that's fine. I shouldn't need anymore." After a moment Lyle asked, "how much LSD is on these?"

"Huh? There's one hit on each square."

"Yeah," Lyle persisted, "One hit. But how much is a hit? How many micrograms?"

"Fucked if I know. Do you want me to call the lab?"

"Could you?"

Johnny almost laughed, then caught himself. For a second it seemed that Lyle might actually be serious, but finally he grinned. Johnny grinned back.

"Seriously though," Lyle said, "you have no contact whatsoever with the guys who make these?"

"No way, man. There are at least three people between me and the guy in the lab coat. I know it comes from BC, that's it." Johnny recalled what Ivan had told him about the cops working their way down from the labs to the street pushers. "And personally, I like it that way."

Lyle coughed and finished his cigarette. He looked like he had about a million things he wanted to say, and even more questions he wanted to ask, but instead: "We should get back in side before Mohammed starts without us."

###

After the lecture Johnny introduced Lyle to free pizza in the Physics building. Over a tomato and mushroom pizza that the other students seemed too intimidated to ask for any of, Lyle asked Johnny if, now don't be offended, he had much experience with drug dealing.

"I might know my way around the business," Johnny said guardedly. Every piece of information Lyle let slip seemed to contradict the last.

"You see," Lyle went on, "I'm thinking of getting into it myself, but I don't know where to start."

"Well," Johnny said, "There really is only one place to start. First you need some drugs."

Lyle unzipped one of the many zippers on his pants. This one seemed to actually lead into a pocket from which he drew a vial with a small amount white powder in the bottom. He handed it to Johnny. "Do you know what this is?"

Johnny looked at the vial. It contained some sort of chemical salt. It lacked the yellow tinge common to street grade crystal methamphetamine. Its consistency was very even, but the granularity was not so fine as to be dusty; that contraindicated heroin and cocaine, but didn't rule them out completely. The most likely alternatives were ketamine or PCP. Of course, baking soda was also a solid possibility.

"I haven't a clue," Johnny said at last, handing the vial back to Lyle.

"It's LSD," Lyle said.

Johnny shook his head. "You got ripped off, man. No one sells acid in crystals; that's PCP. Did you buy it in Quebec? They sell PCP as everything. Hell, they'd sell it as aspirin if they thought they could turn a profit."

Lyle changed the subject. "How are things going with Tinka?"

"They're going fine, why?"

"Just wondering. In the interest of full disclosure I should let you know that her and I had a bit of a thing together last year."

"Yeah," Johnny asked, curious despite himself, "what happened?"

"She went insane. Or rather she stayed insane. Be careful, if you don't keep her at a safe distance she'll be the death of you."

Lyle stood up from the armchair and stretched his arms. Then he looked again at the vial in his hand as though he had forgotten it.

"By the way," he said, "I didn't buy it. I synthesized it. This is zero point one two five grams of lysergic acid diethylamide-25 in a tartaric salt."

Johnny felt his jaw go slack. He tried to pull it back up into his face, but it wasn't responding. He stared Lyle in the eyes. Lyle simply returned Johnny's gaze and cocked his head slightly to one side as he stood next to his chair and waited for a response. Finally, Johnny found his voice. "Maybe we had better talk about this somewhere else."

###

"That's enough fucking acid to kill a horse!" Johnny exclaimed in his dorm room, the door tightly locked.

"Don't think I don't know it," Lyle said, "I've read Dr. Hoffman's book too, you know. By the way, do you mind if I put this in your fridge? It's unstable at warm temperatures. I don't like even having it out of the freezer this long, but I wanted to show you."

Without waiting for a reply, Lyle pulled open Johnny's bar fridge and deposited the small vial between the beer and the soy-milk.

"If you've got that much LSD," Johnny asked, exasperated, "what the fuck are you doing buying it off of me for ten bucks a hit?"

"I want to run some tests on it. See what the quality is, what the dosage is. You know, see what I'm up against."

"Alright, you'd better explain everything to me right now. Make like you're the villain in a god damned Bond flick."

"Not much to tell," Lyle said, "I'm working on my chemistry PhD. You knew that, right?"

"How would I know that? Keep talking."

"Well, I've got a research position under a senile bore who hasn't done any real work since the seventies. My job is to look busy so he can keep getting grant money. Between that and the time I get as instructor for Chem 130, I have a hell of a lot of unsupervised access to the labs."

"As instructor?"

"Yeah. It's such a shitty job none of the real profs will take it. It's taught by PhD students every year."

Johnny nodded as a bunch of things clicked in his head at once.

"Have you heard of Dr. Bronski?" Lyle continued.

"No."

"He was researching a way to synthesize a new type of LSD derivative last year. He was following leads that had been left for dead by Hoffman himself sixty years ago. He started a few promising lines of research but never finished his work. He was very old. It was fascinating stuff. So I've kind of been doing my own unofficial research, picking up where he left off. And I figured, what's the harm in supplementing my pathetic Chem 130 pay-check while I'm at it."

"So you make illegal drugs in the U of T chemistry labs?"

"More or less. But only as a sideline to my real research."

"You don't say things like that man. What if I had a tape recorder? Not smart."

"You're not a cop," Lyle pointed out.

True enough, Johnny thought, but still: "I wouldn't touch that with a ten foot pole made of asbestos and diplomatic immunity. You're going to get caught. And fast."

"No way," Lyle said, "you should see the labs. They've never even heard the word security, much less paranoia. Hell, I could make like twenty pounds of C-4 without having to sign more than one form, and that would be to promise that I would properly dispose of the motor oil I was requisitioning. If I bought the motor oil at the gas station I wouldn't have to talk to anyone. LSD is even easier because you're dealing in such small volumes. Once you have the LSA the rest of the reagents are totally common compounds no one would bat an eye at. You know, like hydrazine and hydrochloric acid."

"Where do you get LSA?"

"I extract it from Hawaiian Wood Rose seeds I buy on-line. Besides, I've gotten away with making this much already and this alone would be worth what, five thousand, on the street?"

More like ten, thought Johnny. Hell, maybe fifteen; they could set their own price. For a brief moment, Johnny's mind was considering whether Ivan might have contacts interested in buying plastic explosives. The conversation continued for some time but really, from that moment, Johnny was sold.

--ten--

"Come into the kitchen."

Johnny couldn't for the life of him figure out what Lyle was so pissed about. Everything had been going beautifully. They hadn't been the first ones into the acid vacuum left by last year's busts, but they had been hot on the heels and

there was a lot of money to be made. Ever since Ivan had hooked them up with a connection in Russia that would ship them Ergotamine by the half-kilo in air sealed coffee packages, they'd been pulling in about five grand a month. So, what was the problem?

"The fucking problem is that this isn't fucking acid." Lyle held the blotter like a used condom.

"What do you mean it isn't acid?"

"I mean it's not lysergic acid di-ethylamide twenty fucking five."

"What is it then?"

"This is the substance Dr. Bronski was working towards when he disappeared. It took me almost a year to work out the synthesis, but this is it. This is a lysergic compound Hoffman never imagined."

Johnny's heart was in his throat. "So what happens if you eat it?"

Lyle paused, maybe for drama, more likely from fear. "I have no idea."

Visions of teenagers dropping dead all over the city flashed through Johnny's head. "Fuck."

"Exactly."

"So what are we going to do?"

"What do you think we're going to do?"

"I have a horrible feeling we're about to eat whatever that is you're holding and see what happens to us."

"Well," Lyle said lifting his fist in a universal gesture, "at least one of us is."

They dropped their fists one, two, three times. Johnny chose paper.

###

Johnny dealt another hand of crazy eights. Five hits of something that wasn't quite acid were sitting on the corner of the table. The other five hits were gone. They had figured that at least someone would take that much, so that was how much they had to test.

"So what else do we know about it?" Johnny was asking.

Lyle lay his cards face down on the table, stood up and walked wordlessly over to his dresser. From the top drawer he pulled out a dozen or so sheets of legal sized paper. He handed them to Johnny. They were covered in chemical equations, sketches of atomic structure and scribblings. Johnny couldn't tell whether it was some sort of short hand or just incredibly bad handwriting. In all, it told him nothing.

"This tells me nothing."

"That would tell a lot of things to a lot of people, but the one thing that it will tell no-one is what sort of effects this chemical will have on the human brain. How long has it been?"

Johnny looked at the clock. "Fifteen minutes."

Lyle picked up his cards and made his play. Johnny looked at the chemical diagrams for a few moments longer, as though expecting them to suddenly make sense. Finally he put them down, considered Lyle's play, looked at his own hand, and drew a card.

"Kinda like when Hoffman first discovered the effects of acid by accident, eh?" Johnny said diplomatically as play continued. "And then tested it on himself to study it."

"Yeah," Lyle agreed, "only Hoffman didn't have two hundred and some teenagers as unwilling guinea pigs. That and he wasn't committing a criminal offence when he synthed the acid in the first place. Fuck! How long has it been?"

"Seventeen minutes."

"How long does this take?"

"What? You said yourself we don't know anything about it."

"No. How long does acid take? I've never done it before."

Johnny felt his jaw drop. He had heard wrong. "You've never done what before?"

"Acid, you fucking idiot!" The stress had driven Lyle almost to the point of tears.

"Fuck! You're joking me. Why didn't you say something?"

Johnny knew he should have been the one to eat it. It had been his fuck-up, he should have been the one to pay for it. And now here Lyle was, a complete bloody mess on their kitchen table and how would they ever know what the effects had been if he had nothing to compare it to? But what did it matter, really? They weren't trying to do science here, at least Johnny wasn't. So long as Lyle came through the other side alive, kicking and sane, they had nothing to worry about. They had nothing to worry about. Right?

"Don't worry," Johnny said, "it will be fine. I'll talk you through it. It usually takes like twenty minutes to half an hour. We'll just keep playing cards and you tell me what you're feeling. Everything will be fine."

Would it be fine? Fucked if he knew.

"I'm feeling a little light-headed," Lyle said ten minutes later, "The cards feel sweaty and the light seems brighter than before."

Johnny let out a sigh of relief. "You're having your first acid trip, man. Enjoy."

Lyle laughed. "An hour ago, I would have cried to find out that I had synthesized nothing more than an analog of acid. But now, it's maybe the best

news I can remember ever getting. Well, what should we do? Have a drink to celebrate? Heh... I guess I'm not going to need one."

"Sure, we'll do whatever you want, man. Let's just play a couple more games of cards to be sure your head's not going to explode or something."

"Why not?" Lyle said, "I don't mind kicking your ass for a few more rounds until things get too crazy."

And it was true. Johnny had lost about five straight hands. He seemed to be losing faster every time. He drew eight cards and heard Lyle laugh a sort of defeated laugh.

"Explains why Bronski disappeared."

Johnny grunted. "Huh?"

"He must have just run away. Been too embarrassed to reveal that he was chasing a dead end after how enthusiastic he had been in his papers." Lyle slapped his hand down on his notes for emphasis. "Hard to get people excited about a new, more complicated and expensive, synthesis for an illegal hallucino-- Why the hell would you do that?"

Johnny stopped suddenly. "Do what?"

"Play the two of spades when you know damn well that I have the queen."

Johnny looked at the card he was holding in his left hand, about to play. It was face down with its back to Lyle. "How would I know you have the queen of spades, Lyle."

Lyle grimaced. "Well, I do."

"And how did you know what I was about to play?" Johnny flipped over the two of spades. "Are these cards marked?"

"No," Lyle said, "I think I must have just seen your hand by accident or something."

Johnny looked instinctively behind him for a mirror he knew wasn't there, shrugged and said: "pick up two cards."

Lyle drew two cards, narrowed his eyes and shook his head. "Weird," he said, "I could have sworn I knew what I was going to draw before I drew them."

"It's the acid," Johnny said, "fucking with your sense of time. It will do that."

Lyle shrugged and threw down the queen of spades. Resignedly, Johnny began the long process of drawing seven cards.

"Ace of hearts," Lyle said just as Johnny drew it. Johnny looked over his shoulder again. Still nothing. He dropped his cards on the table. "All right, I give up. What's the trick."

Lyle shook his head and said: "I just had a feeling."



Johnny put a finger on the draw pile. "Oh yeah? Well, do you have a feeling about this one?"

"Nine of clubs."

Johnny hesitated for a moment. He looked at the back of the card. He couldn't see any markings, but they wouldn't be very effective if they were obvious. "And the one beneath it?"

"Eight of diamonds."

Johnny flipped the nine of clubs and followed it with the eight of diamonds. Lyle picked up the deck in his hand and started naming cards as he flipped them, faster and faster. "Three of hearts. King of hearts, four of spades seven of clubs two-of-hearts jack-of-diamondsnineofhearts FUCK!"

He threw the rest of the deck against the refrigerator and leaped up from his chair, sending it crashing over backwards. They both watched as the cards fluttered to the floor. It seemed to Johnny that many more of the red cards landed face up than the black. There was a pattern in the cards, a pattern he couldn't quite see. Johnny looked up from the cards to Lyle. He was holding his head in both hands and making a low keening noise.

Johnny stood up and was trying to think of something to say when Lyle pre-empted him. "It's not acid. It wasn't fucking acid. It's something else entirely."

"So what is it then?"

"I already told you," Lyle said, taking his hands off his head and looking at Johnny with crazy eyes, "that I don't know. I'm hearing things in the wind that were never there before. I'm seeing patterns in the swirling of dust in the air between us."

"That's just acid," Johnny said, trying not to let his fear show, "it's just the acid. There's nothing to worry about man."

"I'm hearing thunder, Johnny. I'm hearing thunder ten seconds before it gets here."

Johnny opened his mouth to speak but the thunder cut him off. It was the low rumbling kind that you could sometimes mistake for a train. But not this time. It was the kind that came long before the rain. It knocked the wind from Johnny's lungs. He had to put one hand on the table for support. His eyes were locked with Lyle's and it wasn't a pretty sight.

"Dr. Bronski didn't run away from anything," Lyle said, "he was kidnapped."

"Fine. Whatever you say Lyle. Sit back down. You're fucking scaring me."

"I'm fucking scaring ME, Johnny. What was it you told me about those drug busts last year?"

"They shut down three acid shops and started arresting everyone on the distribution list."

"And why would they care about the small time dealers when they've got the cooks? That's the question right?"

"Yeah. That's it, Lyle." Johnny found himself backing up half a step without meaning to. Lyle's eyes were getting more frightening by the second. "Do you know what they were looking for?"

"Acid, Lyle. They were looking for fucking acid."

"Wrong!" Lyle said grabbing the tiny crumpled sheet of blotter off of the table and thrusting it towards Johnny, "they were looking for this!"

Johnny breathed in too fast, choked on some spittle and started to cough. Lyle's eyes got a faraway look in them. "And now," he said quietly, "and now they're on their way here."

Just as Johnny caught his breath, Lyle shoved the blotter into his hand. Lyle pushed the sheaf of notes onto him as well. The fear and tension in the room had doubled and redoubled in less than five seconds.

"Quick!" Lyle said. "Get out of here. Hide these somewhere safe. Somewhere no-one will ever think to look for them."

Lyle rushed over to his dresser and began frantically tearing open the drawers. He looked over his shoulder, saw Johnny still standing there and yelled: "What the fuck are you still doing here? GO!"

Johnny grabbed his skateboard and went.

--eleven--

The alcohol in Johnny's blood hardly prevented him from skating a straight line Eastward down the centre of Dupont. The streets seemed unnaturally empty and the sky loomed with thunderheads of the type Johnny usually found strangely reassuring but now more traditionally menacing. Not just menacing, it occurred to him as he turned south onto Bathurst, but downright apocalyptic.

On Harbord, less than half a block from campus, Johnny nudged a curb and was thrown from his skateboard. There was a moment of weightlessness followed by a moment of tremendous weight. There were hands striking the pavement and there were pages of notes dispersing in the gathering wind because there never really is a calm before a storm and there was blood everywhere but really just on his palms and left cheek and of course everything he touched. And there was a girl, pretty, maybe thirteen, already collecting the pages and handing them back to him and saying: "are you all right?"

And Johnny was taking them from her being careful not to get any blood on them but not quite careful enough and saying "Thanks yeah fine" and running now Eastward again toward campus feeling this gathering fear and becoming less convinced with every passing second despite no further evidence that Lyle was actually getting all worked up about nothing. And the girl was yelling after him "Hey! Your skateboard" and he was yelling back "Keep it!" and then he was leaning up against the door into the Computer Science work-lab and trying to catch his breath and wishing he could just stick his finger down his throat and puke up adrenaline.

He was logged on to a computer in the lab before the jangling in his nerves began to quiet. All around him computer science students were grinding away

desperately at keyboards trying to finish their assignments before midnight. The girl to his left coughed, ate a handful of anti-histamines that Johnny recognized as being ephedrine based, and chased it with coffee. She wouldn't be sleeping any time soon. And neither would Johnny by the way he felt. He lifted the tray of the scanner and shoved the sheets underneath one by one.

"Somewhere no-one will look for them," Johnny whispered to himself when the scanning was done. After half a moment he called up a terminal and started SSH. Logging onto a server run by a friend of his, he uploaded the images to his private directory. He then ran an encryption program on them, using his student number followed by his phone number as a sixteen byte key. Sure, it would only keep out the most easily discouraged of snoops, but the only one with access to the files was the guy who ran the server. A sixteen-byte encryption code was enough to give the message "Hey Tom, these are private, not for prying eyes."

Johnny was about to log-off when he found himself checking his mail almost by instinct. Tom had mail services on his server and Johnny had always preferred using them over Hotmail or UofT mail. There was one new message. It was from Ivan. The subject line was "what the fuck did you do?" and according to the time stamp it had been sent ten minutes ago. Johnny's heart almost stopped. He looked around himself for... what? cops? He placed both hands on the desk and took a second to catch his breath before opening the mail.

To: j@funk.dhs.org  
From: ivan@anon.ru  
Subject: what the fuck did you do?

Johnny,  
You've fucked something up big. No time for a smoke at the corner this time, you have to run. I've heard your name twice in the last two hours and not from the kinds of lips you want to hear say the name of a friend. There's a price on your head right now Johnny and I'm not certain whether you're worth more alive or dead. Every organized crime syndicate from the Triad to the Toronto fucking Police is going to be looking for you. Lay low. I'll be in touch in two days. I'm going to try my best to get you out of this one because I love you, but you're in deeper than anyone I've ever known.

-I-

p.s. is this account secure?

The adrenaline came flooding back into Johnny's system echoing "I told you so" down every nerve ending that had desperately wanted free of it fifteen minutes earlier. Johnny flashed off a three word email, "I hope so," to Ivan and logged off of Tom's server.

On autopilot, as his mind unhelpfully vacillated between images of himself in prison and at the bottom of Lake Ontario with a hole in his skull, Johnny purged the computer's temporary memory of the scanned images. Figuring it was impossible to be too paranoid, he also used a sysadmin account he had secretly acquired while still a student to wipe any trace of his having used the computer.

Johnny was just about to leave when another thought struck him. He logged back on and ran a check of dormant processes. Sure enough, someone had installed a

keypress recorder and was dumping it all to a text file elsewhere on the network. It was amateurish work, almost certainly an attempt at password theft by some first year Comp. Sci. student destined to be expelled. Johnny deleted the program and wiped the text file.

"Am I sure that's everything?" he asked himself. The answer of course was no. He could sit at the computer checking processes and sockets for hours and still not be sure. In the end, there was only one way to be certain. Johnny pounded out two dozen lines of code, set his program running and left.

###

Five minutes after Johnny walked out the door, the hard drives of every computer in the lab and the hard drives of the lab server itself were simultaneously overwritten by a long string of zeros. Hundreds of tired-eyed students broke out crying or laughing or, realizing the futility of doing anything else, simply slumped forwards onto their keyboards and went directly to sleep.

###

Outside, Johnny was meanwhile setting fire to Lyle's notes. When there was only a small pile of ash remaining to be dispersed by the wind, Johnny slumped up against the side of the building and tried to think straight.

Lyle! He was at the place alone and he would be as high as an acid-tripping kite by now. Johnny pulled his phone out of his pocket and quickly dialed his home number. Ring. Ring. Ring. Shit, he was going to get the answering machine. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Shit! What the fuck had happened to his computer? He stabbed the off button with his finger, jumped to his feet and started running in the direction of home.

--twelve--

The converted warehouse that their apartment was in looked no different than usual when Johnny reached the corner of Ossington and Dupont. Still, he was too cautious to use the front door. He climbed the fire escape. When he reached their level, he willed himself to be silent and invisible before lifting his head to peek in through the window. Their apartment was crawling with cops and men in black suits. In the far corner was the reason why the phone hadn't been answered: It had been pulled out of the wall and Johnny's computer was a twisted heap of still smoking metal. Through the open crack at the bottom of the window, Johnny could smell an odour of magnesium. There was a cop poking it with his baton and holding a handkerchief over his face. Johnny almost smiled at his look of displeasure. Lyle was nowhere to be seen. Just then, one of the suits looked up and met Johnny's eyes. Johnny froze in panic for a split second before leaping to his feet and running down the fire escape.

He leapt from the second story landing and hit the ground running. There was a window being smashed above and behind him and someone was yelling "Stop where you are!" and when Johnny didn't stop, there was the report of a gun. Like most people Johnny had never been shot at before. Fortunately, some animal part of him knew how to deal with being hunted. It was animal instinct that carried him around the corner of the building and over the fence that ran alongside the railway tracks. It was animal instinct also that pumped his legs until the veins ran with acid and then still kept pumping them. Johnny was back on campus before

animal instinct would turn his body back over to his brain and allow him to be sure he hadn't been shot. Johnny just wanted to hide. Someone wanted him dead.

It was raining by the time Johnny was lifting aside the manhole cover in the parking lot of the Medical Science Building. He looked around desperately, still expecting to hear cop boot-falls overtaking him from behind. Then he was down in the steam tunnels and pulling the manhole closed behind him. His memory served him well and after three quick turns he was rotating the wheel on the door that led him into the Hart House basement. When he reached Tinka's room, he found the key thankfully secreted away in the same nook above the door as before. Knowing, by the simple fact that the door was locked from the outside, that no one was inside, Johnny didn't even grope for the light before collapsing onto Tinka's mattress and falling immediately into an exhausted and terrified sleep.

###

He was awakened by the sound of the door being pulled open. He blinked a few times at the total darkness until Tinka flipped on the light. It took a couple more seconds for Johnny's eyes to adjust but when they did, the look of shock on Tinka's face was evident. It was what he had expected.

"Tinka," he began sputtering immediately, "I know everything hasn't been cool between us lately but I think I'm in a lot of--"

Johnny didn't finish his sentence because Tinka had punched him in the face. Hard. Hard enough to knock him out cold.

--thirteen--

Johnny woke up with blood in his mouth and ringing in his ears. It was the weird kind of ringing that doesn't sound so much like a bell that was struck too hard and won't stop reverberating but rather like two people having a pitched argument inside your head in a language you don't understand. In this case, that was exactly what was happening, except for the inside Johnny's head part. Both voices were male and he recognized neither of them. Johnny felt in his gut that that wasn't a good sign. Where was Tinka?

"What the fuck did he just say?"

There she was.

"He says he doesn't believe you." It was one of the two male voices, the younger sounding one. Johnny hadn't been able to get a read on its character before but now it sounded as smooth and cold as a knife. The kind of knife a butcher would use for cutting a cow's throat.

"I don't give a shit whether or not he believes me!" Tinka yelled, her voice more than filling the tiny room. "I told you already I have no idea who he is or how he got here. Just get him the fu--"

She was cut off by the sound of an open palm hitting her cheek with serious force. Johnny opened his eyes and shot up into a sitting position. Some less sensible part of him was insisting that he leap up and defend her against the two men. Most of him, of course, was happy for Tinka to get whatever she had coming to her. His head still hurt like hell. He opened his eyes and was on the

verge of jumping up despite his better judgment when he caught sight of the younger man.

The man of the smooth and cold voice was also the man of the piercing grey eyes from the picture on Tinka's wall. He wasn't wearing the same suit as he was in the picture, but he was wearing one very much like it and it fit him tautly. If his voice had the character of a knife his physical demeanour was that of a loaded gun being held by a psychopath prone to spasms of the index finger. Johnny had imagined many horrible scenes involving meeting this man, but none of them were this bad.

The man uttered a few sharp, terse words at Tinka in Korean. She squinted her eyes at him, shook her head, said "Fuck you, Jin" and spat in his face.

With the sort of preternatural calm unique to executioners, Jin wiped the spittle off of his face and raised his hand to slap Tinka a second time. Again Johnny almost sprang up from the bed, but Tinka pre-empted him by hitting Jin in the throat with a punch that seemed to come out of nowhere. His eyes wide, Jin collapsed to the ground choking as Tinka turned and stalked out of the room. Seizing the moment of opportunity, Johnny jumped up to follow her. Before he could reach the door the older Korean man grabbed him by the collar. Johnny spun to push him away but barely had time to notice the man's fatherly resemblance to Jin before he was caught across the chin by a ring-studded fist. He lost consciousness about halfway back to the futon.

###

When he awoke again, he didn't know where he was. He certainly wasn't in Tinka's room. Wherever he was it was cold. And loud.

He propped himself up on one arm to get his bearings. He was surrounded by crates and there was a huge steel panel set into the floor next to him that looked for the world like it would open up if someone pulled the right lever in some adjacent chamber. He was in the cargo hold of a plane. And he wasn't alone.

The middle aged Korean man who had been sitting against a nearby crate reading a newspaper had noticed Johnny's cognizance. He stood up and walked in Johnny's direction. Reflexively Johnny covered his face with his arms in anticipation of the knockout punch, but it never came. Instead, he felt a needle prick in his right thigh.

Johnny opened his mouth to say "What the fuck" but he didn't even get past "Wh--" before collapsing once again into unconsciousness.

--fourteen--

Quickly, so as not to allow himself time to reconsider, he shoved the acid under his tongue. Or rather, he shoved the not-quite-acid under his tongue. Acid is more stable on blotter than it is in crystal or liquid form. Even so, certainly the drug must deteriorate somewhat in three weeks time, even on blotter. This is what Johnny tried to tell himself as osmosis invited the foreign chemicals into his system. Certainly, he was actually ingesting something less than five hits worth. Johnny was not unaware of the fact that he still was completely in the dark as to what had eventually become of Lyle, not to mention all the kids he had sold the blotter to. Were they all dead? Brain damaged?

Suddenly, there was a sound that Johnny could only identify as a shotgun thanks to a childhood misspent on videogames. But much louder. Thoc tumbled down the stairwell and into Johnny's field of view. He came to rest against one of the mildewed concrete pillars with his head twisted at an unnatural angle from his shoulders and leaking blood from several dozen holes in his chest. There was another burst of firing outside and someone was yelling in English. Johnny had never seen a dead body before, except at his grandmother's funeral. He was too saturated with adrenaline to go into shock just now, but it did remind him that potential drug overdose was hardly his most pressing problem just now.

The room had only one exit, the one through which Thoc had just entered. His guards had generally been poorly disposed toward the idea of letting Johnny close to that door. Still, over the weeks, Johnny had managed to surmise that immediately behind the first locked door, there was a stairway going up and at the top of that stairway, another locked door. Johnny had no idea whether a street, a landing, a hallway or the open desert lay behind that second door because the guards were always careful to ensure that one door was securely locked before opening the other. Or they had been careful of that until now.

Johnny rushed over to Thoc's broken form. It was instantly clear that he was completely and irreversibly dead. By some reflex born of action movies, Johnny took the pistol from Thoc's grip. It was heavy in his hand and simultaneously frightening and reassuring. Knowing nothing about guns, Johnny could only assume that it was loaded and the safety was off. Looking up, Johnny saw an unobstructed pathway to freedom. Both doorways stood open and the stairway was obstructed by nothing more than still-glistening trails of Thoc's blood. Johnny could see another dead or dying body leaning up against the doorframe at the top of the stairs. Through that doorway, Johnny could see only ceiling, but natural light was leaking in from somewhere which meant either a glass door or window.

He stood frozen for perhaps fifteen seconds trying to steel himself for a mad dash to freedom. Finally, wrapping his fingers tightly around the pistol's grip, he took his first step towards the stairs. Just as he set his foot onto the first step, a stray bullet struck the wall near the top of the stairs, exploding in a mist of plaster dust. Johnny took a step back, shut the door and clicked the deadbolt into place. Trying desperately to catch his breath and calm his nerves, Johnny leaned his back to the wall next to the door. Slowly he slid down into a sitting position. He set the handgun across his lap, held his head in his hands and waited for the acid to take hold.

His sense of time was the first thing to go. How long had he been sitting there? Minutes? Seconds? Hours? Was it over? Was everything safe? But no, everything was obviously not safe. So said the dead Korean man three feet off to Johnny's left. So said also the loaded and dangerous weapon laying across his knees. The barrel had the words "Custom 10 auto" etched on it. They meant nothing to Johnny.

Abruptly, the sound of gunfire began again. Seventeen shots, Johnny counted without intending to, from three different guns. As the report of each bullet being fired reached Johnny's ears, he noticed tiny variations in the patterns of air movement across the hairs of his arm. Which hairs, speaking of, seemed to be growing at a fantastic rate. Before Johnny's eyes, his arms became those of a yeti, encased in improbable sheaths of coarse vibrissa, of which each filament was its own private door of perception. Yet the visual image remained unchanged. His arm looked just as it ever had; It was the meaning and context of that image which had shifted and distorted. If the drug had in fact denatured while on blotter in Johnny's pocket, it must have started out several times as potent as LSD!

And here a sudden breeze played across the wheat field of his arm, electrifying follicles in its wake. Somewhere in Utah, a butterfly was flapping its wings.

Johnny became fascinated by the still growing pool of blood surrounding Thoc's body. The uneven character of the chamber floor dictated a rivulet of blood towards Johnny's left foot. The rivulet was a branching off of a larger rivulet which was itself an extension of a pseudopod connected to the primary puddle. Surface tension prevented the tiny red line near Johnny's foot from branching off any further. As he stared, Johnny realized that the puddle was not shapeless or random but was in fact a very close approximation of the Mandelbrot set. He watched, fixated, as more and more blood collected near his foot and began to form the bloated abdomen of a beetle. Reaching out, Johnny dipped his finger into the blood and traced several radiating lines away from the gathering pool.

Realizing suddenly what he was doing, Johnny recoiled in disgust. He tried desperately to wipe the blood off of his finger and onto the leg of his pants, but his finger was still red. Frantically, he began scraping his index finger against the coarse cement wall behind him. Very soon, droplets of his own blood began to show. The pain brought Johnny back into the present. Thoughts of blood borne viruses flashed briefly across his mind, but then he remembered that his chances of living long enough to die from AIDS were not looking good.

Johnny was further jolted back into the now by a panicked slamming and clawing against the locked door. Someone was screaming in Korean on the other side. Johnny could make out nothing but fear until the voice finally degenerated into repeating "Kim-Jae Kim-Jae" over and over again. Kim-Jae had been one of the more quiet and taciturn of Johnny's guards. Johnny unlocked the door more because he could empathize with Kim-Jae fleeing a gunfight than for any rational reason. Johnny pulled open the door just as a bullet forced the back of Kim-Jae's head out through the front. As Kim-Jae's body toppled forward into the room, Johnny tried to force the door closed again. Kim-Jae's right foot was stuck between the door and the frame. Johnny pulled the foot free and just as he was slamming the deadbolt back home, a bullet burst through the door mere centimetres from his hand.

Falling backwards in fear, Johnny found himself sitting on top of two dead men. Directly between his legs was Kim-Jae's lifeless hand. Tight in its dead grip was a hand grenade:

The End.

Johnny closed his eyes tight and waited for it, but it didn't come. When he opened them again, the grenade was still sitting there, M26 stenciled around its waist, unexploded in Kim-Jae's hand. It was then that Johnny noticed the pin, so similar to that of a fire extinguisher, still housed safely in the head of the grenade. Delicately, Johnny lifted the grenade from Kim-Jae's grasp.

The explosion knocked him clear across the room. Different pieces of him in different directions. He gasped deep for air and somehow his lungs still accepted it. I'm hallucinating, he told himself. If it was a hallucination, it was like no hallucination he had ever had before. Looking closely at the deadly package in his hand, Johnny found that it was no longer exploding, but rather radiating the potentiality of explosion.

And then it all clicked. The random and chaotic patterns of dust in the air remained chaotic, but no longer random. This speck tumbled twice and shot



upwards because, behind the locked door, at the top of the stairs, an American soldier had coughed four seconds ago. That same soldier would now be sighting down the barrel of his rifle in case the door should open.

"They are here for me!" Johnny almost choked on the words. Just as they had come for him and Lyle before. They had followed him all the way to Korea seeking that chemical which was playing these tricks on his brain. They had followed him to somewhere near the ocean, an eddy of dust told him. Lyle! What had ever become of him? But the dust carried no news of that. Either he had gotten away or he was wherever Dr. Bronski was now. Heaven or hell.

Picking up the Custom 10 auto from where it had fallen, he could see tight discrete bullet paths extending from its muzzle. Here was one ricocheting off the door and here another shattering the leg of the table where Bop Ngo was once played. But Johnny's hands were shaking and no trajectory could be trusted or maintained. He dropped the gun back to the floor.

He was going to die alone in a basement cell in Korea. His body would drop on top of those of Thoc and Kim Jae. And there was nothing he could do about it. Defeated, Johnny touched his forehead to the pillar against which Thoc's corpse lay and closed his eyes.

Tiny vibrations in the pillar talked to Johnny of decades of strain from the unrelenting task of supporting the building. Johnny empathized as tears of horror and frustration and fear began to roll down his cheek.

"End it now," said the pillar.

"You want me to kill myself?" Johnny asked aloud. He was still holding the grenade in his left hand. His memory dredged up a remembered statistic from a Sidney Cohen LSD study: 1.2 attempted suicides per thousand acid trips. Somehow, he doubted the study encompassed many situations like this one.

"No," said the pillar, "not you. Me."

Johnny's eyes shot open again. The pillar continued to vibrate. Johnny placed both his hands flat against the pillar and listened carefully to everything the vibrations had to say.

"Lower," the vibrations quivered, "right against the floor. A little to the right. Perfect. Now you need something to shield and contain the blast."

He pulled the pin of the grenade and released the handle just as an American soldier shot the lock off the door.

Johnny said "sorry Kim" and rolled Kim Jae's body on top of the grenade as the timer emitted its first quiet "tick." That tick included the potential for three more ticks but entirely precluded the possibility of a fifth. As Johnny ran across the room, he could see drywall and concrete and wood collapsing all around him three seconds in the future, here crushing his leg, there collapsing his skull. Until, at the last second, he dove into the one spot where he could already feel the potentiality of an unlikely sanctuary: a small pocket of space against one wall where emptiness and air would be preserved beneath a mountain of debris. But he dove too hard and struck his head against the wall. Unconsciousness took him.

--fifteen--

Callum woke Johnny as he always did by placing a cup of black coffee on the floor next to the mat Johnny slept on. The aroma did the rest. Once awake, Johnny would slowly pull himself up into a sitting position and cradle the cup between his hands waiting for it to cool. Callum would always sit in a well worn arm chair about a metre and a half away with his own cup of black coffee and a clove cigarette hanging out of his mouth and. He would sit and watch Johnny. Sometimes they would talk, sometimes they wouldn't.

Johnny had never been much of a coffee drinker before, but he could feel in the mornings, particularly on the mornings when nothing was said, that it meant a great deal to the old man to have someone with which to share his morning coffee. Sometimes Johnny suspected that if he were to refuse his coffee, or perhaps even fail to finish it one morning, he would be promptly turned out to fend for himself on the streets of Busan. He took a first cautious sip of that morning's hot tarry mixture.

"Your friend Lyle is dead, you know," Callum said abruptly.

It was all Johnny could do to keep from spitting out the half mouthful of coffee. He barely managed to swallow it and choke out: "What?"

"You know it as well as I do. I just think it's about time you faced up to it directly. It can take a while to come to terms with that sort of thing Johnny, but you can't let it lapse into delusion."

It had been three weeks since Callum had pulled Johnny out of the wreckage of the building in which he had been held prisoner. If curiosity was, as he had claimed, his main reason for coming to Johnny's aid, it had certainly been satisfied. Johnny had told him everything. There seemed little reason to hide his story from a lonely old American living on the coast in Korea when so many others who were obviously much more hostile seemed to already know it. But now, Johnny said nothing.

"It's just the way it happens, kid. It's what happens when you get involved in things that are bigger than you are. Some secrets are just too big. The only way to keep secrets like that is to kill everyone who knows them."

Johnny shook his head half-heartedly. "They weren't trying to kill me. They were trying to capture me. If they wanted me dead, they could have just blown up the building themselves."

"Of course they were trying to capture you," Callum said, "They needed to find out who else you had told. They needed to know who else to kill. Trust me, once they had the names they wanted, you would have been disposed of quickly and without remorse."

Johnny took another sip of his coffee. "Then I guess you're next on the hit list now, aren't you? If they've already killed Bronski and his connections and if Lyle's dead, which I still refuse to believe. That would just leave you and me, man. Better look out, they should be showing up any day now."

Callum nodded and reached his left hand behind his back. From the small of his back he produced the biggest, meanest looking handgun Johnny had ever seen. Movies and videogames included. "Don't think for a fucking second, kid," he said

while brandishing the grotesque contraption, "that they aren't on their way right now."

Johnny put his coffee down and jumped to his feet. "You're insane. You're a fucking psychopath. What the hell are you doing keeping something like that in your pants?"

"Protection, Johnny. We need protection. Listen, they--"

"No! I'm not fucking listening to another word you say until you put down that fucking hand cannon. I've already seen more guns than I ever want to see."

Callum placed the gun on the floor in between them. "Sit back down, Johnny."

When Johnny remained standing, Callum continued, "I'm serious, kid. Sit down."

Johnny sat back down and tentatively picked up his coffee. "Callum," he said, failing to completely keep a tremor out of his voice, "how would they ever find me here? They have to assume I died when the building collapsed."

Callum noticed his cigarette had burned out and lit another. The smell of burning cloves filled the room and Johnny's nostrils, reminding him always of apple pie. He took a drag which seemed like it would never end and then said: "They probably did assume that for a while. But if they have the magic acid, they're going to start reading the ripples and, given enough time, those will lead them here."

"We don't know they have the drug," Johnny objected.

"How else did they home in on you and Lyle so fast back in Toronto? How else did they find you all the way in Korea? They have it Johnny. They have it. If your buddy could finish Bronski's work after hours in the university lab, do you really think that the fucking military would fail to do the same with the whole fucking defense budget to work with? You'd better believe they've got a god-damned airplane hangar full of unlucky bastards hopped up on the stuff twenty-four hours a day, kid."

"They?" Johnny said. "Who the hell is this 'They'? We have no idea. This is all just spy novel delusion and speculation."

"Them, Johnny. The bad guys. The CIA, the government, the Illuminati, call them whatever the hell you want. It's not paranoia when they really are breaking down your doors and coming halfway around the goddamn world to pump you full a truth serum and make you talk, kid."

"But I'm a Canadian!" Johnny pleaded.

Callum laughed. "Do you really think that the people we're dealing with feel the need to respect borders?"

He was right. Johnny remembered when Callum translated the article from the paper for him, two days after dragging him out of the rubble. 'Fighting between rival gangs' they had called it. No mention of Americans in there anywhere aside from 'Nineteen found dead in wreckage, including several Caucasians.' How many of those deaths am I responsible for, Johnny had wondered. But direct causality seemed like a thing of the distant past. Really, how could anyone be held

responsible for anything anymore? But when it came down to it, Callum was right: They wanted Johnny and They had the power to come looking for him.

"If they already have the drug," Johnny said, "then what hope do we have? They're going to find me and they're going to find you."

Callum patted the handgun like it were a child or a puppy and grinned.  
"Eventually, yes."

Johnny's eyes opened wide. "You want them to come, don't you? You are insane!"

"I've got a story of my own, kid, and this is just the ending it's been waiting for. This place," and Callum made a small gesture which somehow included all of Korea, perhaps all of Asia, perhaps all of Earth, "will never be my home. I haven't been home in fifty fucking years, Johnny. I've been sitting here in this vile fucking city, playing chess in the park against other old men who call me white devil to my face whenever I beat them. I've been sitting on my ass, drinking and smoking my life away, waiting for my chance to finally go out in a blaze of glory like I should have all those years ago. This is it kid. This is the fucking end."

Suddenly, there was a single WHUMP at the front door of Callum's tiny house. The old man was at the door with gun in his hand in the blink of an eye. He moved like a soldier. His back to the wall and his hand resting lightly on the handle of the door, he gestured Johnny behind the armchair. Throwing open the door, Callum's seventy year old body twisted like a snake, prepared to strike with forty-four caliber venom at any white devils closing in on the house. Instead, there sat a small brown paper package tied with twine on the doorstep. The mailman was already two houses further down the lane. The package had Callum's address on the label, but no name or return address. The stamps were Canadian.

"Open it," Callum said to Johnny.

Inside was an American passport with Johnny's face and a false name: Jean Daignault, born January first 1983. Underneath the passport were a stack of American hundred dollar bills and traveller's cheques. And an unsigned note. The note was indicated simply "J."

J:

Out of the frying pan and into the oven, eh?

Don't spend it all in one place.

Keep safe and keep in touch.

Callum closed the door and looked up at Johnny. "Ripple, ripple," he said.

###

It was a warm morning two weeks later when a butterfly disturbed Johnny and Callum's morning coffee. Callum had been half-heartedly reminiscing about Ohio girls of scant virtue from his adolescence when the small yellow butterfly alighted on Johnny's nose, causing them both to laugh. The noise startled the frail insect which immediately took back to wing and flitted aimlessly about the room. Johnny watched it at first with idle pleasure but then suddenly with intense foreboding. There was something more to its movements that he had not seen before, something sinister. The butterfly was ushered to one side of the

room by brief unannounced breeze through to open window. Johnny jumped up in alarm, spilling his coffee violently across Callum's floor.

"Jesus Christ, kid! What is it?"

Johnny said nothing. He shook his head as if to dislodge his premonitions. It couldn't possibly be happening. Flashbacks didn't exist. But still, he had never been the type to have hunches and he had never been so sure of anything in his life.

"What is it?" Callum repeated.

"They're coming," Johnny said.

"What? Who's coming?"

"Fucking Them!" Johnny burst out.

Callum opened his mouth, what do you mean or how do you know on his lips, but thought better of it. Instead, he recruited his gun from his waistband to his hand, grabbed his keys from the shelf and tossed them to Johnny.

"Go! Start the boat!"

Johnny scooped up Ivan's package under his arm and rushed out the back door and down the hill to the dock.

He thrust the key into the boat's ignition and started the engine. It sputtered out and failed within moments. Manically, Johnny pumped the bilge as each swell of the green water brought him news of converging forces bent against him. After what seemed like hours of pumping, he got the engine to stay started. He untied the main and fore lines so that only the aft line tethered the boat to shore. What the hell was Callum doing? Packing his fucking underwear?

Johnny leaped from the boat and scrambled up the hill to retrieve the old man from his cabin. Halfway up the slope, he was frozen in his tracks by the report of a single gunshot. Every muscle in Johnny's body seized as he stared like a deer into the headlights of the future. The wind carried Callum's petulant voice to him.

"Come and get me you rancid bastards!"

Johnny could see him clearly in his mind's eye, crouched behind the overturned armchair in his army-issue jungle camos and undershirt. His unkempt grey hair and two days beard perfectly framing his wild green eyes as he held the smoking hand cannon in front of him. There was another gunshot. Of course he wasn't coming.

Johnny sprinted back down the hill, jumped into the boat and shoved the throttle all the way forwards. The aft tie-ring twanged free of the boat, taking screws and housing with it, as he sped out into the Korea Strait. There was a compass set into the dash and a full tank of gas. Johnny had never paid much attention to geography but he knew that if he kept the nose pointing West and the throttle down he had to hit Japan eventually. He only hoped they didn't have much of a Coast Guard.

--sixteen--

Five weeks. That's how long it took them to find him at Callum's. Before that, it had only taken them three weeks to locate his basement prison.

Johnny hefts his new backpack onto his shoulders and straightens the cobalt blue shirt and black sport jacket he bought at a Tokyo tailor with counterfeit money. He checks his watch, still forty minutes left before his flight. He has only been in Japan five days, but he doesn't want to push his luck while still so close to the last spot they've placed him.

Callum had been wrong. Lyle is still alive. They hadn't known about the drug's residual effects; Callum hadn't taken that into consideration. Johnny is positive that Lyle must have escaped. There had been no sign of him at the loft when Johnny had gone back. Surely he had gotten away. And with the lingering enhanced sensitivity to danger, he must certainly have been able to stay one step ahead of them and get himself to safety.

Johnny looks inward for some chemical verification, but is left with only logic and hope to rely on. Before buying his ticket, he had gazed upwards through the glass dome of the Atrium in Kansai International Airport. He had gazed upwards and tried desperately to read Lyle's location in the movement of the clouds. When that had failed, he had bought an atlas and a coffee. He had closed his eyes and flipped the atlas open to a random page. Chile. As likely a place as any, although the stop-over in Hawaii made him uncomfortable. He would prefer to avoid both Canadian and American soil.

Johnny looks again at his watch. Twenty-eight minutes. He is about to make one hell of a lot of ripples and wants to cut it as close to takeoff as possible. He walks over to the same convenience stand where he earlier bought his atlas and coffee. There he exchanges handful of yen for an Internet card.

Johnny's mind is on the story of Prometheus as he logs on to the terminal. Or at least he has a feeling that it should be, but he can't really remember much about it. He does have an uncomfortable feeling though that it doesn't end very well for the protagonist.

He logs on to Tom's server. Before he starts into his true task, he checks to see what e-mail has found its way to his inbox in the nine weeks since that night in Toronto when everything changed. He is secretly hoping to find a note from Lyle, but when there is none, he quickly rationalizes that Lyle would certainly have been being extremely careful to disturb the water as little as possible.

Among the spam, two letters catch his attention. The first is a worried note from his mother asking why he hasn't called in two months and why his phone has been disconnected. Johnny wants to write her a novel and explain everything, but he knows that the first thing she will do is go to the police and that is exactly the last thing he needs.

He composes instead a six word e-mail: "I'm okay, will write more later."

Johnny almost adds something about being in Madagascar, just to throw anyone who might be intercepting his e-mail onto the wrong track, but he catches himself in time. That is exactly the sort of thing that would reverberate out in many unpredictable ways, inevitably revealing his actual location to someone able to read the patterns. In fact, perhaps even the message as it stands is too revealing. But he is about to make so many ripples that it seems it can hardly matter. He queues the e-mail up and sets it to send in two days.

The second letter is from Tinka:

Johnny-

I'm sorry for punching you in the face. I'm sorry for calling Jin in on you. He's a dick. I won't be seeing him anymore. I'm also sorry for casting a curse on you and Lyle. You didn't know about it, but I'm sorry anyway. I've cancelled it. I hope you aren't dead. Get in touch.

#####tinka

p.s. I broke into your apartment. It is TRASHED.

Johnny smiles despite himself. He is about to delete the e-mail, but then thinks better of it. Instead, he simply closes his mail program, and started the script he wrote the bay before at an Internet bar in Tokyo. It begins to count.

###

Johnny is asleep on a Hawaii-bound airplane with a pair of headphones still playing the audio track of the in-flight movie into his unhearing ears when his program comes to life.

It yawns and opens its eyes. Once it has stretched its legs, it sends tendrils out to the edges of Tom's server feeling for connections to the network. Using these connections it leapfrogs from anonymous fileserver to anonymous fileserver always bringing the encrypted scans of Lyle's notes with it and always leaving a copy in its wake. Within half an hour it has duplicated itself hundreds of times. It then pulls its tentacles back in and prepares itself for the second phase of its execution.

Simultaneously, every copy of the program begins posting the encrypted scans to every public forum on the Internet and sending them to every mailing list, propagating itself across the worldwide network at an astonishing speed and in such a fashion that no effort, no matter how concerted can restrain it. Attached to every copy of the file are the sixteen-byte decryption code and a short note:

Dear World:

Make of this what you will.

Lysergically Yours,  
a friend.