East of sunrise

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by

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"Are you alive?" Fritz asked for perhaps the five-hundredth time in the last three strange years. As musical as ever, Joanna's voice floated in the darkness: "I never really died. You know that."

Yes, I know, he thought, but he didn't speak it because that would end the string. Instead, he said, "If you would just touch me."

"I am. Don't you feel my hand on your chest? I can feel your heart beating."

Fritz shifted slightly as his sleepiness fell away. He had never hear Joanna say that before, but, yes, he could feel her five warm, slender fingers press against his bare chest as lightly as dust falling toward the dim gravity of the moon. Her vague shape came into focus, sitting beside him on the bed, her right arm arcing down to his chest. "You're back," he gasped as joy quickened his breath.

Then his eyes flicked open and the form of Joanna winked out, leaving only darkness. The hand still rested on his chest, but he knew it was only his own. He sat up in bed, heart pounding. For an instant, he tried to grasp the receding joy, but it all had been a dream. The shallow kind where eyes close unconsciously for a few seconds and dream images masquerade as reality. The joy retreated into distant memory and Fritz allowed the more familiar feeling
of self-pity to wash over him. Those dreams were the only places where he could really see, really touch Joanna.

Joanna's cool, reassuring voice again filled the darkened room. "I never really died. You know that."

Fritz's chest froze in mid-breath. What . . . yes, he remembered. He had cried out, "You're back," in the dream; he must have said it out loud, also. He turned and focused on the arm bracelet lying on the night stand next to the clock. The tiny diode which indicated Proper Functioning Mode cast enough light to etch a red outline of the bracelet onto his retinas. He repeated, "You're back."

After a slight pause, Joanna's voice drifted up from his bracelet's synthesizer. "I never left, not really."

Yes, that was the proper response phrase. He had run through this sequence many times, especially in those cold, cold nights during the first few weeks. But didn't she say something new before he drifted into the dream? Something unfamiliar for a change would be so sweet. What had he heard? Something about touching him. It didn't make any sense, but even that slim thread of possibility was enough to clutch at 3:00 a.m., the midnight of the soul, as someone said once. He tried to remember what he had said that keyed this new sequence. "If you would just touch me."

But the response was familiar: "I'm touching you with my soul; that's all we need." Of course, for he had asked
for her touch many times before. Even the new words were part of the dream. Nights like these caused the most agony. He had searched long and hard for a drug that would bring sleep without dream, but the dreams still came.

Fritz didn't say anything else, all the rest of the night. Neither did Joanna. He must have fallen into sleep at some point, because he opened his eyes and morning appeared and his arms were wrapped tightly around a pillow, squeezing it to his chest like he used to hold Joanna. Exhausted from the night, he slowly rose, shaved and showered. Before he dressed, he checked the charge on he bracelet, then snapped it onto his right arm. It was large, reaching from just above his wrist to just below his elbow, decorated with swirling etchings of silver and gold which hid the tiny lights and switches. It was so thin that no one would notice it when he wore a suit or jacket. He pulled a long-sleeved shirt from his closet and slipped it on. As with all his shirts, he had fixed the wrist buttons so that they would hold the sleeve extra tight; he didn't want the sleeve to slip up his arm and reveal his secret. As he fastened the buttons, a tremor of guilt passed through him, like a junkie hiding his trackmarks.

As he prepared breakfast, he chatted through the pleasant morning routine. "I think I'll fix turkey and melted cheese on muffins today."
"Cheese is bad for you, you know."

"What the hell, it's Sunday and they're my favorite."

"You'll never learn, Fritz."

Et cetera.

Except for foods and days of the week, this routine varied little even when Joanna was alive; it did not vary at all now. After eating, he said, "It's a nice day out and I have nothing to do. Where should we go?"

"The museum would be nice."

He thought it over. No, too many people at the museum on Sundays. It might not be safe. "I think the park would be better."

"The park would be nice, too."

Fritz frowned. That final "too" was different in tone from the rest of the phrase. Weaker, maybe. It made him think of the process: Joanna recording a list of places it would be nice to go; the bracelet now randomly selecting one as a response to his question; the bracelet finding the proper response to his park suggestion; the bracelet noting that the park was the second place mentioned and tacking a "too" on the end of the sentence. The too's tone was different because the processor drew it from a sequence Joanna recorded on another day. A day closer to her death by the sound of it. He purged those thoughts, but he couldn't shake the recurring realization of the split in his
mind which allowed him to understand logically the processes of Crystal Memory and still half-accept these fragments of Joanna as a living soul.

As he walked out to his car, laughter drew his eyes to the house across the street. Frank and Judy were checking something on their speedboat's trailer. They were going to have the kind of day that normal people enjoy. Scenes like this, more than anything else, made Fritz feel like a phantom or some other such creature of night and sorrow. A man of 41 who looked 50, he rarely spoke to anyone except Joanna now. Even at work where he had a small accounting cubicle to himself -- no contact with people required. It was all phosphorescent screens and keyboards. Frank and Judy saw him and waved cheerfully. He smiled and waved back, but got into his car and drove away without speaking. He wasn't close to his neighbors because he didn't want to tip them off to the bracelet. It was, after all, illegal.

He found a relatively secluded area of the park and sat on a bench, taking in the day. Like all people who carried the souls of the dead, Fritz avoided the congress of the living. It was the price that had to be paid when one indulged in what society considered to be a perversion. If revealed, he would become an outcast, even subject to imprisonment, since the moral outrage of the religious sector and concern from the psychiatric profession caused
these new ghosts of science to be outlawed along with the latest drugs. The memory Crystal that was the essence of his bracelet, of Joanna, had cost most of his savings and all of her life insurance. Bought on the black market. A transaction whispered in back rooms. At first, even he had been appalled at her idea but . . . .

A gray rabbit hoping for a handout approached Fritz and broke that bleak chain of thought. He leaned down toward it. "There's a rabbit coming over for lunch," and smiled. "I love to watch them play . . . ."

Frightened by the dislocated voice, the rabbit fled. ". . . but they make me feel so guilty."

"Guilty? Why?" He had never heard this before.

"Because of the horrible things we have to do to them in the lab."

He frowned. Why did she record that? She worked as a lab technician before the brain cancer, and Fritz had often made it clear that he didn't care to hear the details of animal experiments. Had he never mentioned rabbits to the bracelet before? Every day he longed to hear new things spoken by Joanna's voice, but this didn't make sense. He shifted his right arm uncomfortably.

A young woman on a path about a hundred yards in front of him caught his attention. She wore a coat over her summer dress even though fall had not yet made itself fully
felt. The way she moved drew his interest. She held her right arm close to her body as though it was injured. Or more like it carried a great weight. Fritz suddenly became certain that she wore a bracelet beneath that coat. Over the past two years, he had developed a knack for spotting people like himself. It was the way they carried their burden that gave them away. He once saw two firemen lifting a person out of a wrecked car. Something about their posture made it clear that the person was dead. It was the same even with Crystal bodies; there was no mistaking the way people carried the dead, regardless of weight.

As she passed near a group of three boys in their late teens, she mouthed something to her arm. The boys took notice and began to follow her. Sensing trouble, Fritz rose and walked in their direction, switching off the speaker on his bracelet to avoid accidentally triggering a response. They didn't look violent, but he knew from experience not to trust looks. Fascists almost never look like monsters, he remembered a history teacher telling him long ago. Boots and jackets. The style hadn't changed much since James Dean. Except for the colored hair. The boys glanced at each other in silent agreement. Apparently they'd heard a response from the woman's bracelet. One sprinted in front of her and she saw them for the first time. The other two positioned themselves so that she was in the center of a
triangle, unable to escape in any direction. Fritz began to run. One tugged at her coat just as Fritz covered the remaining distance. The other two were absorbed in the spectacle and didn't notice Fritz until, without breaking his stride, he drop-kicked one of them in the back. He went down screaming. "Goddammit, Get him!"

The oldest, the apparent leader, glanced at the one holding the woman's coat and said, "Get her down, Roy," and rushed at Fritz.

Roy jerked her coat off and kicked her legs out from under her and yelled "Bitch!" just as Fritz sidestepped the leader's attack and grabbed his arm. He twisted it behind the boy's back and shoved it upward until he felt ligaments pop and heard a howl of pain. But by then Roy had finished shoving the woman to the ground and ran over and drove his fist into Fritz's side. Fritz went down, his stunned diaphragm unable to draw oxygen. Roy made the mistake of diving on top of him. Fritz wrestled for balance with his left hand as he tried to protect his right. He caught his opponent off guard with a sudden shift and rose to his feet. Roy was still on the ground and Fritz stepped on his hand, applying weight until he felt, actually heard, finger bones snap in two. The sound made Fritz sick, but he didn't want to take any chances by letting the boy get on his feet in fighting condition. For an instant, he felt a strange
thrill at causing pain, but he pushed that thought aside. He turned quickly to face the first one he kicked, but he was still on the ground, dazed. The leader stood up, cradling his ruined arm, and said, "Come on, let's move before any fucking cops show up!"

The others shouted, "You're gonna get it, man! Go fuck your corpse, slut!" and unsteadily ran away.

Fritz turned to help the woman, who was still on the ground. "Are you hurt?"

"No, I ..." she reached for her coat to cover her bracelet, then her eyes locked on Fritz's arm. With a brief instant of embarrassment, he realized his shirt sleeve was torn, revealing his own bracelet.

"Yes, I have one too. My name is Fritz. Can I help you get somewhere?" and smiled.

"I'm Linda," and smiled back, still trembling.

They went to a small diner on the street that bordered the east side of the park. The place was empty; it was too early for the lunch crowd. Unnerved by the incident, they spoke more openly about their lives than they would have ordinarily. Linda had married young, not even 19, and was so uncertain about her future when her husband began to die that she convinced him to record himself to help her along after he was gone. His name was David. He died two years ago, but she still received love and comfort from him. He
still gave her advice for the hundreds of situations he had anticipated and painstakingly worked out on his deathbed. Of course, she knew he was dead, but she wanted to hear his voice every night, just until she finished the grief process; that wasn't so bad was it?

"Why do you think they treat us like such freaks?" she asked in a hushed voice as she noted the icy stare of the waitress behind the counter.

Because we are, Fritz wanted to say. "I guess they're afraid that if someone close to them dies, they might do the same thing. God knows, the prospect of becoming one of us must scare people who don't like to think about death."

She looked at him strangely. "Are you sorry that you did it?"

"I didn't really do it. I mean, it wasn't my idea. Joanna really wanted it for me. She even started the process before she told me about it. She said she was afraid of how lonely I would be when she was gone. I wasn't sure at first, but she. . . ."

"But are you sorry?"

"I don't. . . yes, I think of all those thousands of hours she spend arranging and planning and recording all those words and sentences. . . I wish we could have spent those last months with each other instead of with a machine. I never understood why this was more important to her."
Fritz stopped and looked away. He felt as though he had given too much of himself away. Until now, he had never even said these things to himself.

"Do you have any children?"

"What... oh, no. She couldn't have children. We wanted to, though."

"Maybe she wanted to leave something of herself behind. That's important to some people, I think."

Just then, several people dressed in suits and dresses came in. Must be church people, Fritz thought uncomfortably. The religious establishment was very much opposed to his particular form of life-after-death. Two women took a nearby booth. One of them spotted Linda's bracelet and began to whisper, not quietly enough, to the other. "Look over there. The bracelet that woman is wearing. Don't stare!"

The other woman spoke with a hint of sympathy. "Well, I would never have anything to do with them, but can you really blame --"

"But it's against God! Remember what the reverend was saying last month: those scientists are inventing everything they can think of to lead people away from God."

"Maybe you should put your coat on; it's about time to leave." Fritz moved to help Linda cover her arm.
"Oh, yeah. I've got some things to do anyway, but we might get together again some time. Do you think?"

They made a date for the following night and surprised themselves by hugging rather closely instead of shaking hands for goodbye. Linda said she guessed cool metal had replaced warmth for too long for each of them.

On his way home, Fritz was elated. It had been so long since he had carried on a lengthly conversation with someone other than Joanna. Hell, even more than that; attacking those youths and starting a relationship with Linda were the only times he had taken the initiative since Joanna died. He was most proud of how he was able to rationally and logically discuss Joanna's death and his relationship with the bracelet. During those long days and nights alone, he had begun to believe his ability to distinguish Joanna from the program that mimicked her was slipping away.

But after he got home, his mood swung into depression. It seemed that all the negative emotions of the past years filled the house like liquid, drowning him whenever he came in the door. Joanna's clothes and all her other personal items, which he had never removed, conspired to overpower the brief hours with Linda. The morning was almost like another, receding, containing no more substance than the dream of Joanna in the night. He wanted to call Linda just to hear her say, yes, it's all real. But he couldn't bring
himself to pick up the phone because he was afraid she wouldn't be home and the phone would just ring and ring. Since Joanna's death, he had developed a terror of unanswered phones at the other end of the line. Of uncompleted connections in general. The only calls he made were to places where an answer was assured: carry-out restaurants or to the office. Or to the cool, synthesized female voice that gave the day's weather.

On top of this, a new thought began to develop. Linda suggested that Joanna had been so interested in recording herself because she wanted to preserve something of herself after death. Fritz had never considered that Joanna had any motive other than compassion for his plight. But maybe... her adamant single-mindedness on the subject would make more sense if she had interests of her own, interests beyond his welfare. After all, he never said this was what he wanted. He finally just gave into her. Then there was the matter with the rabbit. He almost forgot about that with all the excitement, but it was significant. She must have had a reason for including that response; maybe that reason was not entirely benevolent. Crazy. He put those paranoid thoughts away. But later, when he was in bed and the lights were out, he spoke to Joanna for the first time since meeting Linda. "What do you get out of all this?"
No response. She had not programmed an answer for that question. Or maybe she programmed the silence. The processor should have kicked back a random, general response. After all, the question was ambiguous.

He thought about these things for a while and found he couldn't sleep, so he asked Joanna to read to him. That always helped. A slight pause, then she began:

But the third sister, who is also the youngest --!
Hush! whisper whilst we talk of her! Her kingdom is not large, else no flesh should live; but within that kingdom all power is hers . . . .

The words washed over him like heavy waves dark with seafoam, but he barely heard them. She recorded hundreds of passages from his favorite books because when she was alive, he liked to hear the soft timbre of her voice; it lulled him to sleep and she correctly anticipated many sleepless nights. But why this? And why now? He had never heard it before.

She is also the suggestress of suicides.
Deep lie the roots of her power; but narrow is the nation that she rules . . . .

Then he recognized the piece. It was from Suspria de Profundis, but why did she start in the middle? The suicide line revived the paranoia. Maybe she couldn't deal with him having a life after he was gone . . . maybe . . . .
Madonna moves with uncertain steps, fast or slow, but still with tragic grace. Our Lady of Sighs creeps timidly and stealthily. But this youngest Sister moves with incalculable motions, bounding, and with tiger's leaps . . . .

. . . maybe something in her program sensed . . . identified . . . the intimate conversation with Linda and fought back?

Could Joanna have been that jealous?

She storms all doors at which she is permitted to enter at all. And her name is Mater Tenebrarum -- Our Lady of Darkness.

Fritz lay very still for the rest of the night. For the first time in his life, he was fearful of ghosts.

As frightening as the night had been, it faded when he met Linda for dinner the next evening. For a while, everything seemed as though it would be all right. They told each other many things and, perhaps driven by their sense of wasted time and misdirected emotion, they went home together. For the first time since her death, Fritz allowed a visitor into his apartment -- Joanna's kingdom. Eager but with nervous motions, they kissed softly, then passionately. Linda slipped her hand under his shirt and worked it off. They slowly undressed each other until only their bracelets clothed them. Finally, with trembling hands, they removed
each other's lovers and there was only the two of them, alone at last. They became one. Fritz was grateful for Linda's presence: to hold a warm, moving lover after so many years. But he was also uncomfortable. She seemed out of place here with so many reminders of Joanna. He felt as though she was watching. And once, when his eyes were closed and their movements were rapid, he caught himself imagining Joanna. Then, when they were resting much later, Fritz moved to speak Linda's name, but by reflex said, "Joanna."

And, horribly, the bracelet answered. "I'm here beside you, my love." Somehow, he had forgotten to turn the function switch to "off."

Linda stiffened in his arms.

"Christ, Linda. I meant to say you. I'm so . . ."

"It's all right, Fritz. I could have done the same thing. It's been too long for both of us."

Fritz switched off his bracelet, then got out of bed. "I'll take them into the other room." When he came back, Linda was crying.

"God, Fritz, when you were in there, I started to think about how I was alone for the first time since . . . but I wasn't thinking only about you. I was thinking of David's bracelet. Will we ever be able to let them go?"
Fritz got back into bed and put his arms around her, but he didn't answer. They went to sleep like that, but when Fritz woke up, they had rolled away from each other and he only held the familiar pillow in his arms.

Joanna came to him in his sleep two weeks later. He had seen or talked to Linda almost every day, but he still could not let go of the bracelet. That was okay, though, because neither could she. They talked about it rationally and marveled at the depth of the bracelets' power and decided that it would just take some time. They wore them less. Fritz rarely spoke to Joanna, but he sensed deep emotion building within him. Resentment and maybe fear. The truth was, he was afraid to speak. Afraid of what she might say. About Linda. Ghosts.

As he lay in bed one night, balanced on that state that might be called either sleep or wakefulness, he became aware of her presence, a dim outline lit by the almost imperceptible glow of the bracelet's red diode. For the first time that day, he spoke to her. "What do you want?"

Her voice responded from the bracelet on his arm rather than her outline. "I just want what's best for you."

"Just for me?"

"For us."

"I think Linda might be best for me . . . for both of us."
He had never mentioned Linda before, but Joanna knew. "She's coming between us. How can you let that happen?"

"No, she can't come between us; you're not . . . I can't touch you. I can touch her."

"Really?" He felt hands touch each side of his neck, lightly, just below his ears. A slight chill passed over him and he woke up. Or fell asleep. Either way, she was gone and he didn't remember anything else until the breaking of dawn. He was exhausted, so he stayed in bed for a while. Gradually, he became aware that the light from his window was fading instead of growing. Confused, he sat up and noted the time on his digital clock: 6:30*. The indicated p.m.; he had slept through the day. He quickly got out of bed and began to dress. A sinking feeling of time wasted made him queasy. At least it was Saturday, no big loss. He went into the kitchen, turned on the light, and froze. A bracelet sat on the counter. Linda's. It had to be. How did it get here? He couldn't remember anything about the past 24 hours, but two conflicting chains of thought that mimicked dim memory rose from a dark well in his mind: Linda had come over and woke him up, but he'd said he didn't feel well and went back to sleep and forgot all about it. She went back home and, maybe, on an impulse, left her bracelet behind as a gesture. A signal of deeper commitment. That made sense and he almost remembered it.
He got out of bed after a long and unknown conversation with Joanna, went to Linda's house . . . and did something . . . then brought her bracelet back. Linda wouldn't have just given it to him. Would she? He started to go to the phone and call her, but the prospect of hearing that dead, endless ringing on the line suddenly frightened him. Much more than usual. In a burst of frustration, he snatched the bracelet up and raised it over his head. He intended to bring it crashing down into the sink, but his hand began to shake and his arm lost its strength. He laid it gently on the counter and pulled a knife from a drawer, then put it down also. He started to laugh and said out loud, "I can't even kill a computer; how could I kill a person?"

He stopped laughing, momentarily afraid the bracelet, David, would answer. But it didn't. Fritz reassured himself; he couldn't kill anyone, and Joanna would never have asked him to, even now. They just weren't like that. His confidence ebbed as two sudden images flashed in him mind. One was of him attacking the youths in the park. He remembered how good it felt to hurt someone else after feeling pain himself for so long. The other was of Joanna, when she was alive, coldly, clinically slicing open a living, trembling rabbit.
"Goddammit! Ghosts aren't real. Joanna is dead -- she couldn't have told me to . . . ." He thought about that for a moment. Possibilities: One: Ghosts were real.

No.

Two: He was insane.

No. Not that.

Three: Joanna had included a secret program that could have sensed the beginning of a relationship with another woman and activated a deft strategy to lead him to . . . certain actions.

That could explain everything.

He walked back to the bedroom. Where Joanna was.

He thought of all the possible questions.

Did you plan all this?

Were you that cold, even in life?

Do you still love me?

Did you ever intend to let me go?

Suddenly he was sure that he didn't want to hear any answers that would prove he was right. Or prove something else, like the existence of ghosts.

He silently picked up the bracelet and carried it into the bathroom. He placed it in the sink and drew a hammer from the closet. He began to pound the bracelet, but the metal was harder than it looked and he didn't know where the vital circuits were. It was a long time before the red
Proper Functioning Mode light went out. He realized he was crying and told himself that he wasn't killing Joanna, she was already dead. But he realized that in any case, he would never hear her soft, chiming voice again and he cried harder. Finally, a large section of the bracelet twisted off and a tiny flood of silver liquid spilled out and ran down the drain. He wanted to say something -- goodbye or I'm free or go to hell -- but like Joanna, he couldn't find the words anymore.

After a long time, he went to the phone and dialed Linda's number and tried to control his fear as her phone rang. And rang. And rang again as he stared at the bracelet that was David and wondered what to do with it.
The carnival tents clustered at the edge of the desert town like the base of an invading army. Tall and slender metal rides its machineries of war. The sign which spanned the telephone pole gates read:

**NAYEN AND TOBAD BROTHER'S CARNIVAL OF MYSTERY AND THRILLS**

Buzzards, all shadows and leers, perched on each pole, scanning the ground for hot dogs.

Carson got out of his Transportation Department pick-up and entered through the gate, glancing nervously at the silent, winged guardians. The midway strip was deserted. The game tents slept, awaiting night, flaps covering their counters. A murmur of voice drew Carson down a side alley to a large picnic tent where several people were relaxing at the tables. A teenage Indian boy sitting at a table to himself looked up as Carson approached and waved in recognition. "Mr. Carson! I'm over here."

Carson ducked under the low-hanging canvas and sat at Johnny's table. It felt good to be out of the heat. "So, Johnny, how have you been keeping yourself?"

The boy swept his arm at the carnival around them. "Great. I just started working for these people. Guess what? A couple of Navaho guys own the whole thing -- I fit right in. At least they say they're Navaho. Sometimes, I'm not so sure. Anyway, we're going on the road next week."
Alamogordo, then Las Cruces. I'll make some money for a change."

"But you're not above making a few honest bucks, right?"
Johnny grinned. "Naw, my mother said you called last night. I was working, so I just told her to have you pick me up here. Twenty dollars, right?"

Carson nodded.

"What are we going to do?"

"Same as last month. I've got a few more details for the survey job on the turnpike. I think we'll have to climb a hill or two and I need you to help me carry the equipment."

"It'll be fine, so long as we get back by seven. I don't have any real work to do here before then."

"No problem. Can I get some lunch here?"

Johnny went over to the kitchen area where a tall, Latin woman silently handed him a plate of beans and corn bread. Carson noticed that the talking had died as soon as he arrived and the other workers made a point of not looking at him. It must have been his New Mexico state patch on his shirt sleeve. State officials were always shaking down the carnies with threats of health and fire citations. Carson was relieved when Johnny returned with the plate. Without saying anything, he began to eat. After a minute or two, Johnny volunteered, "It's kind of strange working here. I
mean, I never learned much about Navaho growing up; my parents were Mormons. But the bosses are into that stuff."

He lowered his voice. "I don't think they like people like you much. You know, white."

Carson grunted. "I'd never have noticed." A tall, lanky man in a black suit and derby hat approaching behind Johnny caught Carson's eye. He carried a black object. Johnny looked over his shoulder and quickly turned back, lowering his voice to a whisper. "That's one of them: Nayen."

The man sat at the table directly behind Johnny and stared at Carson. He placed the object on the rough, water-warped wood, keeping his hands around it. Carson recognized a knobbed, glass lid; the kind that covered old-fashioned glass candy jars like he saw in the corner drugstore when he was a boy. The rest of the jar was wrapped in black velvet. It was the man himself that unnerved Carson: His skin was dark, but not like a Mexican's or Indian's. It was as though he was covered in a light coat of something almost black, through which his skin gleamed dimly. Smooth and almost shiny. His fingers were very thin and long, longer than they should have been. Stiff, black hairs almost covered them.

Carson finished eating quickly and said, "Let's get started."
Johnny nodded and took off toward the parking lot. Carson rose and followed more slowly. As he passed the man, he heard him say, "The sun will drink your life and the birds will eat your soul." He walked away quickly, barely hearing the rest of the threat.

Johnny fell asleep during the hour and a half drive, yawning and squinting awake when Carson pulled off the highway onto the baked, rocky ground. "We here already?"

Carson stared unhappily out the window. Hot air distorted the horizon, making it wavy like the ocean. The bleached, white skull of a bull lay a few feet away. Black buzzards circled, drifting on the eternal currents of heat.

The sun will drink your life and the birds will eat your soul.

"Damn him, anyway," Carson muttered.

"Who?"

Carson turned and frowned. He had not meant to speak his thoughts. "Oh, I was just thinking about that guy, Nayen."

"Him? What did he do?"

Carson repeated the man's curse. "You had already gone out to the pick-up when he said that. Come on, let's move our stuff up on the hill."

Reluctantly, they got out of the air conditioned cab of the pick-up and lifted the survey instruments out of the
back. As they left the road and trudged through the sand and loose rock, Johnny asked, "Did he sound mad?"

"Well, not very kind. Why?"

"That thing he said about the birds and sun is an old saying that the Navaho used on white people they didn't like."

Carson frowned at Johnny. "A curse, you mean."

They stopped at the foot of the hill and Johnny glanced uncomfortably up its slope. It was a tiny mesa, really. It rose from the desert floor 20 or 30 feet, then flattened, spreading out in an irregular oval shape for a quarter of a mile or so. "Well, yeah, but don't blame it on me; I like your money." He grinned. "It was my Grandpa that told me about it. A long time ago, he and his friends used it, I guess."

"Really? That's strange. After he said that, he said 'That's what the young ones say, but you won't be so lucky by the time we're through with you.' Something like that."

Carson stood in a small drift of sand. Heat penetrated his boots like hot coals. "Come on, let's get up there."

They shifted the instruments slung around their backs, leaned into the steep slope, and scrambled up. Loose sandstone broke under their feet and tumbled down. Breathing hard, Carson tried to take his mind off the heat and labor by thinking about the old man. It didn't make him
feel much better. A jump over one last sandstone boulder, and Carson mounted the top. Johnny stood, panting, waiting for him. They were sweating heavily, but a gust of fiery wind instantly evaporated the droplets clinging to their skin. Carson unslung his small plastic thermos, opened it, and drank. The ice water washed the desert sand and heat from his mouth. He offered the container to Johnny. "Want some?"

"Yeah, thanks."

They rested until their breathing slowed to normal. "Which way now?" Johnny finally asked.

Carson consulted his compass, then pointed. "South. Let's set up over there, on the edge. We should be able to see the thing."

The desert floor stretched 50 miles, heat creating shimmering mirages of silver pools. The landscape danced. Dry and twisted clumps of sagebrush crawled like spiders. Carson blinked.

"I don't see anything," Johnny said.

Carson pointed. "Look there, and there, and there. Those little ridges curving toward us. They're the western edge of the formation." The ridges squirmed. The heat again.

"I see two of them, I think. What does this think look like, I mean, if you could see it all at once?"
Carson sucked at the dryness of his mouth, the cool water all gone. When he had first seen the aerial photos, he knew exactly what it looked like. A spider. Even the image of one still nauseated him. "It's a large oval, with four long lines on each side reaching out east and west, then curving north. It's 15 miles across and the ridges are so worn down that you have to be up in the air and looking directly at it to see its shape."

"It's a spider, then?"

"Could be anything. Let's get the tripod set up." They quickly erected the metal stand and bolted the sights on the platform. Carson began looking through the lens and taking notes. Bored, Johnny picked up pieces of reddish sandstone, tossed them down the small cliff, then finally asked, "What does all this have to do with the Turnpike Authority? They can't care that much about some old ruin."

Bent over his notebook, Carson smiled. "No, they don't care about it at all, but it's in the way. They planned for this turnpike to run straight through here, then when they did some aerial surveying, they found this thing. No one had noticed it before. So the archaeologists got all upset and went to the governor and the next thing you know, I'm out here trying to plot a route around the thing to 'preserve' it for future study."
"Who would take the trouble to come out in this heat and dig around anyway?"

"Yeah, that's what I said, but I'm sure they'll find someone. In the meantime, we're going to have to put a curve in what would have been a perfectly straight highway. Aside from ruining some nice symmetry, it's cost God knows how many millions of dollars." Carson looked up from the lens. "Hey, don't the Navaho have a spider God or something like that?"

Johnny laughed, but stared at the ground. "I don't know too much about that stuff, like I said. But, yeah, I remember my Grandpa telling me about the Spider woman, but don't blame us. The Navaho never built anything this big. It might have been the Old Ones. Maybe they had a spider women, too."

Carson stepped away from the tripod and stretched his back. "Who?"

"The Anasazi. That's Navaho for Old Ones. They built little cities around here and Chaco Canyon, then died out before the Navaho came around."

"Yeah, the Anasazi. I studied them in engineering school, but I never heard them called the Old Ones. They built a road system that ran in perfectly straight lines."
If a mountain was in the way, they just ran right over the top of it instead of going around. Hell, if they made this thing they would understand if we built over it."

Carson worked for an hour longer in silence. "There, just about got it. The highway will skim the outside of the ridges, but the People in Suits should be happy."

"Can we go now? It's going to get dark soon."

"Just a few more minutes. I want to get the height of that nearest ridge." He sighted the leg, which cast its own shadow, then cursed. "I screwed that up. This reading says that the ridge is lower than the desert floor."

Johnny squinted against the lowering sun. "You must be adding something wrong. It looks four or five feet tall to me."

Carson tried again, and got the same reading. He opened his notebook, accidentally tearing a page in frustration, and consulted a chart. "This can't be right. We're not leaving until I figure this out." But several more readings produced the same result.

"Can we go now?" Johnny nervously kicked at the dirt. Carson glanced at him. "What's the hurry?"

"The tarantulas are coming out." He pointed to one leg of the tripod. Carson glanced down to see a black spider the size of a coffee cup trying to climb the smooth metal. With a half-stifled cry of disgust, he stumbled backward,
knocking the tripod over with his arm. The tarantula fled, gone before the tripod hit the ground. Carson looked at Johnny, trying to hide his embarrassment behind a grin.
"You don't like them, either? Okay, let's break this stuff down and go."

On the way back to the pick-up, they spotted a dozen or more of the creatures, stalking large insects. They seemed to flow over the ground, long legs methodically striding forward in silent rhythm. Not quite silent, though. Carson once heard the soft patter of legs dragging a heavy body across sand. He stepped quickly, avoiding the darkening shadows of rocks. The memory that he had been trying to keep locked away ever since he saw the photos of the strange image finally broke free. It tumbled out of a closet filled with sharp-fanged dolls and leering, screaming jack-in-the-box heads and all the other nightmares of childhood.

He was three years old on a late summer evening. A tarantula crawled slowly along the ground, a grasshopper in its mouth. Carson was on his knees, watching. He leaned forward, his right hand on the ground for balance. Suddenly, the monstrous spider dropped the grasshopper and charged, its back legs a blur; its forelegs raised high above its body. Carson screamed and leaped back, but not before the spider reached his hand and sank its fangs into
the soft skin between his fingers. His mother told him not to worry, that it wasn't poisonous, but it turned out that Carson was hyperallergic and he had to spend two days in the hospital, his eyes swollen shut. He screamed a lot because all he could feel were soft legs, crawling all over his body. Even the sight of spiders, especially tarantulas, made him ill after that.

"I knew I should have never taken this assignment."


Annoyed, Carson realized he has been talking to himself again. "Oh, these readings on that ridge. I couldn't have made a mistake, but I'll catch hell from the office. They'll laugh me right out of the building if I tell them that the ridges are really trenches."

They reached the pick-up, loaded the equipment, and got in. Carson checked the floorboard for tarantulas. When they were back on pavement, driving back to town, Carson said, "I guess I'll just have to falsify my report. I'll say they measured four feet tall. Does that sound about right to you?"

"I don't know, the desert can really get your eyes mixed up. Maybe those really were ditches, or whatever."

Carson saw several tarantulas crawling on the pavement.
He resisted the urge to swerve and hit them. "No, the aerial photos clearly showed them as elevations, not depressions. Anyway, you saw the shadows they cast."

"Well, why don't you just tell it like it is? Let them send someone hiking all the way out there with a yardstick if they don't believe you."

Carson sighed and shook his head. "No, they'd send me, I'm sure. Anyway, it's more than just that. I mean, I'm a professional. I know the math, and I have the best instruments. I can measure anything in a given landscape to an inch. But if I didn't make a mistake, and I'm sure I didn't, then those readings are evidence of the impossible."

Johnny looked at him and laughed. "It's just one little thing, so what?"

Carson considered how to explain. "Don't you see? It's more than just one thing. One mistake makes the whole system faulty. The math, the instruments, everything. It's like basing your addition system on the premise that $1 + 1 = 3$, then uncovering that basic mistake. The whole system falls apart. For all I know now, the world is flat and we're about to drive over the edge."

"I still think you're making too much out of it."

"Maybe, but I just like straight lines."

Johnny laughed again. "I've never seen a straight line that wasn't made by a man."
Carson mulled this over. They passed another cluster of tarantulas, at least 20. He cringed. "Why are there so many of these fucking things in the road?"

"I think the pavement stays warm longer than the dirt at night and they like the heat."

Carson switched on the lights and they drove on, the last traces of dusk faded. Soon, they crested a hill and the town's distant lights sparked the horizon. As they drew nearer, a spinning circle of white fire rose above a jellybean spill of colored light.

Johnny leaned forward. "Hey, the ferris wheel! The carnival really lights up the sky, doesn't it? Just drop me off."

The pulled into the dirt lot, now strewn with litter and cars parked askew. The banner was now bathed in a flood light.

NAYEN AND TOBAD BROTHER'S CARNIVAL OF MYSTERY AND THRILLS

"Those are strange names," Carson said as he fished out a twenty dollar bill. "Here's your pay."

Johnny took the money and stuffed it in his shirt pocket. "They're from Navaho myths. Nayen is short for Nayenezgani. I think it means Slayer of Enemy Gods, or something like that. They're teaching me all that stuff.

"It's been nice working for you, man. I've got to run now."

Carson killed the engine and switched off the lights. "I'll think I'll walk in with you and get a Coke. We drank all the water."

The midway bloomed, now. Like morning glories at night. Children dragged their parents from booth to booth. Dunk the clown! Shoot the ducks! The Amazing Tor, sword swallower! See the man with the burning hair! Music fought laughter for dominance of the ears. Lights flashed like fragments of a rainbow gone insane. It was the pandemonium that only existed only after dark, when a carnival opened its eyes.

"See you later; it's been fun." Johnny ran off into the crowd. Carson walked down the midway until he saw a stand from which adults ushered children with blue and pink cotton candy. A young woman there served him a Coke, of course charging an outrageous dollar for a "small." He turned to leave, but after taking several steps, he realized he had started in the wrong direction. Instead of the midway with all its color and motion, he was in a darkened alley between tents. Great, he thought, a surveyor lost at a carnival; it figures with everything else, though. He kept walking, intending to exit the alley and circle around to the parking lot, but it was longer than he expected. "To hell with it," and caught himself talking aloud again. He lifted a moldy,
burlap corner of a tent and slipped inside, the rough material scratching his neck.

It was pitch black. He guessed he was in a storage area, cut off from the attraction and its attendant by a curtain. He inched forward, felt the curtain brush against his face, and slipped through. This side was almost as dark, but a single black candle lit a small table. "Come in, sit down," a soft feminine voice whispered. A fortune-teller; it had to be.

"I was just passing through; I'll go out the front. Sorry." He started to leave.

"Sit down, Carson."

He turned. "How do you ... did Johnny put you up to this?" Curious, he stepped toward the table. He could make out only a face in the dim light. It smiled at him. "Don't you want your future told?"

"No. I never believed in that stuff." But he sat in the chair by the table; he wanted to find out how she knew his name.

"No? I didn't think so, but you let a lot of things you don't believe rule your life, don't you?" She spoke with a slight lisp, drawing out "so" and "things."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"For instance, don't you always check under your bed covers for tarantulas, even though you know its impossible
for them to get into your apartment, way up in that tall building?"

He broke into a sweat. No one could have known that, least of all her. And, the thing was, it was an irrational act, just as she said. "I'm just going to leave now. I don't care . . . ." A lace-covered arm reached out of the dark and pinned his hand to the table. It was very warm and stronger than it should have been. Something heavy shifted on her side of the table. He was getting sick.

"Don't you want to know your future?"

"I said, no! I don't believe in palm . . . ."

"Then why are you afraid? Anyway, I don't need to read your palm. I already know." She released his hand and he drew it to his chest, cradling it. "Your fate, I should say, not your future, is that you worship what is rational, but you will allow fear to control your life. You doubt yourself. You want the world to be as straight lines on paper. You think this means perfection and you will deny the truth until the moment of your death."

"Fine. Now . . . ." he had no breath for words. Blindly, he stood and stumbled toward the exit, but when he pushed through the flap, a wall of distorted reflections confronted him. "At least she's being consistent," he said, startled to hear the insanity in his own voice. After naming one of his worst fears, she confronted him with
another. He had always hated the houses of mirrors, hated how something as reliable as his vision could be so easily tricked, hated how light bent to distort the world into impossible curves and shapes which defied geometry, but how could they have known? Still, he recognized a method here. And a purpose. Someone was trying to steal his sanity. That gave him some resolve; at least he knew what to fight against. Just concentrate on getting out; don't think about mind reading or demons or . . . make sense of all that later.

He stepped forward, feeling with his hands so as to avoid crashing into the glass wall of a false passageway. Images of himself, short and hugely fat, tall and curved like a triple hour glass, walked beside him. He didn't look directly at them because he thought he glimpsed things in the images that couldn't be accounted for by refraction alone. One image he couldn't avoid. Big as a bay window, it contained not his image, but a desert. A highway cut through it, black. Blacker than it should have been and . . . uneven, crawling with . . . He turned away quickly. The suddenness of the open room surprised him. So did the old man with the jar. They stood in a circular space fronted with mirrors that magnified their size. A single, bare light bulb hung on a wire between them. In addition to the jar, the man had a small, green canary on his shoulder.
He stooped to the floor and spoke, barely audible. "I doubt you're calm enough to say anything sensible, but there's not much to say now, anyway. Watch."

Those long, long fingers stripped away the jar's black cover to reveal an enormous beast. Carson couldn't even call it a spider, though he had seen a picture of one like it in a book. It looked just like a tarantula, but much larger.

"This is a bird spider," the old man said, "very rare and precious. Here is how it got its name." He lifted the canary from his shoulder, raised the glass lid, and quickly thrust the bird inside. It fluttered hysterically. The spider didn't flinch at the beating wings. It sat motionless until, in a spastic lurch, it raised its forelegs and pinned the bird beneath its heavy body. In the enlargement-mirrors around him, Carson could see the fangs at work. The bird shuddered, then stilled.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Carson cried, his voice all breath. "I wasn't going to hurt those mounds. Dammit, I was here to work around them!"

The man stood, reluctantly, it seemed. As though standing upright was unnatural for him. "Who said we had anything to do with that? You don't even know who 'we' are. But I'll tell you this: your actions don't matter. Even your very thoughts are offensive. All straight lines, just
like the Anasazi. As your young friend would say, you pissed us off."

"I don't understand. That's not fair."

The man just hissed and shook his head. Then, he casually kicked the jar over and hurled the glass lid at the bare light bulb. Shattering glass echoed in the room and the last image Carson saw was the man disappearing through an invisible exit.

In his mind, Carson could see the spider releasing its prey and slowly crawling from the jar, stalking. Carson stood still in the dark, listening. Yes, the spider's footfalls were there. A steady rain of rhythmic thumps. The monster must weigh a pound or more, Carson thought. More than even a bird spider should. The best thing to do would be to try and step on it, judging its position by the sound. But if he missed . . . an image filled his mind of the angered beast charging, its forelegs raised. Carson turned and ran toward where he remembered coming in, but misjudged the direction. He crashed into hard glass and toppled backwards. Stunned, or simply frightened, he could not move at all. Several seconds must have passed because he heard footfalls, soft as rain, approaching his left ear. But the touch came on his neck. And the pain. He screamed his arm into motion and grasped the soft, damp, furry body and jerked, but that only made the pain worse, the fangs
stretched and tore his skin. In the last moment, before he went away from that horrible place entirely, he babbled insanely that nature has its reasons for avoiding straight lines; curved fangs hook flesh so much more firmly.
LILITH IN NEON BLUE

Maybe it started with the touch of a door knob and the quivering, biting blue spark produced by the contact of flesh and metal. Or maybe it was the green lettering on his computer screen that began to gyrate and flower into the third dimension after 12 nonstop hours of keyboard pounding. Or maybe the soft, blue orb of a misfit street lamp that seemed to flicker as though obscured by the passing of moth-winged darkness. Of course Lilith was there all along, but the awareness came slowly, in stages. Suspicion started here:

Tyrus Dow pressed the SAVE and TRANSFER keys on his computer, thereby committing a document, which had taken him seven hours to write, into his corporation's magnetic bubble memory banks hundreds of miles away. More eternal than chiseling in stone. But at that instant, as his slightly numb index finger depressed the Coke-sticky key, he saw an image on the screen that his terminal couldn't possibly have generated. It was just there for an instant: phantom geometry that came and went like a fork of lightning. No big deal, except the image was blue and his screen knew only two colors: green and black. Ty switched off the terminal and rubbed his eyes, grimacing as he felt the slight stickiness of the Coke pass to his eyelids. This didn't make sense and he hated it. Ty liked to know where things
were, how they fit. He could break the house in Vegas at blackjack, calmly betting stacks of blacks on a 16 near the end of the game because he noted and remembered which cards had already been dealt and calculated the overwhelming odds against the dealer drawing a better hand from the remaining stack. Ty didn't accept quirks.

Could be, he thought, that he was seeing things. He hated that theory even more. He was a trained observer who could identify 30 miscellaneous objects at a glance and categorize them by size, color, and shape from memory. Ty trusted his vision. But either he was seeing things or something had happened that he couldn't fit into reality as he knew it. Just forget it, he told himself and knew he couldn't. A kingdom for the want of a nail, he thought. Even the smallest details must be considered.

Peripherally, he saw Roman approaching and tried to guess his opening line. He was right.

"Ty, get the fuck out of here and go home. The payroll office is going to kill me if I sign another check with overtime for you."

He was using the Playful Chiding Approach as outlined in the company's Employee Relations Manual. Ty had read it. His eyes focused on Roman's only deviation from Corporate Standards: his pale green and scarlet tie. He nodded, stood up, and put the dust cover on his keyboard, deciding
in the process to throw Roman a curve: "Jack, does that tie come with batteries?" and went away from there.

When he stepped out of the elevator onto the ground floor, he blinked and became aware of the stickiness still on his lids. He detoured to the public washroom, cursing himself for not remembering to use the executives' upstairs because sometimes street people slipped into the downstairs. Cases of hepatitis had been traced to that washroom. After rinsing his face, Ty carefully took a length of paper towel with which to open the door and avoid contact with the damp handle.

Out on the street, he was reminded once again of the shortening days; the taller buildings already obscured the sun. Realizing it would be dark before he got home, he quickened his pace. Two blocks down, a burst of light and motion among the gray suits and brown walls drew Ty from his path. A glance at its source brought him to a full stop. A panhandler wearing a bright red-and-blue nylon windbreaker over his disintegrating trousers and plaid shirt worked the crowd with inspired animation. It was his gimmick that attracted Ty's attention: a brass dish, apparently a church's offering plate, sat on a three-legged pedestal about waist high. It was ringed with a Christmas tree wreath of red, blue, and yellow LEDs. Ty stepped up for a closer look.
"Alms for the poor, sir?" Ty shifted his gaze to the beggar's face. The man's skin was creased and his hair was gray, but his quick, precise, almost stylized movements suggested a young actor portraying an old but energetic King Lear. His voice was cracked, but it resonated with a self-assuredness, even smugness, that Ty never expected could come from a street person. For the second time that day, Ty felt his sharp picture of reality growing fuzzy around the edges. He glanced down into the plate. It was nearly full, mostly with dollar bills.

"Looks like you've already got plenty there to me," and glanced back at the beggar, noticing more tiny LEDs blinking like insect eyes from inside his shirt.

"That's the way it looks; yes sir, you're right about that, but I'm one of the faithful and I have to tithe." He shifted his body slightly and the points of light moved in perfect unison. Were they on some sort of necklace?

"What, you give some of that to a mission? The Salvation Army?"

The man laughed. The lights jiggled. "Hell, boy, where've you been? Religion changes fast these days and you've got to change with it, or you're in a world of shit."

Ty wanted to hurry on home, but this was morbidly interesting and he just had to ask: "Got a new god now, do you?"
"Boy, you'd better believe it and she's a real bitch! Not to say she doesn't take care of me, but she gets jealous. Now how about a buck so I can get her offering?"

Ty clutched a bill and quickly slipped it into the plate. It was a first, but he felt obligated because of the conversation. The bum smiled and started to say something, but Ty turned quickly and walked away. Something about the bum's philosophy seemed to connect with the strange flash on Ty's screen, forming a seed of paranoia. He didn't want to be distracted by it anymore.

He moved down the street with a pace that kept him on the verge of breathlessness until, just as the last sunlight drained from the sky, an aberration in the once familiar street again brought him to a stop. At first, he couldn't place it -- just a sense that something was out of place. Subtle but very wrong. A pulsing of neon light drew his eyes to the left, across the street. Something was different about the woman in the kinetic sign, he half-glanced at her on the way home every day during the part of the year that the sun was down and the sign on. An advertisement for a negligee manufacturer called Lilith, the neon formed images of a woman in four positions. In the first one, she lay on her back, head tilted toward the sky. Each image was turned more toward the street until, in the final position, she lay on her side looking down at the
passing stream of people. The positions lit up in quick succession, giving the impression of cartoonish motion in an endless cycle. Her body was ghost silver, her hair flames of scarlet, and her eyes blue. She wore a gossamer lace work of amber. But it now seemed to Ty that a fifth phase had been added. She seemed to be looking down lower than before. His irritation growing, Ty hurried home.

The apartment door was unlocked. Frowning, he opened it and asked, "Cass, are you here?"

No answer. He had left Cassandra in the morning, giving her his spare key so she could lock the door when she left. Apparently she forgot, although that wasn't like her. The message light on the answering machine was blinking, so he hit the replay button. The tone bleated, then Cassandra's voice resonated hollow and metallic from the speaker: "Hi, love. I just called to tell you that I'm going to run over to my place after work to pick up a few things and wash some clothes. I'll be over to see you about seven or so. Bye... oh, I think I forgot to lock the door; you might want to look around and make sure no weird people wandered in. Bye."

"Dammit, Cass. Can't you re..." He stopped, sheepishly aware that he was talking to a machine. With a sigh of anger, he stalked back to the bedroom. He stripped off his suit coat and flung open the closet. Something
moved back there in the darkness. Sudden fear brushed the
hair on Ty's neck and arms like static. "Who are --"

A shrill cry and a spray of blue sparks answered. He
leaped backwards, lost his footing, and tumbled onto the
bed.

Cassandra emerged from the closet, laughing. She
twirled a toy plastic gun on her finger: the kind that
shoots sparks. "Gotya that time. You should have seen --"

"God damn, Cass. That one was not funny." Ty's hands
were shaking, more from delayed response to the whole day's
events than from anger at Cass. "These . . . games of yours
are fun up to a point, but don't make me have a stroke."

The apparent fury in his quivering voice cut through
Cassandra's laughter and hardened her eyes. "Hey, lighten
up. You used to like this sort of thing. If you can't take
a little surprise now, fine, but don't yell at me."

Ty collapsed back onto the bed. "I'm sorry, it's not
just you. I was already upset..." He closed his eyes.

"Hey, is something wrong?" She sat on the bed and
placed her hand on his cheek, as if checking for fever.

"It was just . . . ." He could not verbalize his sudden
anxiety of electricity and blue; there was nothing rational
about it and he was a rational man. Nothing more and
nothing less. "I just had a lot of trouble on my computer
today. Some malfunctions, you know. It all gave me a
tension headache, and when you . . . .

"Ty, I didn't mean to upset you. Maybe it was a bit too much."

Ty smiled. "I'm okay. I guess this is one of the hazards of dating a video game writer. Are you all like this?"

She smiled, too. "You bet. Now let's fix some dinner and see if we can get rid of that tension," and leaned over to kiss him.

Much later, Ty awoke in bed as Cassandra got up and went in to the bathroom. He noticed she had placed a small blue ghost light in the hallway. That bothered him, but he told himself it's just a damn light, don't get uptight. He smiled at the unintended rhyme and felt the urge to share it with Cass. But then he would have to explain what he was thinking about and he didn't want to seem paranoid. How could just one flash of strange light on a computer screen haunt him so much? Then there was the bum . . . . He closed his eyes and thought about the night four weeks ago when he met Cass. That didn't bring much comfort, considering the setting. He had gone out with Marty and Ray from the office. They ended up in the Broken Rainbow, a New Age dance club that was all blue smoke and laser light and silhouette. They introduced him to Cass and mutual interest
kept them together throughout the evening. She was a video
game designer, as detail-minded and workaholic as Ty, but
she had that playful, unpredictable quality . . .

"Look, there's a ghost in here," she whispered in his
ear as they danced to a slow, jazzy, synthesizer song.

Ty glanced around at the gyrating bodies and pulsing
lights. "What do you mean?"

"Those lights on the wall to your left. Watch the
pattern they follow." She pointed to a bank of mini
spotlights that swiveled back and forth as they alternately
flashed up and down the spectrum.

Although Ty would rather have concentrated on nuzzling
her shoulder, he watched the lights until the music trailed
off. As the next song began, Ty gave up. "They're just
flashing and moving randomly."

"That's what I mean. They aren't programmed. They're
moving all by themselves."

Ty frowned. He didn't want to get into a technical
debate on a night with more sensual possibilities, but he
said, "Nothing is random. Surely there must be some sort of
program that mimics randomness, but that in itself has an
inherent logic behind it . . . ." he trailed off, feeling
foolish at sprouting shop talk while holding a beautiful
woman in his arms.
"But that's my point. If the world has any real order to it, and the programmer doesn't control them, then something else must. I call them ghosts. Like the things that chase Pac Man around. Unless you can learn the secrets of the system, you never know what they're going to do next."

Ty started to object, but she hugged the words from his mouth and leaned close to his ear, "And life is just one big video game. You never know what's going to try to eat you next."

They danced until the club closed down with its theme song, a slow, teched-up version of "Over the Rainbow." She went home with him that night saying, "Beware, I don't do one-nighters. You may not get rid of me, even if you want to."

The next few weeks hummed with the crisp, sharp notes of her wit and voice. The days were sequined with the smiles behind her eyes. And her laughter, like chimes of jade touched by wind . . . but no, his world was too pragmatic to make room for such images and the ideals of romance. Sometimes the feeling stirred in Ty that it was all mirage: perfection in a desert where perfection could not be. Still . . . he liked what was happening. It was just moving faster than his cautious nature hated to allow. He tried hard to remember more of what they talked about that first
night, but the fragmented prisms of Broken Rainbow blinded memory. When he slept, he dreamed that blue-tongued lightning reached down from the sky and took hold of him and made him dance like a stringed puppet.

At work the next day, Ty couldn't finish an entire program. He just sat there, watching the characters on his screen. They were the proper green, but he couldn't help thinking they were somehow animate. After he watched for a while, they seemed to dance with motion as subtle as that of an opening flower. It wasn't just that; everything electrical in the office -- from the fluorescent lights to the pencil sharpeners to the telephones -- seemed to produce sounds that Ty had never noticed before. Hums and clicks and snaps all seemed to carry meaning. And those numbers on the screen . . . they were reaching out through the glass.

"What's the matter, Ty? I haven't seen you hit a key in ten minutes." Jack wandered over, zeroing in on Ty's inaction.

Ty considered for a moment. What the hell: "Jack, have you ever thought electricity might have a life of its own?"

Jack laughed, but not as cynically as Ty expected. "You've been looking at Blue Spiders too long."

Ty recognized "Blue Spiders" as a proper noun, but couldn't guess who they were; he only knew that he wouldn't like them. "What?"
"Oh, you haven't seen mine yet? I thought you'd have looked it over pretty closely by now. I know how you are with these things."

"Looked what over?"

"Hey, come over to my office; you've got to check this out," and dragged Ty away from his terminal, suddenly more interested in showing off his latest toy than in Ty's work.

Ty almost cringed when he saw the thing in Jack's glass-walled office. It was a hollow crystal glove that contained a much smaller metal globe within. Blue, jagged bands of electricity (just like he dreamed of the night before) crawled around the inside of the outer globe. They resembled long-legged spiders, trying to get out, ceaselessly searching for the smallest hole through which to slip into the real world.

"Isn't that something? A plasma sculpture. Every exec I know has one. They're the latest thing in office deco. Isn't that just something?"

Ty didn't answer because he was already walking, sickly, back to his desk. He switched his terminal off. And his desk lamp.

The beggar was in the same place. Ty was exhausted and just wanted to get home to Cass, but he stopped and watched him work the crowd. Something about those flashing lights in his shirt . . . . A lot of people were giving money.
Suddenly, the bum looked straight at Ty. "Hey, I remember you! You're a live one; that's for sure."

Ty stepped closer. Reluctantly, as one approaches a snake to see if it is poisonous. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, yes, you're a special one. Got that shine in your eyes. You've seen Her Lady. Or she seen you. Better give a little something and make sure she looks fondly on you."

(Those tiny LED's inside his shirt).

Ty's hand reached into his pocket. Just give him something so he'll let me go in peace, he thought as he dropped a bill in the offering plate.

"What do you get . . . her?"

The man laughed again. "Batteries, of course," and gestured to the lights around his neck. Ty turned and began to walk away because he didn't want to admit what he glimpsed. The old man's voice followed: "Yeah, be right to her and she'll be good to you, but if you make her mad, you're FUCKED!" Ty kept walking; trying to forget the sight of LEDs sewn into the man's flesh.

The string of impossibilities was racing through his mind when Ty opened his apartment door and found yet another element out of place in his ordered world. His sofa was now against the west wall of the living room and his recliner had been moved to the south wall. Cassandra walked in from
the bedroom, wearing a white silk robe. "How was your day, Ty?"

"What happened to . . . ? What are you doing here . . . ?" and gave up.

"Don't you remember? I told you last night that today was my day off and I'd just hang around here and wait for you to get home."

Ty tentatively stepped into the living room. "Yes, I forgot, I guess."

"You forgot? You never do that. What's up?"

"Just a bad day. Really strange. But what I want to know is . . . ?" He gestured at the misplaced furniture.

"Oh, come on. I'll show you," and nudged him over onto the sofa. "See how it faces the TV now? We can sit together without having to watch it at an angle."

"Yeah, it's ok . . . I just wish you'd told me first. You know how I hate changes that I'm not expecting."

She laughed. "What, I should call you at work and tell you to brace yourself when you get home because your chair might be in a different place? Lighten up." She picked up the remote control and flicked on MTV. A heavy metal band dressed in brightly colored rags played in a blasted urban landscape. Electricity licked out from their instruments.

Ty closed his eyes and tried to dismiss his growing obsession with the texture and hues of neon and video light.
"Isn't there anything else we can do on this couch besides watch TV?" He opened his eyes and her face filled his vision. She smiled, leaned forward and kissed him, but Ty couldn't concentrate on that. He was thinking about her eyes. Were they always that shade of blue? A shade between indigo and evanescence?

The next morning, she left before he woke. He groaned. The blue lightning, more vivid than before, had stolen his sleep. He dressed slowly, vaguely aware of a tiny hum somewhere in the apartment. Although he should have recognized the sound, he pushed it aside as imagination or an aftertaste of the dreams until he passed his study on the way to the door. The computer screen was on. Cass must have done something with it before she left and forgot to turn it off. Ty walked into the room and saw, flashing on the screen:

GOOD MORNING, TY. I HAD TO LEAVE EARLY. I'LL SEE YOU AFTER WORK. THERE COULD BE A SURPRISE!

Damn, I don't know how many more of those I can take, Ty thought on the way out the door. On the bus, Ty thought of all the things at work he didn't want to face. Glowing computer screens. Humming electric pencil sharpeners. Fluorescent lights, long and flickering. Blue Spiders trying to get out of their eggs. He let the bus carry him past his stop and got off at the park down the street.
A bank of phone booths stood near the bus stop. Ty picked up a receiver and dropped a coin in the slot. The dial tone sounded strangely three-dimensional, as if there were physical space somewhere inside the phone lines. A church for the beggar's new God, Ty thought as he dialed the office. "Hello, Terra Nova Corp."

Static punctuated the secretary's voice. "Hello, Cindy? This is Tyrus Dow."

"Oh, Mr. Dow. What can I do for you?" Static again.
"I think we've got a bad connection. Can you hear me?"
She sounded puzzled. "Bad connection? No, I can hear you just fine."

"Well, anyway, I just called to say I won't be in for work today. I don't feel very well."

"Yeah, I can tell. You sound --"

"I'll be all right. Just tell Roman." Another burst of static. Ty hung up without waiting for a reply. The noise on the line gave him the wild idea that some electrical beast was stalking him, its random static causing the strange effects Ty had been noticing. His computer. The phone. Lilith. He walked away from the phones and the crowded street and disappeared into the comforting green of the trees. But even the heart of the park was no complete refuge. Sitting there on a stone bench, Ty could see no sign of the city, but the sounds were there. All the sounds
of traffic and machinery and tall buildings were muted by the soft leaves of the trees, but they still got through. They blended together into a bass hum that seemed to slowly rise and fall along a cosmic scale. That's it, Ty thought. The city's hum. Its voice. It made him sleepy, like a lullaby. Slowly, Ty's eyes closed and he let himself sleep. This time his dreams were not shattered by the blue lightning; this was much more restful. Lilith flashed back and forth across the sky in a myriad of positions. At times, she held her amber negligee in her hands and it looked like a spider web, ready to drop over the city. That's right, she whispered. I always look out for my faithful.

Weary from the night's dreaming, Ty napped in the park, noticing later that the sun was already lowering in the sky even though he had intended only to rest for an hour or two. Annoyed, he stood and walked away from the heart of the park. The strange hum that was the composite of the city stayed with him until he emerged onto the street and it broke down into identifiable sounds. That's all it ever was, Ty thought. It's only a city, only steel and cables and concrete and bright --

The street lights flickered on at that instant. As he walked by one, it buzzed and went out, then came back on when he passed. He quickened his pace and ducked his head,
fearing that the next light would do the same. Soon, he slowed, as if uncertain of his next step. He realized that he was on his usual street. He didn't want to pass the beggar again, let alone the neon sign. He considered taking another route, but rejected that notion. It would be an admission that things he did not believe in were governing his life. He knew he wasn't crazy and he knew the things he saw could not be real. Everything would make sense when viewed from the proper perspective. He was determined not to become like those fools who retreated into the belief that the world was flat because they couldn't understand why they didn't fall off a round one.

But soon, the beggar came into view. Ty resolved to ignore him. His crazy ravings had no relevance to Ty's life. He was not important at all; just get past him and take a look at the sign again. Of course it would be the same as it had always been. Neon tubes don't bend like flesh. Not in Ty's world. All events have causes and explanations, once he found these, everything would be normal again. The clarity of logic would reveal the beggar to be a lunatic and put to rest his half-formed suspicions about Cassandra.

"Hey, boy! Where you going? You've got to make your offering. You did it twice; if you don't keep it up, she'll be pissed."
Ty just walked on, rationalizing. Yeah, that was probably the hook the old man used to con people into giving more and more. Just plant a paranoid seed in their minds about the New Gods and do the bit that goes, "A blessing given is a blessing received." Just like a TV preacher.

Ty's smugness began to evaporate as he neared the Lilith sigh, however. He looked down at the sidewalk as it began to reflect her...its light. He walked as if wearing blinders until just opposite the sign. At that point, the urge became overpowering and he turned. Lilith looked directly into his eyes. Not just at the street, but into his eyes. Also, she was no longer running through her endless cycle of motion; her gaze continued, relentless. Just before his cool, rational mind gave way, Ty saw that no one else on the street seemed to notice what was happening. Maybe they all paid their dues, he thought wildly and he turned and fled up the street, going (without realizing why) back to find the beggar.

By the time he ran several blocks, Ty got control of himself and saw he had passed the place where the beggar was before. This made him angry. He used to have perfect spatial orientation. Had he lost that, too, along with his sanity? No. As long as he was still thinking, he was still sane. The right solution would make sense of it all. He went back to find the beggar as some of his old confidence
returned, but when he reached the spot (he was sure it was the right place) the man was gone. No trace. He walked on down to where the sign should have been. It too was gone. Had they ever been there? To hell with it. This is enough for one day, Ty thought and hailed a cab. He didn't look for Lilith on the way home.

When he opened his door, he felt something was wrong. The air was heavy as though (but not quite) something had been burning. "Cass, are you here?"

"Yes, Ty. I'm in here." Her voice indicated the kitchen. He was halfway there when she came out. "Was today any better?"

He couldn't answer because her hair held his attention. Usually straight and flat, it was frizzy, as though it had been permed. Or soaked with static electricity. He looked down at her feet as she stepped forward. Sparks leapt from her bare feet to the carpet. Long ones, like in Jack's Blue Spider. Like in his dreams. She spoke lovingly. "Come to Cass; let me give you a hug," and reached for him.

He backed away, trying to decide if he was hallucinating. To buy time, he stumbled to the bathroom from the hall entrance, gambling that he could pass through it into the bedroom and circle around Cass (Lilith?) to the front door, if indeed all this was really happening. "Just a minute," and shut the door.
In an instant, he heard a soft crackle on the door knob. "Ty, what's wrong? Are you all right in there? I'm coming in."

Part of Ty's mind still refused to accept the reality of the situation, but the cautious part took over and guided him through his escape. He was out the door before Cass could cut him off (assuming she even tried).

Once on the street, Ty wandered for more than an hour, almost blindly. He didn't see solid objects, only the hues and forms of energy. Rays from car headlights. Ghostly globes encasing street lamps. Blue falling from power lines and skipping rapidly down the street like drops of mercury. "What do you want me to do?" he finally cried out.

At that moment he remembered a night with Cass. A night he now realized was the epitome of all his recent fears. It was their third or fourth date. She took him to the building where she designed her video games. In the lab was a prototype of her newest creation. It lacked the commercial flourishes of the machines in the arcades. It stood awkward and colorless, cables running in all directions from its base as though it were a great, robotic spider. Cass switched it on and asked him to try it. Geometric patterns in bright green appeared on the screen, collapsing, changing, merging. Cass pointed to a red square and said, "This is what you control with the dials. You can
make it into any shape you want. The goal of the game is to match the shapes of three green lines and trap them. You have to anticipate what they are going to turn into and adjust your red line to fit on top of them exactly, canceling them out."

Ty tried for several minutes to guess the patterns shifting on the screen so he could predict when a hypotenuse triangle or perfect circle or some other simple shape would appear, giving him time to set up an identical shape and lie in wait. Soon, he turned to Cass and said, "I can't do it. I can't figure out what sequence they follow."

She laughed. "There isn't one. At least not one made by me. It's all up to the ghost in the machine."

Irritated at failure, Ty stopped playing and turned to Cass. "But then it's impossible! I can't make sense out of chaos."

She smiled and pushed him aside. "Sure you can. Just go with the flow. Let it show you the way. Watch." She quickly manipulated the controls to cancel out each fluctuating shape. "See."

"But you must have known --"

"No. Ty, you're going to have to realize that some things are beyond your control. That doesn't mean you can't get along with them. You just have to learn to play the game."
A flicker and buzz from a nearby street lamp woke Ty from this memory. "Okay," he said to the light (which may or may not have heard). "If life is just one big video game and I don't know the rules, so what?"

"She always takes care of her faithful." Real or imagined, the beggar's voice trembled in his eardrums.

Maybe that was it. Maybe he shouldn't even try to go back to his own world. Cass with her sudden surprises and their unpredictable relationship -- how could his old, ordered world with all its furniture in the right place co-exist with her? And Lilith: maybe he should just pay his tithes and accept his role in her city. Maybe she would let him live, and eventually, let him in on some of her secrets. With that thought, he turned for home. To go see Cassandra. Maybe she had just been playing one of her jokes. Maybe she had become Lilith. It made little difference either way; he would come to terms with his new world.

As he neared the block where the neon sign had been, he became afraid, briefly, of what he would find there, but Lilith was back in her place, satisfied, and didn't even glance at him.
A small, compact gray mist at the edge of my headlights resolves into a wolf, serenely striding along the pavement with all the grace and subtle terror of a Lovecraftian moon hound, its eyes reflecting pools of wild fire back into my own. Unafraid, it stands silent as I speed past on the narrow forest road. I glimpse it, receding, in the rear view mirror. Bathed in full moon glow, it snaps its head back and I imagine that I hear, over the violent sound leaking from my disintegrating muffler, the quivering banshee song of my dreams that have called me home to die.

Not much later, I pull off the main road and creep under the looming tree branches which from time to time tap inquiringly on the hood of my car. I round a curve on the overgrown trail and my head lights reveal my old -- and new -- home: A large but simple wooden cabin. As best as I can tell, it is in livable shape. Glass intact in its windows, thick redwood shingles in proper place. Something is growing up through the spacings of the porch steps. Hours behind schedule, I decide to leave the unpacking until tomorrow. I get out and pull my bedroll from the back seat; the movement and chill air set the scars on my right side and shoulder on fire. I pause at the steps and bend down. Three long stemmed weeds -- maybe sunflowers -- bob and weave slightly in the breeze. Not wanting to trip over them
in the morning, I grasp all three at once and pull. They are stronger than I thought and their sinuous stalks don't snap until my own weakened back muscles burst needle-like warnings as though they themselves are tearing. For an instant, I feel the weeds and I are one organism, straining with tension. Climbing the steps makes me remember the metal-hinged joint in my hip and imagine an iron file grating on soft, wet bone.

Inside, I flick on the light switch and am relieved at the burst of soft white light. The wind generator I had had installed weeks before -- after the accident -- fully charged the batteries. I quickly inspect the rooms: the furniture in the front room is intact, but rats or mice or something have chewed through the sofa's cushions in one or two places. Also, the fireplace needs to be cleaned. I dread that -- the pain of having to bend over for so long. The small kitchen is in good shape. Nothing has managed to get to the food stored in the cabinets. In the bedroom, I remove the dust cover from the bed and lie down, using the bedroll for cover. Pain touches my hip and shoulder like hot iron, then slowly fades away as my body becomes accustomed to its new position. The familiar sounds of forest night wrestle with the lingering phantoms of city engines and sirens and metallic insects which drum my ears, calling back the inside of the factory where I am standing
by a stack of pipes and the forklift is passing by with a barrel of solvent. The driver doesn't see me and for some reason he turns sharply. The barrel drives me into the freshly-cut, rough edges of the pipes. The pain of crushing bones is suddenly overwhelmed by the pain of acid solvent from the ruptured barrel spilling down my side and washing my flesh away.

But then I am falling through the sulfuric smells and sounds to a place of forest where it is day and I am running across the wide meadow. The grass brushes my knees and I am only ten years old but I know somehow this is my last summer in the forest before the death of my father whisks my mother and me away from these meandering paths across blacktop pavement into the straight and square streets of Pittsburgh. But now I am running, chasing wind ghosts. It is easy to see them in the meadow; they flatten large oval swaths of grass, leaving the grass behind them dancing. In the forest, there is no grass and the trees are too stubborn to bend so I can't see the ghosts; I can only hear them rustling the leaves. But out here, I can see several at once. I can see them leaving the woods at one end of the clearing and rushing across the grass until they reach the trees at the other end. Deep in my mind I already know some science, I know the atmospheric patterns that cause wind to seem to break apart and travel
in gusts that mimic individual, living things; I read about them in the library. I wanted to learn what mysterious forces lay behind these invisible lives, but the truth was dull, all thermal charts empty of wonder so I forget and let the winds be ghosts and I run, getting in front of them so their cool breath washes over me.

I fall down and lie on my back, watching the scant clouds race low across the sky, billowing. One of them loses its cotton-ball shape for a moment, forming a hook and twisting in a circle like a cat chasing its own tail. I hear laughter and look back down to see the old man watching me from the edge of the trees. Only now do I remember him and the ancient stories and secret paths he shared with me. I get up and run towards him, but he shakes his head, sadly but still smiling, and sinks slowly back into the woods like a fish disappearing into the lightless depths of a pond. Confused, I slow to a walk and turn for home.

Before I am halfway there, I tire. I don't know why; I've only been out an hour or two and I never get tired, even if I'm out all day, but my muscles burn like after a long hard run and I limp on my right foot. I must have hurt it one of the times I fell in the grass, but I don't remember the pain. I am glad when I finally break free of the trees and into the small clearing surrounding our house. It seems different now . . . like, yes, the weeds are taller
than they were when I left. Some of the sunflowers have heads even though I mowed the yard only a week ago. The light is fading fast. The sky is growing red. I've been out much longer than I thought. Expecting a whipping from father, who doesn't like me to spend so much time alone in the woods anyway, I run inside. The cabin is empty. I go to the kitchen door and look down to the pond, just visible in the fading light, but no one is there either. Worried, I go to my room. I am very tired now, very sleepy. I get on my bed and try to doze off but the pain in my hip is getting much worse now I can't concentrate on sleep I open my eyes and wince at the pain, trying to remember what I dreamed about. Images of something that happened here when I was a child flirt on the edge of my memory, but when I try to focus on them, they fade. It is still dark though dawn is near, so I try to go back to sleep and back into the dreams; they seemed like happy ones. But my body has been in this one position for too long now. It will hurt until I begin to move around and loosen up the frozen muscles and joints. The pain will go away until they tire from overuse and unnatural friction, and then it will be time to lie down again.

I get out of bed and put on proper clothes for the woods: thick flannel shirt with sweater, denim pants, and
hiking boots. They feel good -- familiar even though I haven't worn them in years -- and the pain has subsided to a weak, dull throb, easy to forget. I decide to wait until full light to unpack and go for a walk to pass the time. As I open the kitchen door, a strange sensation sweeps through me. A burst of memory breaks through; I stood here in my dream, but the context quickly fades.

True dawn is still a while away, but the highest clouds in the east are brushed with faint red (again, a flash from my dream). I walk down to the pond. It is still and I kneel (the twisting in my hip) at its edge and look at the stars reflected. For a moment, it seems as limitless in its width as in its depth, an endless mirror reflecting but also at one with the sky. I lose myself in it for a minute that promises to stretch to eternity, but the awakening sun breaks the scene and time back into fragments (too long forgotten, my knees protest my position with pain) as the stars extinguish themselves in the water that is now tinged with green alga and the trees on the other side emerge from the gray mist, gaining color and form. I see that something about them is wrong, but I don't want to know what it is just yet. I want to keep the earlier image of perfection in mind as long as possible. I walk back to the cabin as quickly as I can.
Before I go inside, I turn for one last look, but the pond is obscured by the trees. I open the door, then freeze, suddenly remembering a part of my dream where I stood here and looked at the pond. It should be visible from the cabin. Then, with a pang of guilt at how much I have forgotten, I work to relearn the most basic trick of forest magic. Don't look at the branches and the leaves (the old Indian telling me) put them out of your mind and focus on the empty spaces between and the trees will draw back their curtains for you. I stare hard and for a minute I am afraid that I am too old and the skill has escaped me forever, then suddenly the pond leaps into view as if it has moved closer. Or as if the trees ceased to block my sight as a gesture to welcome me home.

Slowly, methodically I unpack my car and clean away the patina of dust that has settled over everything. After that, the cabin seems more familiar than ever, as if I had left only days ago, leaving my young fingerprints everywhere as markers of my territory in hopes that I would someday return to reclaim it all. These thoughts make me uncomfortable, so I go out to my car and drive towards town. When I get there, the growth surprises me; it used to be less than a town, just a bank and post office and a couple of stores and a cluster of houses. Now it has become a center of population with many paved streets and tourists.
shops and even motels. Much of the surrounding forest has been swept away to make room for new houses and empty lots where weeds try, ungracefully, to reclaim the ground. The newer buildings are made from lumber, tar shingles, metal sidings, and other materials that are out of place in a forest where only log cabins belong.

Eager to get the things I need and go away from here, I pull up to a convenience store (glass and painted metal) and go inside. The register, unlike his surroundings, is ancient. His windworn face tells me he was perhaps here when I was young. I pick up some milk and bread and take it to the counter. He nods and says as he rings it up, "You're just getting into town ain't ya? I didn't think we'd get any more tourists for a while; it's good to have some business for a change."

I reply (but slowly, my voice sounding strange from non-use), "I'm new, but I'm not a tourist. I own the Carter cabin off the highway a few miles back west. I --"

"The Carter place? By God, you must be Randy. I almost thought I recognized you when you came in. I was a friend of your father's, you know."

"Yes, I'm Randy. I've come back here to live for a while." I shift uncomfortably (a splinter of pain in my hip).
"Well, that's great. You should come down sometime and talk. I don't have anything else to do now that my business has run away."

With an unexplainable burst of apprehension, I ask him what he means.

"All the tourists left town after the deaths, but I guess you haven't heard about that, just getting into town and all. You see, three people have been killed out in the woods in the last month or so. Some kind of animals; a pack of wild dogs we think. Or maybe just one with rabies or something. Really did a job on them though."

"Wolves?" I ask as the apprehension turns to a chill (the thought of the honeysuckle smell of blood).

He laughs, "Son, you've been away a long time; you surely have. We may have had wolves when you were a boy here, but they've all been gone for 20, 30 years maybe. Trappers, you know."

"But last night I heard --" I trail off because he is starting to laugh again.

"Dogs, maybe. You heard dogs a barking and a howling, but no wolves, unless you can hear all the way to Canada."

"Well, I've got to go now, thanks. I hope you get some business back."

"I doubt it, this place was already on the skids anyway, because of the rain, you know."
I don't have to ask, he sees the question on my face.

"No, I see you don't. I guess you must have been a long ways away." He says this sadly. "It's acid rain, falling down from factories out west. It's killing the forest and the fish. Nobody wants to come out here for a vacation no more. They don't want to see it. Hell, take a good look at the trees around your house; it ain't hard to see what's happening."

I drive home quickly and walk down to the pond. This morning I had a sense that something was not right, and now I can see. The deep, rich green of the pines is marred in places by strange yellows and grays. Some trees are obviously dying. When I slap a branch, dozens of pine needles fall to the ground, discolored. I watch the water for several minutes, but nothing breaks the surface; there are no concentric rings of ripples that signify fish, turtles, snakes, or water insects. No life.

The curse has followed me. My mind drifts back to those days in Pittsburgh following the accident. I was out of the hospital, living in my apartment. The dreams were just beginning, without form or color, they disturbed my sleep with unseen fury and a disembodied howling that could have been the wind, could have been the call of a night-beast from Ulthar or Belial. When I awoke from those nightmares, I would go out and sit on my small balcony and watch the
sky. Of course, no stars had the magnitude to limn through the brown and yellow smoke that blanketed the city, but I soon saw that other things of interest swam up there, oh yes. Sometimes, when the smog was especially low, it would twist and curl under those familiar forces I knew as a child. In frustration, the wind ghosts billowed downward, trying to reach the earth, but failed, exhausted, to be driven back into the sky. I knew then that I was wasting away in that city, severed from my protective wind angels. The first night I saw them in the wounded sky, I knew I must find my home again.

The cruel irony: After a generous court settlement, I drive hundreds of miles to escape the terrible industrial weaponry and live in peace in the only place I was ever truly happy, only to find that more poison from the same factories has beaten me here, doing to the forest exactly what it did to me.

Happier thoughts intrude. I now remember seeing my old Indian friend who taught me the names of the trees and made the forest come alive. He is so clear in my mind. An Indian by blood only, he used to say. "I listen to the Rolling Stones. I'm no Indian." But he kept the past alive with the stories and ways that he learned from many tribes, as well as his own. He wore a leather jacket, but it was made in Japan. His boots had a Nacona trademark. He wore
blue jeans. "I'm only a fake, like an Indian in a Hollywood movie," he used to say. But he knew the tricks of the forest and taught them to me. I never learned what kind of a job he had; I think he was ashamed of it. He never told me his name either, he said he had two: One was given to his family by the white men; that one wasn't important. The other was the name of his grandfather, but he said only the forest knew it. "If you listen hard and listen right, the wolves will call it out to you, but I'm not going to tell it to you, that's too easy."

Now one of his many stories comes back to me; it seems appropriate somehow. Once, way out on the western plains, a tribe hunted buffalo by stampeding them off of a cliff. They did this every fall so they would have meat for the winter. One year, the tribe couldn't force the buffalo over. They would go to the edge of the cliff and just stand there. The tribe was frightened that there would be no meat for the winter and they would starve, but they didn't know what to do. Then one day, the most beautiful girl in the village looked up at the herd standing on the edge of the cliff. "If only you'll come over," she said, "I'll marry one of you." To her delight and horror, dozens of the buffalo jumped to their deaths. That night, after the tribe's celebration, the buffalo leader came to the young girl and asked her to keep her part of the bargain. At
first she refused, saying that she couldn't leave her family. The great buffalo showed her the dead herd and said, "Those are my family. They died so that your people might live. Now you must keep your word." With that, the great buffalo took her away to live with the remainder of this herd. But soon the girl's father saw their tracks and realized what had happened. He set out to find his daughter, but when he caught up to them, the beasts trampled him to death. The daughter, sick with grief, searched the ground for her father and found only a small bone. It was all that remained. As the buffalo watched, she performed a song that brought her father back to life. The buffalo leader was overjoyed to see this magic and promised to let the girl and her father return to their tribe if she would learn the buffalo's dance and have her tribe use it with her song to bring the herd's dead companions back to life after each hunt. Ever since then, the Indian tribe performed the dance and sang the life song after killing buffalo.

I asked the old man what the story meant, and his confident, authoritative, story telling voice went away as he struggled to explain the story in modern terms. "It means that hunters . . . that people must have respect for what they kill because they are . . . equal in a way. We must try to survive and so must all things. Sometimes this means killing must be done, but it should always be done
with respect. Today, people trap wolves and other great
animals just to gut them and stuff them full of cotton and
give them glass eyes and use them to decorate their houses.
That's why there are so few buffalo any more. Or wolves.
They hide away because they won't die for trivial causes.
Someday everything will go away from us."

After losing myself in these memories for a while, I see
that it is almost dusk. The sun is hidden behind the trees
and the light is fading fast. I get up (pain like needles
through my hip) and walk home. Since the light is dim, I
can't see if the trees along the path are damaged, which is
fine with me. Suddenly, off to my left, something moves.
It is only a glimpse out of the corner of my eye, but I
know, irrationally, that it is the Indian. I walk a few
steps off the path, trying to get another look. He is gone
now, but it couldn't have been him anyway; he can't still be
alive. He was old when I was ten. Ahead, I see something
else. It is the gray wolf (fear brushing my spine like a
feather) that I saw when driving in last night. It just
stands there in a clearing, watching me. I feel an urge to
go to her, but as I start forward, she turns and runs off
into the woods, quickly disappearing in the growing
blackness. I go back to the cabin, disappointed and
curious. Like the old man at the store said, there can't be
any wolves left around here. Anyway, why was I crazy enough
to walk toward her? She could have killed me as easily as run away (she?).

After cooking some food only to discover I am hardly hungry, I go to bed. It is still early in the evening, but my body tells me it is time anyway. However, my mind is restless and it takes me a long time to go to sleep. My eyes close and dream images begin to flicker only to fade as a pain in my body or in my mind flares up and wakes me. Finally, I am sinking into a deep sleep where images suddenly become bright and alive. I roll out of bed and push the door open and

run out into the night with no pain at all. Even though the moon has not yet risen, distant Mars casts a red glow that etches the forest out in detail. I move quickly and silently and close to the ground. I know the direction I want to go and a gust of wind brings the scent of what I seek. I run, weaving through the trees with greater agility than I ever remember having. Soon, I break into a clearing and I see the gray wolf, waiting for me. She does not run this time, but as I draw near, two darker wolves rise from their hiding places in the deep grass and block my path. Their growling and bristling tell me that I still must prove myself before I can go near them, especially the gray one. They gather and run in pack. I follow. We reach our goal and crouch, waiting. The two people are asleep in their bed
rolls. They do not move, but the heat rises like fire from their bodies, matching the color of Mars and marking them with silent flame for us to see. We stay absolutely still for a heart beat, but they sleep on, undisturbed by the light of the red star that drives our blood.

We move in low until we are only feet away from their beds. Still they do not awake. One of the darker wolves growls and the man sits up. He looks around, but never directly at us. He gets out of his bed roll and we smell the cancer deep in his bones. He is already doomed. We spring forward together and he screams. He goes down under our weight, and one of his arms strikes me across the back but my thick fur absorbs his blow. I bite down hard on the thick of his arm and he screams, but does not scream again.

I turn and see his wife, awake now, but still and silent with fear, obeying her instincts. Her face is framed with horror and I turn away, unable to look. The man no longer moves and the wolves turn their heads to the sky and cry out, mimicking his anguish, honoring it. I join in, hearing for the first time the rich complexity of the howl, notes running up and down octaves my ears had never before been sensitive enough to hear, weaving together, intricate. As the gray wolf cries out, I remember something a friend said long ago, "Listen hard and you will hear my name in the wolves' howl." I look at the gray wolf and she looks at me
and a silent understanding passes between us. "I am here now."

We eat quickly, then flee and before long I am gliding low through the trees alone and my house comes into sight. I enter through the open door and suddenly tired I sit up in bed. Pain flairs in my head as well as my body. It is dawn and I have slept 14 hours or more, but I am exhausted, as though the very act of sleeping was strenuous rather than refreshing. I get up and dress anyway, hoping I will feel better later. For the first time, I see blood on my pillow. I touch my face, but it is dry. I walk (memory of a dream dances) back to the bathroom (it slips away) and look in the mirror. Some dry blood is smeared on my cheek from the pillow, but I am not cut. No blood in my nose, but that has to be it (strange taste reminds me of ...). If my stomach was bleeding, I would surely feel pain. Something disturbs me about it all, but I push the feeling aside as I wash my face.

Feeling cramped and oppressed by the cabin, I go outside and decide to drive to town. For no particular reason, I go to the store where I met the old man (seems like days ago) yesterday.

"Oh, hi," he says, staring at the floor. "I guess you haven't heard; there's been another killing."
Again, the odd sense in me like panic just below the surface. "Another one? Where?"

"Oh it was a few miles north of here, some campers. No one would be crazy enough to sleep outdoors around here, but I guess they thought they were safe."

"Did . . . both of them die?"

"No, just the man, the woman wasn't touched . . . . How did you know there were two?"

I say nothing, considering the question myself.

"Anyway, she hasn't said anything yet about what killed her husband. At least not that I've heard. Are you all right? You look --"

I nod quickly, "I'm OK. I just . . . ."

He doesn't sound convinced. "Maybe you'd better sit down for a while."

"No I've got to get back home." We both stand there quietly for a minute. It seems I should say something more. "I saw a wolf last night."

He looks at me strangely because (I assume) some shock registers on my face from a sudden memory. Whatever it is, it slips (other wolves) away before I can grasp it. "I'll talk to you later, I've got to go now."

I drive away with the feeling that something in my head is about to explode. With almost every thought, something, some memory tries to surface, but as soon as I turn to look
at it, it dashes away. Back at the cabin, I move about restlessly, trying to find something to do. I fix lunch, but find that, despite my small meal the night before (there it is again) I am still not hungry. Even before it is dark, I lie down to sleep. I am anxious to dream, though I don't know why; whatever I dreamed the night before only tired me. I fitfully fade in and out of sleep until well after nightfall. I finally am able to relax and I gratefully slide down into true sleep where there is no rest for me because I am out running through the trees again. This frightens and even sickens me for a moment, but the feeling soon passes. Still, thoughts stalk in the back of my mind of something (a fragment of dream) that I can't grasp. But I break into the clearing and see the others and the lingering disturbance finally fades away. Gray Wolf is there waiting for me and I run to her (memory of pain in my side) effortlessly. The darker wolves part respectfully and I brush up against her; the static of our fur tingles my spine. We frolic for a moment -- in silence because nothing needs to be said; soon the bright red star will rise and we will run the night at one with the dying forest.
"It's too late to fall in love with Sharon Tate."

Victor D'arque smiled tightly and looked at the radio, then out the window at the falling sun. "That's the God Damn truth!" He thought how it can be too late for just about anything. Too late for Saul, that was for sure. The thought of Saul opened a gate in Victor's mind and a flood of images swirled out against Victor's will he could not slow them down I couldn't even cry when the fluttering sheets of newspaper in my hands howled headlines about death and terrible new weapons Brian Bomb used against brown skinned like the earth people who opposed CIA policy the print ran with my tears because I was crying now as I read how they used our work to kill to kill me I cried because my hand had been the forge for the sword but that wasn't what I wanted I wanted it to give life not kill they killed everything when we met in the lab that day Saul looked at me and tried to mold his face into a smile but it ended up a death mask and he said this is how bad it can get and he touched a valve and a matrix of glass containing compressed gas exploded driving shards of glass through his eyes into his brain.

It's always later than you think Victor thought as the sun slipped behind the black glass monolith of the Hawk
Building. He lowered his gaze to the street and saw a pale figure in white, possibly a woman, with arms reaching up to him. Victor's eyes failed to focus for an instant and the arms, draped in white (not quite, small colors moved through her like a prism) seemed to elongate halfway to his ninth floor apartment. He rubbed his eyes and opened the window to get a better look. He leaned out into the cooling air she was gone. In the failing light, he could only make out white pieces of newspaper stained with color gently tumbling along the black pavement. As if she had dissolved.

Victor slowly sank to his knees and laid his forehead on the window sill. His hands trembled violently. For the first time, he considered the possibility that he had become insane. For as long as he could remember, he had kept a secret hidden away in a distant chamber of his mind. A place filled with glowing images of hope and things untarnished by the patina of doubt and fear which settled over everything else as he grew older. At the center of this place was a feminine figure in flowing white, a gentle ruler in a kingdom of replenishment. Victor maintained a serious -- even passionate -- devotion to this fantasy, knowing it was a little strange, but always keeping it separate from reality. Until now. Maybe it was just an optical illusion created by stress and too little sleep, but he felt as though his mind, his last bastion of control, had
deserted him and he was now falling down a pit, sensibility vanishing above and gibbering madness waiting below. He glanced at the .38 revolver lying on his bed like a large, dark spider.

Not yet.

He would follow this path and see where it led. See how bad it could get. If it was only blackness, it would be no worse than this.

When he was ten years old his uncle the engineer took him on a tour of the nuclear reactor where he worked. Deep in its depths Victor pressed his ear to a warm white pipe as thick as a tree trunk and heard the relentless energy of steam thrusting from the core with the fury of a hurricane and the precision of a finely tuned dial. Victor found his God, his purpose: energy and the power to use it as he wished. He had always wanted to control things greater than himself. There, he found a way to go about it, and later what he believed to be a priestlike desire to use his control to help other people.

Years of determination and hope and learning brought him to Arkham where he researched energy transfer under a corporate grant. Where he met Saul.

Saul was like him, ambitious, dedicated, idealistic. They were assigned to the same project: perfecting a method of transmitting large amounts of energy over great distances
without the use of wires or any other material substances. The rewards would be incredible. A power plant could be built in a remote, impoverished area of the world and any native could flip on any modern appliance and it would draw power directly from the source, no strings attached.

That first day was special. Saul and Victor exchanged the usual formal greetings and began to organize their lab. Many mechanical models had to be assembled and as they worked side-by-side, hands intertwining and touching, Victor began to grow uncomfortable. Saul was watching him closely and Victor felt the slow awakening of the sexual desire that he wanted so badly to bury. Finally, as Victor slipped the last bolt of the day into place, Saul reached over and laid his hand across Victor's wrist and left it there longer than a straight man would have deemed appropriate and said, "That's enough for today, let's go get something to drink."

Victor recognized this as a test and, without moving his trembling hand, summoned up the courage to make the first verbal move: "Let's not play games. Are you gay or what?"

Saul laughed, "I wondered how long it was going to take for me to get you to ask that question."

They went to Lovecraft's, the campus pub, and talked for five hours. Saul asked the obvious question, "Have you ever been involved with a man before?"
"Well, yeah, but never in a normal sense. Normal; that's a laugh!"

Saul didn't laugh. "What do you mean?"

"I just meant that I never had a really steady relationship. I realized very early who I was -- fifteen years old maybe, but I was afraid to do anything about it. During my first year of college, I started to get nervous, as though something valuable was passing me by. After a while that feeling became stronger than my original fear and ... and I went to this bar on an unlighted back street where I let some older man pick me up. I didn't know of any better way to go about it." Victor put his face in his hands. Being able to talk like this was a welcome release. Saul mistook the action for shame and reached over to gently pull Victor's hands away from his face.

"Don't let things like that tear you up. We can't always make things happen the way we want. No one has complete control." He smiled.

Victor looked at that confident smile and tried to imagine Saul not being in control. He couldn't. "No, it doesn't bother me. I was just thinking how good it was to talk about it."

"You never told anyone?"

"No. I had several lovers after that, but I never felt close enough to them to tell them about it."
"Why not?"

"I don't know . . . sharing anything about my life doesn't come easy unless it's with someone I care about."

"So then, do you care about me now?"

Victor paused, surprised at the suddenness of his emotion. "I guess I do."

Saul smiled again. "Be careful. Love at first sight is very rare and it rarely leads to Happily Ever After." It occurred to Victor that Saul suggested many mysterious things in his smiles.

Victor tried to concentrate on that enigmatic smile as he put on his coat and started down to the street with his first purposeful movements in days, but the deathly gray walls of the stairwell reminded him of the shielded laboratory where he worked with Saul, and his mind turned inward, back to the night when all their hopes reached realization, when they sang the lines from a popular song: "The future's so bright I have to wear shades." Then it was their anthem. They ignored its real premise: it was about the blinding light of nuclear destruction. That irony was not lost on Victor now.

"Jesus, I think we've done it!" Saul said as the black light in his hands began to glow. Its invisible ultraviolet rays brought the darkened room to life; cloths, metal
samples, and chemical stains on the tables all glowed with magical power. Saul grinned; only his phosphorescent teeth were visible, reminding Victor of the Cheshire Cat. The bulb Saul held was not connected to any electrical source. It drew its energy from artificially generated static in the air. A simple trick, common in spook houses at carnivals, except for one thing: the generator feeding it was six blocks away in the university's coal plant.

"By God Watson, I think you're right!" Victor began to laugh. A small giggle at his little joke built to a roar of laughter. After nine months of uncertain work, success. Sudden. Total. It was almost too much for the nerves. He was still gasping when Saul turned on the overhead lights.

"Take it easy, man. We're not in Stockholm yet. Don't count your eagles till the eggs . . . ."

Victor recovered. "Yeah, yeah. It just feels so damn good. Anyway," he looked at his watch, "we've done enough for tonight. Let's go celebrate."

Saul frowned, but when he glanced at his own watch, he said, "Damn, one o'clock. OK, we have been at this long enough. Lovecraft's?"

"Sounds good to me."

Later, after a few beers, Saul said, "Listen, I want to tell you something about science."
Slightly drunk, Victor started to laugh, but became quiet when he saw the serious expression on Saul's face. "OK, I'm listening; what is there that I don't already know?"

Saul smiled tolerantly. "You don't know how bad it can get. Listen to this. You know my father spent a year in a concentration camp and my grandfather died there?"

"Yeah, you've mentioned it, but you've never..."

"My grandfather was a chemist. Before the war, he worked on several alternative fuel projects for the German government. He was proud of one in particular: a process he invented that used animal fat as a heating fuel. He thought farmers in areas without access to gas could use the fat of slaughtered cattle and sheep to help heat their homes.

"Eventually, the war started and he ended up in the camp where he was assigned to maintain the furnaces which reduced bodies to manageable ashes. He realized that the furnaces were fueled in part by human fat using the process he perfected."

"My father was only fourteen then, but he could see the effect this had on his father. One day, Grandfather was watching a group of people being marched into the gas showers. He began to cry and looked up and said to God, 'Stop this! This is against You!' Nothing happened, so he
turned to my father and said, 'God does not exist and we are the Devil. Only science is pure.' My father told this to me on my fourteenth birthday."

Victor waited for Saul to contradict his grandfather's words. Silence. Shaken by this side of Saul, he protested, "But don't you think that people have a seed of good deep down? Something that comes to the surface in a time of need? I mean look at the noble, beautiful things that came out of..."

Saul broke in with a deadpan voice, "Look around you."

Victor came out of the stairwell into the building's lobby, stepped out onto the street, and dodged a fast moving herd of ghetto-blasting teenagers. Rows of highrise buildings entombed the street, bringing premature night. Above, the sun's last rays bleached the smoky sky with amber. Below, the street lamps started to buzz and flicker. Light rain had fallen earlier and cars covered with brownish filth coughed blue and black smoke into the wet pavement. Their tires ground even more darkness into the tarry surface which nevertheless managed to reflect colors like molten rainbows. Pools of black diamonds. Carbon is like that; it always manages to show its beauty. He leaned over the gutter and squinted at the twisting rivulets of waste. Life began in stuff like this. Ashes to ashes...
The night of the breakthrough they made slow tender lover and as Saul wrapped his arms around Victor and drew him near, Victor's mind gave up conscious control and the thoughts of my growing passion rushed through like water fast relentless Saul's gentle hope tempered with wisdom and courage balanced by realism seemed to offer so much he convinced me I could be different and still make a difference and it was not all violent empty words we would make our own marks of acceptance and at night it was my paleness close against Saul's delicate smooth olive complexion and passion and passion.

When they were finally done, Victor tried to sleep, but couldn't. The story at the bar and the tone of voice in which Saul told it lingered in his mind. One of the things he loved about Saul was his cautious realism, but it seemed as though Saul had hinted at a darker streak of pessimism: something Victor didn't want to see. He looked to Saul for release from his own doubts. "Saul, are you awake?"

Saul mumbled sleepily.

"Look, I want to talk about what you said earlier. I just can't buy what you said about the nature of people. I don't think they're all bad."

Saul was alert now. His voice came out of the darkness. "I never said that; people have good -- look at us -- but
not all people. It can't be taken for granted. Can you buy that?"

Victor turned toward Saul's voice and propped himself up on his elbow. "Let me tell you a story now. I've never told this to anyone and I don't know if you will understand. But . . . .

"All my life I've wanted to do something great for the human race. Corny as hell, I know. At first I thought I was being really selfless, a calling for the greater good or whatever. Later I realized that maybe I was looking for a way to justify myself to the rest of the world. Who's going to call a man who pulls children from a burning building a fag, you know?

"Anyway, it didn't take me long to realize that the best intentions could go wrong, like your father's story. But for as long as I can remember, I've had this . . . this image somewhere in my mind. An image of a mystical woman dressed in white. It's like she's always been there, giving me strength somehow. I got the idea that she represented some kind of human conscience. No, that's not it . . . more like a sort of creative force that motivated me, and maybe everyone else. You know, something to keep us on the right track, keep us from blowing ourselves up."

Saul was silent for a while. He seemed to be affected in some way by Victor's story. "Maybe . . . you could be
partly right." Then he sat up, placed his hands on each side of Victor's face, leaned close and said something that puzzled Victor for a long time, "People love death just as much as sex and it's not yet certain if they love it more and children run off to wars no matter how well they are taught so don't expect more than you are willing to lose."

Victor thought about that as he slowly drifted to sleep and he had a strange dream about I was playing in the sand somewhere between the ages of ten and twelve with the salty breeze carrying tastes of sealife in over the relentless waves that dashed themselves onto the wet hard sand with rumbling sounds of soft foamy death reminding me that the tide was creeping and I had started the sand structure too close to the edge and must work quickly to finish before it all washed away spelling disaster for the tiny people of imagination who needed its shelter and I looked up and saw a floating angel gazing down from swirling white folds of silk staring at my project as if she knew of its importance and wanted it to be finished in time then I caught a glimpse of something that faded in time and the sun passed behind a cloud darkening the beach when the light came back I was there alone in the sand with my creation and the rising waters that crept stealthily like a thief.

A scream amid the impatient horns and mindless chatter drew Victor's attention to a young Latin girl dressed in a
blue jump suit down the block. She stood frozen as dozens of blurred, colorful figures flowed around her. She was crying and pulling her hair. At first, Victor thought she was lost, but a frowning woman leaned out of the window of a car parked on the curb and said, "Evita, go back inside. I tell you I will be back soon."

The girl, perhaps five years old, just stamped her foot. "No! No! The car is eating you. It will carry you away!"

An older boy dashed across the sidewalk and dragged her kicking and screaming back into the lobby of their apartment building. Victor quickly turned his back on the scene and tried to spot his mysterious figure. He saw something white for an instant down the sidewalk, near the fountain. It could have been mist, a blast of steam from a heating duct, but it looked like a long piece of gauzy cloth, fluttering in the breeze. This is it he thought wildly. He rapidly zigzagged his way through the street mass toward the fountain.

Placed opposite the towering, ebony Hawk Building in a sort of sunken plaza, it was not visible from street level. Victor dashed down the thirteen steps which surrounded the fountain like concentric rings and entered another world. The floor of the plaza was set with strange, agate-like rock. The ancient fountain softly pattered in the center, its curtains of water cascading from three round, greenstone
tiers. Underwater flood lamps projected wavering patterns of light, giving the place its only illumination. Victor could see no one else, and the falling water cast echoes through the sudden emptiness. Sounds from the world above were distant and muted. Victor sat on the mossy stone rim and gazed into the water's shallow dominion. The water was not a clear as it appeared from far away. Some kind of grainy silt gave it a greenish-brown tinge. Hundreds of copper pennies littered the bottom. They were beginning to corrode from exposure to chlorine. They reminded Victor of the debris on the floor of the lab after Saul died.

It only took the bastards three months. Five days after their breakthrough in the lab, they were notified that the cooperation which had provided funding was turning the project over to their military contracts subsidiary. Two days after the men came and gathered up all the instruments, working models, and files they could lay their hands on and made Victor and Saul sign papers in triplicate. Then Saul and Victor were on their own, with nothing to do but tinker aimlessly in the lab and wait for something to happen.

One morning Victor came into the lab and saw Saul crying, sitting at a desk with his head in his hands quietly sobbing. It was a first. Victor ran to him and put his hand on his slumping shoulders. "Saul, what is it?"
Startled, he regained most of his composure. "Have you seen the news?" He indicated a newspaper on the desk. Victor picked it up and began to read the story under the headline "CIA slaughters dozens in Mexico with Brain Bomb."

"Sources in the Mexican government say a number of CIA operatives have been identified and arrested after the failure of a bizarre assassination plot. The operatives used a new weapon which transmits high energy pulses of electromagnetic waves which interfere with brain function, the sources say. They intended to kill several leading members of the Mexican Communist Party at a rally, but miss-aimed the device and hit the crowd of spectators..."

Victor dropped the paper. "Was it..."

"Yes. It couldn't have been anything else. We tried so hard, but sometimes children just can't be controlled."

"What are you talking about?" As Victor read the paper, Saul had stood up and moved to one of the experiment tables. Victor saw that he was standing by a network of glass tubing connected to a high pressure gas compressor. "Saul, what are you doing with that...?"

"Remember when I said you didn't know how bad it could get? I guess I didn't know myself. I counted on it too much."

"Saul don't!"
He touched a relief valve on one of the glass tubes and...

Victor raised his eyes to the gentleness of the falling water and felt the strange chill again. Through the liquid sheets, he saw a rippling white figure, still not pure white, pulsing with tiny reds and greens and blues. It looked like a woman, but the water kaleidoscoped her into fragmented geometric patterns so that Victor couldn't be sure of what was real. He slowly slid off the stone rim and started to circle the fountain. The apparition seemed to move, keeping the barrier between them. Victor paused, then leaped into the water, grabbed the lower tier for support and swung around to the other side. He barked his shins on the opposite rim and fell over onto the ground, breaking his fall with his outstretched hands with which he had intended to grasp his mysterious target. He clenched his fists and pounded the ground in frustration. "God damn it! You're driving me out of my mind! If you're real, let me see you. If you're not... just be real... I need..." His voice broke into sobs and he rolled over on his side, curling up in a fetal position. His eyes closed in a helpless attempt to stop his tears.

When he opened them again, much later, she was gone. He sat up and a strange peace flowed over him. She was in my mind all along, he thought. It's all gone now. Except for
the gun; it's waiting back at my room. But a spark in his mind cried out for attention and drew him away from death for a moment.

"I counted on it too much." Those were Saul's last words. Victor didn't understand them at the time and he gave them little consideration later. But now... other words of Saul's came to mind. "Children run off to wars no matter how well they're taught. People have good -- look at us."

Victor realized that for all his pragmatism, Saul was just like him deep down: he needed something outside himself to sustain his hope and willpower. Instead of a mystical figure, Saul had...had the project itself. Victor thought about how Saul spent hours carefully checking each component of the models, almost caressing them. "God Saul," he whispered, "Couldn't you see that the project was nothing? We made it, but when they took it away they didn't take away our love for what we were trying to do. You felt that creativity... it was inside you, they couldn't touch it, only you could do that."

The feeling of peace returned, not quite as complete as before, but that was okay because this time it was peace of life, not death. It had to have some turbulence. It was in my mind all along. Victor saw that Saul's mistake was also his mistake. He wanted his image of the figure in white to
be real because he needed to believe something could always step in and save the day from his imperfection. But the strength was always in his mind. In himself! Saul failed to see this and died. Victor could win. That place still existed in his mind and all he had to do was find it again. He learned against the fountain and rested and people walked by, hardly noticing him. He was thinking about the future, believing there was one, then doubting it, then believing again. After a while he went to sleep and in his dream I was walking along a beach and saw a child building a sandcastle and I went over to the child and recognized it as myself many years ago and I looked down into my own eyes and saw once again the raw life the hope that slowly faded after too many shattered illusions of benevolent gods too many deaths but that childhood spark didn't really die with these things didn't even die with Saul it was only buried like a grain of sand beneath harsh waves but it was still in this place a place beyond change this place somewhere deep in my own self where I could always find it if I looked in instead of out near instead of far I felt I could smile soon and I looked up from my sandcastle and saw myself strangely fighting a pain a hopelessness I could not even imagine something so strong I turned my mind away from it in fear and was able to forget about it because it was disappearing the sun was breaking out of the clouds bringing light to the
beach dissolving the visions that were only half remembered
leaving only my creation and the slowing rising waters that
crept stealthily like a thief.