

The Buffalo Gone- Part 1

The Rise of Marvin

The Buffalo Gone

Robert Cantrell

I am not quite sure about the exact definition of “working journalist.”

“Journalism” is so different now from any concept that I ever considered, growing up and seeing old tapes of Uncle Walter and Edward R. and Mencken’s Gashouse Gang when men were men and copy boys were copy boys and never the twain should meet, if you know what I mean. I always liked the Nelly Bly thing, so girls, excuse me, ladies, excuse me, women reporters are aces with me. I suppose the problem is not what there is now that’s different, but more about what there isn’t, like for instance any editorial control or wisdom. Any guy on a barstool can begin to bloviate and the public doesn’t have the assurance of a good old-fashioned masthead with an upstanding truth-to-powerish motto. To be the editor of a newspaper was as important a gig as any in the Republic. Two sources, objective who what when where, plenty of fiber and little pocket notebooks with plenty of pencil lead, both grey and blue, that’s the ticket. Or at least it was.

But alas, that all went away like wooden ships and iron men when the electronic shizz took over and Mr. Turner demanded to be able to see something, anything, at any hour of night or day when he decided to get up and mix (or have mixed) another drink, if indeed he is a drinker at all.

It is this ethos, that of guys-shooting- the-shit-on-barstools, that I have fallen heir to as I hack (no pun intended) my way through the jungle of gathering and purveying the news of the world.

As to the part about “working” I actually did take college level courses in journalism, ok, like three, admittedly some on-line, but then the news is now on-line, right? So there’s the fit right there. And as in the world of publishing novels, the world is now flat, with self-pub, and in the news at least, with many fewer people, i.e. “real” responsible, well trained journalists (and their analogous outlets), as print dailies are snuffed out of existence faster and faster every day. Many more of us tiny frightened proto-mammals are scuttling about in the shadows and the underbrush as the dinosaurs slowly succumb. On the spectrum of precedence, with the NY Times and the WaPo at the top of the food chain, even below the silliness of the 24-hour agit-prop news- cyclists, and perhaps just above having a snazzy Facebook page, stands, or sits, or perhaps lies on the couch, the noble hardworking {sic} blogger such a I.

I blog for Stutterblog. Actually, Stutterblog is mostly me, like an old-time newsy stringer. I took my regulation six-plus years to get an English lit/sociology/journalism degree from Kickapoo State, by way of a couple of JCs and a fabulous semester and a half at Occidental, courtesy of a small inheritance from a currently dead old aunt (Way to go, Aunt Bessie!). I suppose my other qualification is that I am really good at crossword puzzles, trivia beat-downs,

and I know a ton of impressive Scrabble words, even if I don't know the definitions. In fact, if I say so myself, I may know more useless, unconnected pieces of information than anyone you are likely to have met. Like my high-school civics teacher said, "Mr. Stutts, you always seem to have opinions, though you don't ever seem to have done the reading."

Anyway, it is a tenuous existence out here in the non-credentialed blogosphere of podcasts, Substack, "independent film" and other endogenously directed communication where you can be, on the more pathetic end, both "content producer" and "biggest fan". You can fly right up your own ass if you aren't careful; you can "influence" your-self into self-righteous immobility.

I am not really sure myself how I make a "living". I sort of make that up as I go along. Most people don't actually cop to "blogging" any more than they admit to dedicated nose-picking. So below is an example of my "public" blog, as opposed to the one you are now reading, which is a lot more me just talking to you without necessarily "documenting", which is to say naming or dating it specifically. If any of that bothers you, go watch some fourteen year-old dance around in her cotton-candy bedroom on TikTok wearing her newest Jojo sequins, right? Hey, 20 million military-aged Chinese incels are, so what could possibly go wrong with that?

(Stutterblog-Pub)

Hands down cutest story from the Ecomcona convention in Silicon V. this week is the SG (Synthetic Genome) based puppy, named Charlie, that Complexia CEO Herb Bottner presented

to his young tyke (with fourth wife, model/actress/teen-pop phenom Poppy Leggett). Custom designed from the ground up, most resembling a Shitzahuahua (the dog, not the child, nor the wife), with nary a base pair from a momma dog nor doggy daddy. After nailing one of the first human genomes, and making gazillions from the commercial applications through Complexia stock options, Daddy Bottner turned to the creation of these synthetic life forms, having created, among others, the Esherichia invitricus based E. Bottneria that benignly [sic] infects new carbon spewing smokestacks, eating the carbon before it gets into our [sic] air. The social and science blogosphere has been buzzing with traffic for the last two years about the hopes and fears occasioned by the introduction of such wholly “new” life forms into the natural ecology (as though a power plant which throws a bunch of tons of smog out is a “natural ecology” phenomenon.)

The little Bottnerette has her own cute story as well, having been digitally blogged about from (presumably) conception on. The proud parents (he of the very bald and very big brain, she of the very young and very shapely ass) have kept a site that has included every day, day by day, at least one straight-on headshot portrait (including a few smudgy pre-natal ultrasound images) for these first three (plus) years of the tot’s life. The site is the ultimate baby book. Instead of cooing over an occasional photo, however, assuming one wishes (and assuming one has a high enough intrinsic insulin level to deal with the sweetness) one can follow a continuous morphing image of the child’s development. Played as a loop you can watch her literally grow up in front of your eyes. Very weird to consider. We are also told that the site is fully hypertexted with all sorts of hi-def supplementary inputs on most days. Pictures of Mom and Dad, video of first steps, the sound of the nanny’s voice, what her crib looked like,

video of the weather outside on a particular day taken from her nursery window, etc etc.

Today's entry, for instance, might feature the digital images of the pup Charlie and also record its Shitzahuahua-ish squeaky bark. We all have flashes of the memories of our earliest events, but they are clearly subject to the vagaries of time and neuronal reorganization, reconnection and rerouting of the memory pathways. My smart friends tell me that huge shifts occur at certain times in our lives, like the first year, and then again around exit from toddlerhood into kidhood, and again around puberty. Maybe that is part of the Sturm und Drang of teendom. Anyway, the puppy is cool and one day little Bottnera, should she wish, will be able to go back to the broadband of her external memory file and "really" "remember" the day she got him. (Stutterblog-out)

Me, Marv here again, sort of off-line. Like we can tell. While I was out here covering the Ecomcona (E-Commerce Confab) I had a visit with the family over-achiever, my cousin Sandy, who is a public health doc for the Sunny State of Sunny California. I mentioned the Bottner pup and she came absolutely unglued. Spewed jicama salad all over the place. She and her buddies down in the basement are all over this and they have long had the torches and pitchforks out for Bottner about "recklessly creating new life forms." She opined that God-will-get-us-all for dicking around with the "natural" flow of genetic pressure. And in a timely note she says that some of the old Pub Health hands who were around in the ur-AIDS Eighties are looking tense again as rumors of "something strange" are once again piling up in the county pathology departments of Meso-California.

(Stutterblog- Publix)

OK kids, are we about to see Godzuki rise out of the good surfing on the West Coast, courtesy of Complexia's creation of new genetic forms? The non-official officials out here say that they are seeing "something new" happening health-wise in close proximity to the company HQ up near Palo Alto. A few people have reported symptoms to their docs that don't fit anything in the insurance codes. At best described as vague lassitude, but with no specific abnormalities to define further. Now this being California and the center of strangeness in the Western World, one is wont to write it off as yet another wave of internally cycling neurotic fear. I mean, if you think you are sick, you're sick, right? Either from *being* sick or from *not* being sick but being unable to get your head out of your ass about being sick. Or not. Your correspondent is largely unable and totally unwilling to unravel that tight knot. Let them cluster up in the cellophane-lined trailers and eat nothing but organic roots and berries, and drink nothing but pure rainwater caught directly on the tongue (like rainwater falling through California skies is anything like pure anymore) until they triangulate the demon. So, are we seeing more and more people with vague lassitude? Film at eleven. Should we go on record with the designation of VLS, Vague Lassitude Syndrome?(Lhaso Apso Fever? Stutterpox?) But as much as Stutterblog likes to bust the chops of the California Nuts 'n Raisins, the point has been made: some very-smart-people-who-should-know are worried. Official non-officials, especially those who watched AIDs come guerrilla onto the scene are "just saying" something is brewing. (Stutterblog-out)

I called Complexia and asked to speak to someone there regarding the pros and cons of the new SG forms. When I got huffy and announced that I was “a genuine blogger, following a lead”, I was instantly shucked off to the PR section who immediately and smoothly shucked me off with an audio message directing me to their official web-site. As galling as that was, in the interest of blogistic integrity, and with little else on my agenda, I spooled it up as background.

(Stutterblog-Pub)

Tracking down Complexia background as in company boilerplate, which I thought would be a snoozer. It is an absolutely fascinating read. Much of it is what on the surface appears to be self-promoting puffery on the part of The Bottner, assuring us that he must be on the shortlist for the Nobel Prize if anyone has any sense. As irritating as it is to press my nose against the picture windows on of what might be the coolest work environment south of old Jobs-burg, and really irritating to see pics of Mr. Big frolicking with the outstandingly bikini-clad Poppet Poppy onboard “his new 185 ft. sail boat” one has to swallow the jealousy and peel back the onion of objectivity for the sake of you kids out there reading and giving-a-shit about the insidious issue of VLS.

For instance, one innocuous little hypertext button takes you to the human genome. Stop for a moment and process that. The whole genome, molecule by molecule, or “base-pair” by base-pair as it is explained. It goes on page after page after page of strings of letters A, T, C, and G, in apparently infinitely different combinations. I remember hearing about that in high school biology. But there are 5 billion of the little suckers. Billion, with a “B”. Mr. B had to put together not only the smartest guys in the room re biology to do this, but also to create pretty

much de novo, the biggest, baddest computer programs in the world, with band-width the size of Kansas to keep it all straight.

The referenced genome, by the way, is his own. Again with the irritation, but also again the objective realization that it had to be someone. It's his buckage, so why not his spunkage? The first one the government did took 13 years and 3 billion dollars, yow. Complexia beat them to the finish line by a year, having done it from scratch in 4 years. Now the company can do anyone in three weeks for ten grand. We hear there are lots of takers in the gated swath by the Bay. (Stutterblog-out)

According to my left-wing Cousin Sandy that first genome sequenced could and should have been a mix of alldafolks' DNA, though I still don't quite understand that possibility. Remember, I am what Kickapoo State calls (its right there on my diploma) a B.A, not a B.S., which is to say I don't know much 'bout rocket surgery and all. A few months back I did do a blog from a symposium about space colonization and one of the sessions had to do with exactly who to send on a futuristic mission; who gets the Golden Wonkabar Tickets. The hardcore side said pick the "best and brightest", the right astronaut stuff, no blobby gamer fan-boys need apply, while the other side pointed out that by the time anyone that you could still call human reached light-year distances they would be so different that best and brightest and buffest here and now wouldn't really matter, culture-wise. Might as well, they argued, randomly sweep up the flaked skin-cell DNA off the lobby floor at the UN and put it in a bottle of generic menstrual blood primed with an eternal sub-woofer loop of Stevie Ray Vaughan meets Angelique Kidjo,

amps up, and shoot it off to randomly splash down in the primordial soup of a likely Goldilocks exo-planet.

So, five hundred logistically pain-in-the-ass generations, maybe 15,000 years and assuming that nothing goes dreadfully wrong, to send the walking-around Robinsons (Danger Will Robinson!) versus a quiet billion years to crawl all the way back up from basic aminogoo, what's the diff? The diff being that one way, the biodome colonist version, at least attempts to impose who-the-hell-we-think-we-are, as of TODAY, upon the next place out there. Culturally jingoistic, ego-based individual and planetary go get'em according to Sandy's bleeding heart Neo-maomaxist buddy Charlene. The tribal way, we just sort of make a genetic suggestion and let Beta Lacerta -126 D boil it up however it seems to fit there. I mean, how well is anybody here going to know anybody even fifty generations from now, let alone five-hundred? So why not five gazillion years of pre-show as we reassemble to fit the flow of our new home. As long as it's our DNA it's still "us", right? For the price of the complicated one, we can send fifty of the simples. Better odds of hitting something.

Which brings us to the come-to-Jesus issue with Mr. B and his genome and the Shitzahuahua. Laying out the human genome was a (or as the website implies, "THE") highpoint of science and of civilization. We figured us out. And it was benign, because, in itself, it was passive. It was simple [sic] description, no manipulation or mucking about. But it was like a fourteen-year-old boy being given a really hot car. You think he's going to be satisfied just sitting in the driver's seat in the driveway making Vroom-vroom noises with his lips? Yeah, right. The question is, are you going to be OK with it when the kid pulls out on the street? In a cloud of hot rubber smoke? He may just turn out to be a really great driver and get a lot of

transportation done. Or he may wrap it around the nearest utility pole, knocking out your lights in the process. Stay tuned to see what Mr. B does with his new genomobile. First up, rumored to be already on the ground at beta test sites, the carboniverous bacteria he's created, supposedly to clean up the environment. (Stutterblog-out)

Cousin Sandy called. There are two dead folks in the morgue where she eats her lunch with her other buddy Chuck The Deiner. One body was a woman known to her own docs as a recent frequent-flyer in their office for complaints very like VLS. A fiftyish computer engineer from Complexia. There was, mirabile dictu, no clear cause of death to put on a certificate, said Sandy. So be it.

The other one however, as she choked out, was one of her colleagues at Pub Health who has been even itchier about all this than she and The Tribe. This one, according to her, has a clear C.O.D. for his certificate: "Gunshot wound, large caliber, cerebral, administered by person or persons unknown".

Do we have your attention now?

(Stutterblog-Pub)

Now don't get all panicky, kids. But it looks like we have just seen the face of the Next Grim Thing. As I blogged last, there seems to be something going on out here in SilVal., so I

have just dropped all my other big issues and consulting work and polo matches to stay here and work this thing.

An unnamed source clued us into a particular corpse brought into the County morgue the other day. Your faithful blogger managed, by hook or by crook to actually be present when they were working on it, or her to be more specific. Other than that we will leave ID alone for the sake of the dead/family.

So, what did we see? Well actually not very much. Just a lady who, according to her friendly personal pathologist, had no reason to be dead.

“I wouldn’t exactly say she was the picture of health”, he said “but she was only 53 and had no known risks for anything specific, heart disease or cancer or anything. And we didn’t find squat.” What would you die of if you didn’t die of anything?

He went on to say that pathology and toxicology might find something but that would take a few weeks. He did make one observation. “The tissues were all normal, all the parts and pieces there and all, and they weren’t light in terms of how many grams they weighed vs what they usually do,” he said, scratching his head, “But they just felt funny, kind of...sticky, thin. Depleted? And I don’t mean she was skinny or that she died of malnutrition.” For what that’s worth. (Stutterblog-out)

Back at Cousin Sandy’s Radio Ranch with the tribe, the money is still on the carbon bugs. And the streets are heating up, too. There is a ton of traffic, in the blogosphere at least, about the pros and the cons. Some of the posts are becoming a little unscrewed, even for someone supposedly edgy such as myself. The dreaded words, “demand” and “require” are floated out.

The videos on the all-nite U-tube grabs show a lot of people, now a lot of different *kinds* of people, all walking the streets, especially around Complexia, carrying signs and shouting through megaphones. Everything from Ban the Bomb to Birds Aren't Real.

In the meantime, like I said, Sandy had gotten us into the morgue, with the help of Chuck the Diener, to see one of these folks in question, which was, needless to say really weird. Cousin Sandy is teeth-chattering, knee-walking, freaked out and since she is the "stable" one in the family and used to hobnobbing with dead folk you can vidi what this scene is doing to me. I was the guy who sort of whistled past the graveyard of dissecting the frog in Jr. High. Because she works for the state health guys she got into the autopsy of one of the now increasing number from Complexia, and managed to get me in too. How? Don't know how, don't really care. Don't know if I would do it again. But this one was pretty amazing. The thing that was most remarkable for me was simple; this was the first dead person I had ever actually seen. I mean I've seen "the beloved deceased", most recently a couple of years ago when Sandy's Stepdad, my Uncle Vernon, got smacked by a cement truck crossing the road near where he and Aunt Cloddy lived, but he was already gussied up and in the box at a funeral. But just a plain old, in the raw dead person, nope. I got to stand by the table for a couple of minutes while the pathologists were getting gloves and such on and just looked closely at her face, to really study her. I have always heard about "death's pale flag advancing" and how the dead, even without the formaldehyde look "waxy" with rigor mortis, but the dead woman made me really understand what those tropes are about. She looked almost translucently pale. You realize how your blood colors your skin, and as I looked down at my own hand next to her's I could see all the subtle shades, green and blue and purple, that go to make up "lie-uhve" versus "day-ud."

Remarkable, or rather unremarkably remarkable, was the outcome. The pathologist really found nothing as a cause of death, just up and died as far as he was concerned. No sign of bacterial infection, and they had the gizmos to specifically check for the new GMOs (including Bottner's *E. bottnerii*). They also apparently did an extensive analysis of this woman's DNA, looking no doubt for the smoking gun of a somehow distorted genome. Complexia had developed a whole next generation of gene analysis, ramping up more power for a sharper picture, looking for defects, natural or man-made. Again however, at least in terms of the tests that they had available, at least according to the County and Complexia, she was normal. Dead, but normally so.

When I got to a quiet place (uh, relative to the morgue....) I spent a while putting together what I knew and sending out the "news". It seemed strange to actually have reason to blog better stuff than the quirks involved in Cuban jai alai scores and the cutting edge of rural Norwegian electromusic.

I am staying with Cousin Sandy while I am on the extended tour of the Coast. This is partly because she wants me to hang around and help her dig in the dirt to see if we can get our heads around this developing phenomenon. She looks wider and wider eyed every day and I still don't quite get what she's driving at, but being here, talking with her and her buddies over dinner and at her office during the day, is probably the best background and education I could possibly be getting. Also, Sandy is the only one of my generation of the family established and bourgeois enough to have a spare bedroom, and her larder is way better stocked than mine.

So, we are sitting around the table last night with her peeps finishing up the gluten-free lasagna and my phone chirps up.

Me, answering phone: Yeah?

Otherend: Mr. Stutts?

Me: Yeah?

Otherend: Mr. Stutts, I am Mr. Herbert Bottner's scheduling secretary.

Me: Yeah?

Otherend: Mr. Bottner would like to invite you to meet with him sometime in the next couple of days. If you're free?

Me: Yeah?

Otherend: Would tomorrow at 9AM be convenient?

Me: Yeah.

Otherend: Could you possibly meet him on his yacht?

Me: Yeah.

Otherend: It's called the Carrier Wave. Slip 3 at Sunnyvale Marina. I don't think you can miss it.

Me: Yeah.

Otherend: Thank you so much. We look forward to seeing you. Nine A.M. Have a nice evening. Click.

Me: Yeah...well, I guess I told him.

Of course, Sandy and the gang had been watching and listening the whole time, it being at her table and all.

"So? That sounded agreeable enough. Marvin. Marvin. Hey! Marv."

“Yeah?” Only then did I notice that I still had the phone to my ear. And that I might have been drooling. Whatever look I had on my face must’ve been such that it seemed fair for the others to be concerned.

“So...” Sandy asked, “Who was it?”

“Herb Bottner wants me to hang out with him on his yacht.”

“So who was it? It wasn’t Susie was it?” Susie was my psychopathic ex, the original red-eyed, wild-type female herself. The last time I had stayed with Cousin Sandy had been the week I had broken up with Susie back in Texas and there was a considerable amount of inelegant phone traffic and the not so unlikely possibility that one of the shadows passing by the windows might be Susie, armed or carrying a can of kerosene.

“No. It was Herb.” I looked around at the guests, all of whom were now sort of stopped with wine glasses in mid-flight. “Herb Bottner.”

“Wow.” I don’t know which of them said it. Maybe all of them at once, like a post-Euripidian chorus.

“You’re going to go?”

“Yeah... Yeah!... Hell, Yeah! I mean,...zero to hero in four seconds flat.”

“He must’ve read your blog.”

“Must have. We don’t normally yacht in the same circles otherwise.”

“I wonder if he’s pissed off...about the Poppy’s very young ass thing,” said Chuck.

“Only one way to find out. So why are you guys so freaked out about...Herb...my buddy Herb...my new BFF Herbie?”

“You just wait until E. Bottnerii gets into you and scavenges your carbon. It doesn’t care.”

So the next day, bright and early (for me), I find myself walking up the gangplank (tee hee, they really have gangplanks, who knew?) of this ginormous boat tied up to the center of cool in the Western World. A very polite guy leads me along to the back end where there is this outstanding set-up, under the alcove of the second deck up, with breakfast and mimosas and hard plates and tablecloths and everything. And sitting there, talking to one of his factotums is H. Bottner himself. He looks a little older and a little less lean than on the book jacket, but then, hey, which of us doesn’t?

“Good morning,.. Mr. Stutts?” He actually got up and walked around this big mahogany table with his hand out. “Orlando, please see what we can get Mr. Stutts for breakfast. I’ll have an omelet. Sit down, sit down.” The sky is blue, the water is calm, the air is crisp, Bottner is all smiles.

“ Thanks for seeing me,” he went on. “Do you know why I called you?” Oops, here it comes.

“I assume you might have read my blog and might have something to say about it?”

“Pretty much. You have nerve. I will grant you that. I admire that.” Then he just smiled at me. Sat there smiling at me, sort of nodding his head.

“Which part?” I noticed that I wasn’t doing too good a job of not choking. He filled my glass with orange juice himself. It was fresh squeezed, and I knew how it felt.

He paused, I think for effect. It worked. “Oh, just...everything.”

OK, so he was going to let me off the hook, at least about the Poppy's ass thing. But why? I risked the next shot.

"I'm told that the things you are doing are important," I ventured.

"Told? By who?"

In for a dime in for a dollar. "Well, you, for one."

He threw back his head and laughed at this, "Ya got me!" He dug into the omelet that the factotum brought him. They had brought me a duplicate, on principle I suppose. "Between bites, he dabbed his mouth with the soft cloth napkin, and asked, "OK, so, basically, what do you know about what I do?"

"You work with the genome."

"Yeah? And what is 'the genome'?"

"Its...well, it's our genes, the control thingys inside cells that make them...be what...ever, they are. Whatever." He considered me for a moment. I thought that he might suddenly decide to melt me with a ray gun or something. Thingys? Sheesh.

"OK, close enough. For now."

"For now?"

"Here's the drill. What I do is big biological science. There are a lot of people out there that don't understand it and are therefore afraid of it..." I think he could tell from the look on my face that people like Sandy and her buddies had gotten to me first. "And because they are afraid, they create...impediments. Roadblocks to work that is damned important."

"Like...?"

“Well, like getting the carbon eaters installed in every smokestack from here to Beijing. But that is really being slowed down by a crowd of people whom, as far as I can tell, don’t know their ass from a hole in the ground, carrying signs and sitting in City Council meetings with their weird knitting, protesting and gumming things up.”

“I’m with you up to there,” I assured him. “Unless of course, they’re right.”

Ignoring that, he went on, “And I want you, Mr. Stutts, to help me overcome those...”

“Impediments?”

“Ya got it.”

“By blogging?” Since it was the only thing I did...I mean I was pretty sure he didn’t need me in the lab. Suddenly I went cold. Maybe he did “need” me in the laboratory; like the frog.... For the thingies, the innards. He *was* going to melt me.

But he quickly reassured me, “Yep. I want you to... blog...for me. Both in and out.”

“You have been following my stuff?”

“Sort of, recently,” he allowed.

“Uh huh,” I honked.

“And yes, it, she is young...and yes it is per-fect,” he said very sotto voce.

“Ah.., uh,” I managed eloquently in my defense. Things swung in the air like that for a moment.

“Mr. Stutts.” he began, “let me tell you something about my life. Might put some of it in better perspective, which is pretty much what I want you to do for me, with the blogosphere, after all. You write stuff down?” He waited. I pulled out my digital recorder and a PDA. He seemed satisfied. “Yes, Poppy is young, but certainly not... that much so. And she is *really* very

smart. Hasn't had much formal school because she was learning her craft, singing, dancing, all that. She really is a good musician. Studies piano theory with the USC faculty, practices four hours a day. Seriously disciplined. And as for understanding the kind of stuff I do, well I started with a state U. degree myself. And she has some good tutors who are keeping her filled in. She doesn't have to know more about biology and such than anyone else with a good liberal arts education. Enough to keep her interested and to be able to help me with the social stuff, like," he drilled me, "journalism/English/sociology." I nodded, obviously willing to be placated without any very tough follow up journalism here. Orlando filled my glass again. I indicated that he could leave the omelet, which was truly dynamite, even getting cold as it was.

"What I have in mind, the reason I thought of calling you, is that," here he looked up, rolled his eyes, "You are America." I wasn't quite sure whether to be offended or not but I sure wasn't inclined to contradict Mr B. at the moment. The omelet was just too good. "I have consulted my publicists, who by the way cost a ton, and who have yet to find a way to connect me with Joe Sixpack. You can lay out all the data in the world, but if you don't have people's sympathy, if they don't trust you, if they think you are too smart for them, then you are too smart for your own good. Useless. You follow?"

"OK..." I figured the more I let him talk the more I would figure out about what the hell I was doing here, aside from absolutely digging the overall blue sky and white table-cloth vibe.

"Have you ever been married, Mr. Stutts?" The question caught me off guard.

"Uh, yeah, once."

"By which I take it you are not married now, divorced?"

"Yeah."

“See, you’re already half-way home to being Mr. Average. She was a ballbreaker?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, buddy...”

“My first wife, whom I married when we were both 20, was pretty tough. Basically, however we were just too young. Not a clue what we were doing. Recognize any of that? You’re pretty young yourself to already be divorced.

“Second one was actually pretty nice, we still talk. But she came along at the point when I was just getting good at the academic thing, at science. I had some really lucky breaks about the people I got exposed to, mentors, as I went on for post-grad stuff. A couple of them were Nobelists. And that was just when I was catching on fire in my brain, had some new ideas to get out. Loved being in the lab, would have just eaten and slept there...actually, I pretty much did for most of my twenties and into my thirties. By the time I came up for air Charlotte, the second wife, had just sort of drifted off to her own things. She’s a biochemist at Princeton now. But we just came unraveled.

“Then when I finally had some control, or thought I did, I married again. Girl named Sophia, French, also trained in science, big industrial family, but more importantly, we were just made for each other. Don’t mean to get mushy but we had a very very good marriage.”

He was silent, and not knowing anything other than that he wanted me to talk about him at some point, and that he had brought the tale this far on his own, I dipped a toe in.

“So, what happened?” He turned and looked me directly in the eye, and I could see that his eyes were welling up.

“She died.”

Ouch. “I’m...sorry.”

“Yeah. She was six months pregnant.” Double ouch. “And she got” his voice choked for an instant, stumbled, “Chickenpox.”

“Chickenpox?”

“Varicella. Yeah, plain old chickenpox. Except in pregnant women, apparently it isn’t always so plain old. She was back visiting home in Paris when it started, and she had the best medical care in the world there. But it didn’t matter. Lungs filled up and she just...died. Baby too.”

“Wow. I’m really sorry.” He nodded, his gaze still elsewhere for a moment before he went on.

“I think maybe that kick started me in some way. I went from total despair to absolute rage. Fucking chickenpox! I wanted to just...obliterate it, like it was some kind of...bad guy.” His big hands were unconsciously clenched, like he was choking that bad guy.

“But they have vaccines, no?”

“Yeah, but it still slips though sometime. I wanted it gone. Kaput. History.” He actually chuckled a little, dabbing a tear away. “Of course, no, I wasn’t even in the field to really do anything with it, with varicella. Not really. But it just sort of generically made me wake up to the good that I could do. Really geared up at that point. I knew that if I was going to make any difference I would have to have resources, not grants or scientific charity,... heavy bucks.”

“And that is why you are in business?”

“Yep. The pharmaceutical stuff is just my day job.”

“Some day job. Mine was washing dishes at the Green Frog Grill.”

“Yeah, well that shit’s over,” he said with a wolfish grin. “We’ll work out the bucks. You’ll like it. Just doing one thing. Just writing for me.”

“Cool.”

“Cool?”

“Hey, love me, love my dog... I’m Kickapoo State, too.”

“Yeah, OK, sorry. That is exactly why I want you.” I looked slightly puzzled. “Because I need someone who speaks as the average young American speaks, and thinks. That’s the demographic I need you to put me in touch with, get me in their door. We’ve got to begin to go on the offensive. I’ve paid a shit-load of PR guys to work this but the tide is just rolling out right now. I just don’t feel like I know what’s going on in the streets. So I’m risking new a tack. I’ll still have them working it all, but maybe we just need to have another ear that might better hear the weird key that people are singing nowadays. They don’t always make sense, either, exactly.”

Though I wasn’t quite sure how to take that last part, as far as I was concerned, we were, for the moment like two old guys down at the VFW hall knocking back a few beers, commiserating about the infernal handbasket “out there.”

Suddenly there was, actually, the patter of little feet. And this really pretty little girl came toddling up, and bouncing up beside her was the Shizuhuahua. Bottner hefted the girl up on his lap and reaching down gave the pooch a scratch. As the little girl turned around to look at me her mother appeared. Uhhh huuh, Momma!

Poppy Leggett Bottner might not be the most beautiful woman I have ever seen but probably, she is. Pretty, cute, beautiful, all at the same time. Blond, clearly naturally so, huge brown eyes with exactly the right eyebrows, delicate features, and a stunningly healthy figure.

A stodgy British reviewer had once written that her role in a West End production, “Was clearly designed as nothing more than an obvious subterfuge to convince the audience, including this critic, that Miss Leggett’s body is somehow excitingly flawless. And indeed, one must admit ...” the writer rather drooled on. The overwhelming consensus of reviews had thought her first performance on the London stage, “Surprisingly professional and highly nuanced.” Not bad for a girl, at the time nineteen years old, from Mineola, Texas. She had gone on to establish herself as a well-respected performer, known for a shrewd and practical attitude toward the show business she was in. And this was all well before she met Herb Bottner.

I cannot imagine anything that L’Oreal or Maybelline or God or whoever could have done to make her one iota more gorgeous. And here it was 9:30 AM on a Wednesday and she was just playing with the baby. Bottner looked at me with a tiny flick of a bushy eyebrow. Without saying a word, said (honest I heard him), “Yep, And by God, I deserve it. You got a problem with that, Ace?”

“Hon, I want you to meet Mr. Stutts.” She looked closely at me and then broke out in a big grin, at once stunningly regular, and gorgeously, goofily cute, I was hooked.

“Oh yeah,” she said, shaking a finger at me, “I know who you are.”

Oh crap, I never even thought about the fact that it might be the ux who would shoot me with the ray gun for the young ass thing. After all it was her ass in question. Would it never end? No pun intended.

“Mr. Stutts”, Bottner asked, “what is your first name?”

“Marvin. Most folks call me Marv.”

“Marv here will be blogging us. Like we talked about?” She held out her hand and we shook on it, and that was that. Only later in the day did we get around to discussing some of the boilerplate, some of the do’s (mostly) and don’ts (only a few), mostly relating to little Aurelia (it was her Texas grandma’s name) whom Herb kept giggling with and referring to as “Miss Arugula”. Because Poppy had had her own publicists for so long there was a little stuff about that “turf”, but all in all I could not have felt more comfortable with “Herb and Poppy”. Like we were all together down at that VFW Hall on Bingo Night or something. Except, it kept slamming home to me, the VFW Hall was 200 feet of imported ultra-smooth mahogany yacht.

Poppy, obviously light years beyond me in the field, took the time to very gently give me some advice. “Uhm, Marv, I can call you Marv?” I nodded, as it was still a little difficult for me to breath, let alone swallow, let alone articulate sitting there on the fantail sofa with her. “The people I follow, and who follow me are a little...younger than the one’s Herb needs to connect with, and his PR people, the one’s we have now sort of skew...older.”

“Those folks have all got a stick up their ass, is what,” interjected Bottner, looking up from the bank of computer screens he was working at nearby.

“So even with the demographic you’ll be shooting for, maybe introducing yourself as a blogger is a little... you know, funky? But then, ‘publicist’ isn’t quite right either. I mean, that’s what we’re trying to break through, right?” The two of them looked at each other, brows furrowed for a moment, clearly working my miniscule problem together. He nodded and shrugged, deferring to her on this one. “Anyway,” she went on in a kindly tone, “that may be

one your first jobs, to figure out how to introduce yourself. In order to actually do the job, of connecting.” We furrowed a touch at each other, a heady experience for me, to feel like I actually existed at this place and time and was working with this crowd. “We’ll leave that up to you.” She touched my knee. She touched my knee! Poppy Leggett actually touched my knee! I may never wash my knee again. “So,” she said, “Let’s get started.”

I got to be involved in that day’s digital entry into the baby book. Orlando, the valet guy, snapped the portrait pix, not requiring any sort of discipline or pose and then just sort of grokked the day with the digicam. They even got a shot of “Uncle Marv” awkwardly rolling a ball back and forth with Arugula on the fantail deck. Poppy entered some stuff about the things the little girl was interested in just then, and, as “Aureliadot” as they called it, was a comprehensive record, noted a routine pediatrician visit, coming up. Herb looked up from his work, and asked a couple of questions about her baby shots, and that was a wrap. Then the proud mommy cranked up the playback for me on an HD digital screen about five feet across. I thought, “Oh shit, the baby pics...”

But...wow. Especially on that size screen, which meant that the images of this two and a half-foot tall kid were still life size, the progression, was not a long laborious plod of “And here’s blah blah doing blah blah, blah blah”. Instead, it was one very smooth and frankly breathtaking sweep of progression from day one to that very day, about nine- hundred images but done in maybe a minute and a half. No commentary from Mom. Just the objective stuff. Again, wow. I had only watched about twenty seconds when I had first seen it on the Econcom web site, and on my 13-inch screen, but seen this way it was a different experience altogether. As different from “regular” film as Cinemascope was from Muybridge, the guy with the horses that moved

when you flipped through the pictures. All it took was looks and a whole lotta bandwidth. A whole lot.

I found out that they kept a continuous digicam going in each of three main locations where the little girl would likely be at any time. It was also pretty clear that I had been thoroughly buzzed through a major security net to be here at all, which was OK with me. I almost wished that I had something, anything, at least a little more interesting, if not sinister, in my life to date.

Of course, this was all, in one sense the best security for a child since the day after Lindbergh, but I sensed that that was only a by-product, that they were on the level in terms of wanting to capture all of this for this child's sake. Let her live the same life from several different perspectives. I thought, what more could this particular kid possibly get out of the world, Yo Daddy's rich and yo Momma good lookin'; the only thing better than being the Bottner babe was to get to be the Bottner babe x three or four. Like if, and when you're down or when you get old. Rich people would soon get to live more than one of their oh so comfy lives. Perhaps conversely the poor would be able to at least edit out the shittiest parts of theirs. Hello Second Life meets Wired via The Root.

That evening I am back at the dinner table at Sandy's (much tougher cuts of meat here. Actually, now it even seemed like the saladish stuff was tough). The usual crowd there, "The Tribe" as they referred to themselves included Sandy, who was a doc for the city Public Health Department and her shaggy, lovable husband Bob, who taught biology at the local JC. Chuck was the deiner at the county morgue, and no irony here, he was a killingly funny guy. Chuck's

boyfriend was also a genetic Bob and thus referred to as BobBob, or Bobsquare to keep the various Bobs straight, no pun intended. Also Sandy's gimlet-eyed, redheaded nurse practitioner Charlene and her sociology prof guy Rudy. She and her crew quizzed me like I had been on a fly-over of the North Korean Nuke Fair. When I let it be known that "Herb and Poppy" were really pretty decent sorts I could sense the adversarial nature of things swell up.

"Come on, you know they were just co-opting you."

"Why? What have I got to co-opt me out of? My moral turpitude?"

"Right..." snorted Sandy.

"Maybe it's not you," said Charlene, quietly.

"Huh?"

"Maybe us." said Rudy.

"You? You mean the Ban the Bottner Public Health crowd? The kids in the basement?"

"Well, you are here right now and you are spreading Bottner gospel, and your surely going to at least mention us," Sandy pointed out.

"Hey, come on. I'm being journalistically objective." That got a really arch look from everyone at the table spontaneously but in unison. "OK. OK. But it's a blog. Its not The Christian Science Monitor."

"So you're letting yourself off the hook by saying, 'Hey it's OK, I'm just a mediocrity, a dunce and a flunky'? C'mon. Blog or no blog, you don't have to be a dimwit. You do have some responsibility, whether you accept it or not."

"To who? My editor? Ain't got one of those, remember? No editor, no checkee?"

"Right, exactly my point. No editor, no checkee. Now checkee, so...."

"Editor. Mr. Big."

"Yahuh. The check big enough?"

"Hey, meat is interesting."

"Thirty pieces enough to get a nice juicy steak?" said Charlene.

"No one says I have to do all puff. Or even any puff for that matter."

"Uh huh. You want fries with that steak, Sir?"

"OK so days I listen to them and nights I listen to you guys. And I pod cast it all."

"What if Mr. Big doesn't like this end? Are you going to tone it down in order to save your cushy job?"

"If you don't do us right your ass is out on the street," threatened Sandy, hitting me on the arm like she had a hundred times at family reunions when we were kids. She always knew how to raise a bump.

"Ow! Hey, I got a job, remember? I am currently, economically, Teflon. But...yeah, I kinda like staying here with you Cuz and I think as long as I'm straight up with everyone, both sides, maybe I can actually do some good work here. Might as well. It might get interesting."

"Wow, what a mighty statement of journalistic integrity", said Charlene with a snort.

"All the news that doesn't screw up the surfing'."

"It's what there is, circa 2020."

"Twenty-one."

"What?"

"It's 2021, Marv. Wake the fuck up."

“OK, then... So, after all that journalism 101 class, thank you, what actually has been happening out there, in your world? Anybody else turn up DOA? What about your friend. Any more word?”

They were all pretty shook up about the gun-shot guy. Though he hadn't been one of this dinner table bunch, he had been close enough. He had been a lot older than these guys. He was one of Flossy Wong-Stahl and Arye Rubinstein's contacts over at the San Francisco Public Health Department back when they were all trying to figure AIDS out, when the politics was so fucked up. They said he had never really been the same since. Chronically depressed. Hospitalized a couple of times. Not much more. He was pretty isolated by the end.”

“So, he just checked out?”

“Maybe.”

I didn't pursue the issue further as it was clear it caused pain around the table, so changing focus I asked, “What are you hearing from up and down the coast?”

Sandy poured us both another glass of red. “I called Ron Fabricio at UCSF and he said they had had six, already six, other cases that were pretty much like the woman from Complexia. Just dead. No reason. One of theirs was really weird, too. He said they had apparently had some problem actually declaring one of them.”

“Huh?”

“He said he didn't know the exact details but that he had heard that this particular person, in the ICU, had “died”, but then when the nurses were wrapping them up, they called the house staff back and said they weren't dead.”

“Eeeeeewwww. Edgar Allen Poe lives. No pun intended. What do they do when that happens?”

“That was the weirdness. When the doc came back...”

“Can you imagine how freaked out you would be if you missed one like that?” Chucky the diener chimed in, tipping back his wineglass.

“When the doc came back...he called it again.”

My face is squinched way way up by now. “Wait, wait, wait, what?”

“The resident came in, expecting to have to dig out of a shit pile, and Ron says he goes over and looks at the...patient...the body...again, and says, “No, they really are dead.”

“Like what, they had a spasm and then really really, most sincerely died while he was on the way back in?”

“NO!” Sandy splashed a bit of her wine as she made the point, “I mean apparently they argued about it, the doc and the nurses. Nurses said ‘Not dead.’ Doc says, ‘Dead. Move’m out.’”

“Whoa! I thought you guys had...you know, ways...of telling that stuff. I mean for sure. What did they do?”

“Ron said they kept the patient-slash-body for another two days. Did EEGs, which is supposed to be the sine qua non, at least for the brain being dead. He said he supposed that settled it because the body, now declared to *be* a body, was finally sent down to the morgue. But he said the guys downstairs said it was really nerve wracking to slide that particular one into a cooler. Said they kept going back checking. And he said it was weird. The way it looked, the EEG, something. But he said they couldn’t put their finger on it either. Weird.”

“Weird?” I had set my digicorder on the table sometime back, and Sandy and the Slabistas hadn’t demurred. I suppose they understood that this was the B side of the Thirty Pieces Project. “OK, talk to me about ‘weird’.”

“I don’t know any more than that. Maybe you should go talk to them. To Fabricio.”

“Would they talk to me?”

“I don’t know. But...”

“But?”

“I’ll bet if Herb Bottner made a call...”

“Whoa, whoa.”

“Uh Huh?”

“Why would he want to do that?”

Sandy raised her eyebrows and shrugged. The others were quiet, all focused on me.

“Fuck.”

“Welcome to real stuff, big boy.” Charlene just would bust my chops.

“OK. So what else do we know about any of this. How about the first body, that lady from Complexia. Anything else turn up on her? You said they had done some DNA analysis, anything ‘weird’ with that one? I mean Aunt Cloddy always said “Chew that one before you take another bite.” Aunt Cloddy was Sandy’s mom and that was one of the things she always yelled at us. “You haven’t chewed up the first one yet!”

“Yeah, well... the autopsy report is still non-specific.”

“No sign of the carbon eating bugs?”

“Nope. At least not so far.”

“And nothing in the DNA stuff?”

“No. But, and this is a big but... I found out that the DNA analysis was done by the only genetics outfit that does that stuff, the really detailed stuff.”

“And...?”

“And that was guess who.”

“Ah. My new best friend.”

Sandy nodded. “Complexia”. Rudy and Charlene did not waste the opportunity to exchange very significant glances.

The next day, back on the Carrier Wave, I screwed up my courage to test the actual depth of the water under me with Bottner. “OK so we’re going to do a lot of human-interest stuff, but are we going to actually do anything to address the things that have all the genetic treehuggers’ knickers in a twist?” Bottner didn’t speak for a moment. He just looked at me, perhaps sizing me up, perhaps making that decision himself. He was well known for playing stuff on the fly.

“Like what?”

“I understand that there’s a dead lady down at the morgue who used to work for you. Any idea about what happened to her?”

“The coroner said she died of natural causes. Who knows, maybe a heart attack?”

“Uh uh.” I kept his gaze. He didn’t flinch.

“I really don’t know anything about it. Truly. I know her name, what she did in the company. We sent a condolence to her family. But other than that, no.”

“What did she do?”

“She was a programmer. She had nothing whatsoever to do with the lab side.”

“But the programmers offices, are they near the labs? Anywhere near?”

“We’re all on the same campus, but not in the same building or anything. From a public health standpoint, like John Snow and the pump, everything is segregated pretty fully.”

“John who?”

“Snow. The guy who figured out the London water system spread cholera. That’s when we finally figured out why it mattered to not shit upstream. No, I don’t think the SG organisms are getting out.”

“But how do you know that?”

“The organisms themselves, once they are created, behave pretty much like any other life form in their class. I mean just because they have a new set of engineered capabilities, there is no reason to think they can all of a sudden fly or become invisible or any such thing. Like with the carbon cleaners, they die if they are out of that very odd environment. The new capabilities are usually very specific.”

“Usually.”

“Like Rummy said, in any enterprise there are known unknowns and unknown unknowns. But I have as full a set of containment and safety procedures here as they have at the CDC. I know that because I hired the CDCs best folks to work for me.”

“More bucks?”

“Of course. That’s why I have to have a large income. To do things right, safely. I’m not a rapacious robber baron, Marv. Aurelia has to breath this air and drink this water. You think I

don't care about not fucking it up? I'm on our side. I'm trying to fix it." We continued to hold each other's gaze for another few seconds, each of us considering the other.

Finally I broke, and went on. "My cousin...my contacts...tell me there was also an apparent suicide the same day they brought her in. Guy worked for the Public Health Department. Shot in the head."

"And..." I did not sense that he made any connection.

"And a lot of those guys, the public health folks, are all fidgeting among themselves about your stuff. I just mention it to keep you up on the whole picture. And Sandy, that's my cousin, who works for pub health, mentioned that there are more and more cases of funny stuff popping up here on the coast."

"Funny stuff?"

"People who are maybe dead, maybe alive, something odd is happening to them."

"Humph. Sounds like zombies. Hoodoos. But why are people looking at me like I'm the voodoo guy?"

"They think it may be infection with the E. Bottnerii. Some folks have started calling it Carbon Scavenge Syndrome. I guess because they don't fully understand what you do."

"It's easy to understand..."

"Then why do you have me?" He chewed on that for a minute.

"Well, maybe they are just too...undereducated to get it."

OK, so they don't understand it..." here I searched, "It's that even if they understand what it is supposed to do, it's so new that the folks who are supposed to watch out for threats

are...well, they're looking for threats, unexpected effects. Taking the safest bet on Rummy's unknown unknowns."

"For which I, and Aurelia, thank them."

"So when strange stuff happens they are already primed to hook it onto you. Are you keeping up with these odd deaths?"

"I haven't been, but that's just because I didn't know about them. See, you're already earning your keep."

"Any chance you could get me in to see some of the folks in San Francisco Public Health?"

"To do what?"

"Ask around, just try to get a handle on this. For you...and also for the nervous folk here."

"I'll see what I can do. Let me make some calls." Amazing.

Then we all gathered on the fantail to do the day's Aureliadot entry.

That evening back at Sandy's, as we sat around the table finishing off the third bottle of wine, I couldn't help but wax enthusiastic about the whole Aureliadot project.

"Saw the whole grow-up thing, new dog, showed off a couple of cute outfits, neat sneakers, you know the kind that spark when she runs, who came up with that? I always think that's so great. Getting her shots this week, poor kid. First haircut, be neat to see that from one entry to the next, got their own salon on the boat, right there. We're thinking of little girl ballet,

Poppy didn't start any formal training of any kind until she was ten or eleven. The whole thing is just so cool."

The fanbase was all astounded when I told them about Bottner maybe going to make calls to San Francisco.

"Just like that? He said he'd do it?"

"He said 'I'll make a call'. Hasn't made it yet, don't know what the call will be."

"You ever read about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the call Claudius made for them?" Charlene asked.

"Huh?"

"The letter?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. We've already told you to watch your back."

"So", I challenged, "What has Bottner..Herb...Herbie, done that is so bad?"

"You mean aside from turn a bunch of folks into wax statues and blowing Doc Blogett's brains out? Not a thing. Not a thing."

"Rumor based on hearsay. But that's not what I'm talking about. If, and I say if, he has indeed done those things, it might be to cover something up. What is THAT thing, that thing he is covering up?"

"The bacteria. The new genome," said Charlene, not missing a beat.

"Which is bad because...?" I swilled down another half glass of Sandy's modest zin.

"...maybe wins the next Noble Prize? Its not a secret. On the cover of Time and stuff."

“OK. Heads up, comic books down.” Sandy jumped in. “First of all you know as much about the Nobel Prize as you do about haute couture. Bottner will never get a Nobel, nope, won’t happen.”

“Why? I mean if his stuff actually is righteous.”

“Jealousy.”

“Jealousy?”

“Yep.”

“Too much for one guy? The gold, the girl, the Buick, the whole thing?”

“Jealousy. Nobody gets to have it all. Either the goodies or the prize, not both. That’s how it works.”

“Well, I have seen the goodies. Throw rocks at that ‘ol prize.”

“Your dedication to science is...touching, truly inspirational. As is your deep commitment to woke sociology. The problem *is* righteousness...or rather the lack thereof.”

“But how do *you* know?” I pressed. “I mean, do you have the numbers, the data? Can you make it compelling to me? At my admittedly limited, but at least above-white-trash -SATs?” Now it was my turn to badger. My little Tinkerbelle light of incipient journalism was beginning to flicker. The table was silent for a moment, as they all looked back and forth at each other.

Finally, Charlene spoke, apparently for the irritated consensus, “We just fucking know. A lot of pieces and parts, just hanging together. And it’s too important to screw around giving the benefit of the doubt in case we’re wrong. If we are wrong, we’re assholes. If we are right it may mean dodging the end of everything. If it needs to be stopped, it needs to be stopped now, yesterday, last year. These dead folks are just casualties in the early phase of a war. People are

dying and more are going to die. It has to be stopped.” Myself, I thought she was just a touch too transfixed.

“And you’re that certain you’re justified?” I asked back. “If you’re wrong you are stopping some stuff that might be good. The carbon bugs for instance. There is a crisis on that end of things, or at least everybody from Al Gore on down is shouting there is. And it looks like Mr. B may be the only one to be doing anything about that. Today, now, not tomorrow or next year. You think about that?” There was strained silence at the table, but no one seemed to be inclined to fall to their knees in sudden realization or a flash of clarity.

Later when it was just Sandy and I cleaning up the dishes, she mentioned that Charlene, and particularly the sociology prof hubby, had apparently been communicating for some time with fairly hard-core, doctrinaire “GMO Eco-Marxists.”

“I mean they, especially Rudy, they have always been pretty out there, you know, politically.”

“Not just like, registered Democrats, huh?”

“I worry about her sometimes. Like maybe she’s gonna get in trouble somehow with all that.”

“Yeah, she seemed a little intense there at dinner.”

“Like, that’s what I mean. That speech? The one she laid into you with? I’ve heard it now about a dozen times. Like it’s a script or something, same words, same phrases.”

“Well, it’s a free country, last I checked,” the wine maintained agreeably. “You ever talked with her eco-freaks?”

“Me? No. God no. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I really am worried about some of the things that people like your buddy Bottner are doing, And I do think they bear really close watching. But when it comes down to it, you’re right, we really don’t know for sure if they are the good guys or the bad guys, at least not yet we don’t. But Charlene and Rudy...they have their minds made up, and it’s hard sometimes to even have a conversation with them. I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “I really hate that, because Char and I are, or at least we were, such good friends.”

“Well, you remember what your mom always said.” Sandy looked at me puzzled. “Aunt Cloddy always said, ‘You can never fill the duckwasher too full,’” and I carried the shaky stack I had bussed out into the kitchen.

About ten in the morning the next day and I am sitting on the fantail of the Carrier Wave scrolling through the news including the blogosphere. Bottner has spent the whole morning on the phone and on computers gearing up the VLS Project to try and figure out the cause of this freaky stuff. Seemed a lot of sudden focused attention, but then that was the man. It felt like early stages in some local political campaign. People moving around in the background with signage and setting up tables and phone stations and such.

There were some really flaming op-eds, especially in the smaller, more granular, boutique press, shading down into the non-solid, editorially amorphous blogosphere. Individually not alarming, mostly just wing-nuts, but un-edited and taken in the aggregate, well up into the double digits of hostility and outright opposition. I could see what Bottner thought he was up against, and began to see more clearly what my job here was. The solid old idea that

reason alone will always triumph was beginning to crumble under my feet. I suppose anyone who presumes to swim in the waters of public expression comes to that scary realization, and it's probably just a part of the baptism under fire for anyone presuming to call themselves a journalist. Up to this point in my so-called career, I had been paddling around in the shallow pools, with essentially nothing at stake. I was faced with a choice here, I thought; just slowly back away and avoid the shitstorm, or make a committed step and learn to deal with the disappointment in humanity as a given of the job. Back in the day, I suppose that happened to most people as they did their time as "cub" reporters, now probably called "interns" or

"junior associate reporters" or some such plump. They had the advantage of a system of gradual seniority, with mentors, nee editors, available for consultation and support at this crucial juncture in not only their careers but probably in their inner lives as well. Stringers like me had to like it or lump it. I realized why there are so many people out there who "used to be" in the journalistic trade. They now owned bars or hair salons and could just nod and smile when some whack nutjob started in. Hey, no sweat off their nethers.

Orlando brought Bottner a call up at the end of the room on the fantail, and Herb was pretty stone-faced as he listened. This was distinct enough that the rest of us sitting around clued up and zeroed in on it. Still listening, he pointed to Orlando and to the big video screen in the shade of the overhead deck.

The feed on the bigger screen at the front of the space jiggled and joggled a bit and then opened up on the scene of what appeared to be a recent earthquake or explosion. Generic action of people scurrying about with hoses and pumps and other machines and tools going about God-knows-what, but God bless them for doing it, a lot of smoke, and presumably ash

and soot as well in the air, some small flames, but more masonry visible than flammable wood. But where is this place? Not yet clear to us. A lot of red brick.

Bottner stands up in front of the screen and says, "That's the tower of the Cal-Power/Complexia coal-fired power station near Santa Eucharista."

He sees my look of question. "Small place, experimental. This is one of the first three places where Escherichia B. was actually installed in a smokestack. Supposed to run as the pilot for two years before anything else can move. Damned delay! It has been on line for about a year and has functioned flawlessly, dropping the amount of particulate and sub-particulate exit waste by 90-plus per cent. Also, by the way, because of the feed-back loop, burning the carbon filled bacteria for fuel, making it more efficient, and thus cheaper than any other power source currently available, wind, solar, all of it. And these eco-fucks knock it down. Jeesus!"

Later that morning, The Carrier Wave slipped its berth and gently pulled away from the dock. Making its way up the Bay over the next few hours and ultimately out into the open Pacific beyond the Golden Gate.

I was a little nervous about all this until Orlando walked me up a set of stairs to the next deck up and showed me one of the small "state-rooms" that I could use while we were gone. Gone to where? For how long? Unknown unknowns. But it was felt easier to protect the family out here than at the moorings, or even at their walled estate up in the hills. It would take a few days for the details of the explosion to come in, establish themselves, sort themselves out, and make Mr. B comfortable enough to go back to his base. In the meantime, there was complete electronic coverage of the situation, from the news coming into the boat on about twenty feeds, including with the folks at places like Interpol, to the physical status and safety of the

Carrier Wave itself. Turns out there is a tender-boat that always shadows the Carrier Wave. Not another sail-boat, rather, an equally sleek, but powerfully motorized supply vessel called Shadow Wave, crewed by Bottner's security guys. Able to carry out littoral combat if needed, but, listed as "ship tender" by official description. Always just off on the horizon.

As soon as things had settled at least a bit we docked again in a few days. I was clearly in the way in the eco-raid investigations, so I felt obliged to earn my keep and hie on over to SF and use the Bottner carte blanche to cover the other waterfront, the growing VLS crisis.

Ron Fabricio is a very smart guy. Harvard Yard, Stanford, yada yada. He's a doc here at UCSF in the Infectious Disease Department. Those are the guys who have to get it right or else the bacteria and fungus win and we all melt. I had a wake-up-in-a-cold-sweat dream in which I could actually see all the bacteria in the world, all actually looking at us, poised like tigers at the edge of the firelight, and just as they all sprang upon us, I woke up. Jeesh. Gimme shelter.

So anyway, this guy Fabricio, just sort of knew Sandy, and it was pretty clear that that alone wouldn't have gotten me the late afternoon slot with his secretary. But, given the Bottner tag, the guy could not have been nicer. Even a little bit of a suck-up. Which scared me because being the suckee is not something with which I am familiar, and I found it was not really something with which I was all that comfortable. I really find I like at least thinking that the folks around me are smarter and more powerful and in charge; that they can, in fact, keep the bacterial tigers at bay.

"So what is it that Mr. Bottner wants to know?" Fabricio asked.

"He, and I, and my cousin Sandy," I intro-ed just to keep it all honest, "All want to know anything you can tell us about the guy that died but didn't die."

“Ahhhhh.” Now he got it. “Bottner wants to know if any of his beasties have gotten out?”

“Do you think so? I mean do you think they have?”

“Excuse me, but why did he send you?” He had more than a touch of snobbery in his voice. I thought about how it would be if I had a ray gun.

“I do...research for him,” Poppy’s advice kicking in.

“Ah ha.” He nodded. “Well you know there is such a thing as medical privacy?”

“From Bottner? The man knows your genes...from space. Let’s just sort of read into the minutes that you told me to be discrete and I said I would, OK?” He caved. Apparently if I had said “I’m Herb Bottner’s ice-skate caddy,” it wouldn’t have mattered. I’m Bottner’s...anything, would carry the weight.

“OK. So, what does he want to know?”

“About the undead dead.”

“I figured.”

“And...?”

“It’s just weird...” I waited on “weird,” remembering recently being in the presence of “weird” elsewhere.

“This guy wasn’t dead, but he had no pulse.”

“Then why isn’t that dead?”

“Because he had brainwaves.”

“And that is wrong.”

“Backward. You can have heartbeat without brainwaves, but the other way, uhn uh, never seen it, or not for more than a few minutes at most.”

“What else about it?”

“It’s not the only one.”

“It’s not?”

“Nope, at least a couple more that I know of.”

“So what do you make of it?”

“This is the next new thing. AIDs in the 80’s, syphilis in 1493.”

“Black plague?”

“Capitol B capitol P.”

“You think?”

“Pays to be prepared if it is.”

“How prepared? I mean in what way, exactly?”

“Got me so far. But I’m sure thinking about it.”

“So what exactly is “it”? No clue?”

“None.”

“Is it bad genetics?”

“That’s what Bottner wants to know?”

“That’s what a lot of people want to know. Bottner among them, yeah.”

“If I had to say, I’d say...no.”

“Because?”

“Ah, look, this is absolutely pulled out of the ass here. No one ‘knows’ anything about this stuff yet, really. All just guesses.”

“But somebody has to start.” I cranked up a Bob the Prof lesson. “What is it you guys do, generating hypotheses? It’s not inductive or deductive yet because there is no general or particular to it, not that can be recognized. So that makes it abductive at this point.” He seemed impressed. Little did he know that in regards to rectal derivations that little hodge-podge of which I actually understood about as much as if it had been in Farsi, was copped almost word-for-word from Sandy’s hubby Bob at the dinner table. Apparently, however, my instincts about exactly what bullshit was ambulatory here were correct.

“Yeah..., abductive,” Fabricio said, now warming to the whole thing, and me, a bit more, like maybe we had roomed together at Choate. “If I have to, just abductively grok this thing, I’d say it’s not Bottner’s bugs. But I just don’t have a handle on it yet. We’re in the stage of trying to recognize patterns. I mean you go back to basic logic. Don’t chase blind stuff. It may not even be biological.”

Now it was my turn to pick up. “Not biological? So what’s the problem, then. Like radiation?”

“Hey at this level part of the differential diagnosis is still Biblical Plague as far as we know. Invasion by tiny tiny Martians. It’s all open.”

“But I assume you’re not betting the Martians?”

“If I had to say, I’d say it feels..., feels mind you, more like physics than like biology.”

“Physics?” I was fucked. What I knew of physics was the ball thing clacking back and forth. I am what you would call quasi-Newtonian and not always sure I really believe in gravity. Puffing my cheeks out I muttered, as my nasty IT geek friend, Bernie, sometimes did for pure asshole ironic effect, “Like, we’re totally granular at the atomic level.” It was just something he always said, usually with a little smirk at my expense. I often quoted it as a self-effacing statement of surrender in any technical situation that got beyond me, which was pretty much all of them, pretty quickly. But this time, kwatz!, my man Fabricio gets this semi-stunned look on his face, snaps into a thousand yard stare for a couple of seconds, squinches his educated forehead up and suddenly says, “Yeah. Maybe. Yeah, that may be as good a way as any to describe it, so far.” There was newfound respect in the man’s eyes. I knew it was important for me to shut the fuck up and listen from this point in, not blow the illusion that I had inadvertently created.

“I mean it’s not like anything is missing”, he went on, “Or that it isn’t working correctly at the organ system level. Its deeper than that, like it really is at the atomic level, maybe even deeper.”

“Carbon scavenging?”

“Ah, Bottneria carbonivorous bugs? Not that I can see. Not certain we would see it if they were here, though. Novel effects. But, no, maybe not the bugs. Deeper.”

“Deeper?” the trick was to ask it like a therapist asking a leading question, rather than as a wide-eyed rube asking “Goll-Ily! Ya mean it?!”

“I’m not too well versed in sub-atomic structure (he, apologized, to me), but...maybe their quarks are fucked up. Their charm all screwed up or their ups are all downed.”

“So would that affect their genes?”

“Who knows? Or if so, how?”

“Uh huh. So what’s next?”

“I thought that was what you were here for, to tell me.”

I thought about this for a moment and the actual, correct, not-just-BS answer came to me, “Let me talk to Bottner and we’ll get back to you.”

“Hurry.”

Next morning, Poppy was loading Aurelia up for her appointment with the pediatrician, just routine stuff, and as one of the crew was bringing the SUV around (actually two came around, hers which the boat-crewman would drive, and a second one with a couple of the big security guys. She plopped her baby-stuff bags down and sat across from me as she waited for them.

“So has Mr. B called the cops about the smokestack explosion?” I asked her, “Or is he even planning to?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she nibbled at her lower lip. “I asked him that last night and he said we have more stuff than they do. They’ll just mess it up.”

“They”, the CIA, the FBI, the CDC, the ATF, the FCC, hoo boy, and they will “just mess it up”. Ok, so there we are on that.

“Hey Marv, you wanna go with us?” she suddenly suggested brightly, always up to make good times.

“To the doctor? Yeah, sure. Why not? I think that’s part of my beat. I’m just goofing around here. But I’m not getting any shots. No shots.”

So the SUV’s came around and we piled in, bags and binkies and all and away we went to a very prosperous part of town to a very upscale and discrete looking office park. We moved the circus inside and I am sitting in the waiting room flipping through what are actually up-to-date magazines, Poppy and Aurelia are off in the back, with one of the guys watching over them, when I heard a couple of muffled pops. Nothing much. I flip a page. And then screams.

The door to the hall flies open and a nurse comes tumbling out, blood splattered across her scrubs. More pops clearer now with the door open, and clearly recognizable as gunshots. The place starts to smell faintly of cordite. I find myself standing, but not really knowing which way to move, and to what purpose. Out the front door would be pretty sensible, except now I can hear that door flying open. It’s the cavalry, or at least it’s the other guy of the security detail, pistol out in front of him and he enters the waiting room like clearing a terrorist block, looking all around as he moves. We are the only customers in the room, as they apparently reserve the place for Poppy and Aurelia when they come, and there are no other patients or families waiting. I raise my hands to show him I am no threat and then point to the open door, he knows who I am and his

scan passes over me. The nurse is screaming, "They shot Dr. Ochs!" Then looking over at the girl behind the glass of the check-in desk who is clearly stunned, she goes on, "Minnie, call 911!" We can hear struggles in the back, but thankfully no more shots. We are both moving that direction, security in the lead. I hear Poppy shouting, "No! No! You put her down. Nooo!" and a crash of something metal hitting the floor. The security guy moves in through the hallway door, there is another quick riff of shots and then its quiet. I hear people moving out the back door. And worst of all, I can hear Aurelia's shrieking as it gets suddenly fainter, moving away. "Mommy!" And the back door slams shut.

I look over at the nurse, as she is now huddling with the desk girl.

"Call somebody. Now!" It puts them in motion. I juke my head enough to see down the hallway into the back rooms. One security guy is face down in the hall, a lot of blood under him. I slip in it as I move on back. I look in a side room, a desk, diplomas, empty. The door at the back of the hallway is sort of half open, awry on its hinges, as though perhaps it was forced or blown open. Daylight is streaming in the gap. I hear an engine and run to see if I can catch up. I can see a late model minivan, dark green, just turning a corner out of the back parking lot and into the large street where it disappears accelerating away.

I turn back in, from here I can see the security guy's eyes are open, he's dead. I hear rattling and clanging and go into the exam room. The other security guy is cooked, and the body of a middle aged-woman wearing a short white jacket with two very distinct red holes in the front is sprawled backward across the exam table. And behind

the exam table is Poppy, blood streaming down her face, trying to get up. Her arm looks bent at a crazy angle between the wrist and elbow. She slips around in the blood and is clearly woozy. I help her to get up into a chair.

“They took Aurelia!” She can hardly breath. Her nose is clearly broken left to right and bleeding like a fountain. I look to the side cabinet and see a cloth to hand her to hold against her face.

“You OK? You breathing OK?”

“They took Aurelia.”

“I know. Stay put.”

As I pass through the front room I see the office ladies are still there. “Go help the lady back there. Did you call 911?” I think I can hear the very faint sound of a siren. The older lady nods, clearly shaken. “Go help her!” I point back down the hall. I keep on going out the front and the driver, who has been in the SUV across the parking lot, unaware of the brewhaha, snaps to and starts to get out.

“No! Get back in. They’ve kidnapped Aurelia and just split out the back, over there. He is back in and has the SUV turned on in the few seconds it takes for me to get in. “Go out here, turn right. Punch it!” I am grabbing my cell phone getting 911. “Police dispatch. What is your emergency?”

“A little girl just kidnapped. People shot on,” I turn to the driver “Where are we?....”

“2400 block of Salem. We are headed south on Salem”

“2400 block of Salem. We are headed south following a dark green late model mini-van. They took a little girl, shot up a doctors office and took her.”

“Can you see the van now?”

“No. I’m headed the way they took off out of the parking lot, but they could be in any direction from here. They were at 2400 less than five minutes ago. We’re looking. Get somebody out here, please! “

“Are you the girl’s father?”

“No ma’am. I work for her folks. Her name is Aurelia Bottner. Her father is Herbert Bottner.”

“There is an ambulance dispatched to that address. How many people were hurt?”

“Two dead, three, I think, and one busted up pretty bad. The ambulance is good. That’s good. But tell your units to look for this mini-van. Dark green.”

“Anything else you can tell about it? The make or year? License plate?”

“No, its late model, but I just caught a glimpse. We’re looking for it now.” The driver was hauling down Salem, a fairly sedate four lane street just on the edge between the suburbs and faster, bigger, more convoluted commercial streets. He was whipping his head side to side as we hit the cross streets. He shook his head, though still pushing on. We were coming to the intersection of one of the bigger eight lanes and I could see the raised freeway only a block or two over.

“There! There, is that them? Damn!” We had zipped through the cross street I hadn’t had much time to look to that side. He sped up to get to the next intersection.

“Yeah! That’s it! At least same kind. He spun the big vehicle a hard left and we charged down the even smaller cross street. A guy was backing out of a driveway and we had to stand it on its head to avoid hitting him, but then jumped the curb, honking, as we swept around him. We skidded round the corner, making a right to be behind them. They were two blocks ahead and turning left onto the big street leading to the freeway. “I think this is them!” I shouted to the phone which was still on, on speaker.

“Don’t try to catch them” the dispatcher said.” Just stay behind them. Where are you now?” I looked at the driver who leaned over a little, still driving like a bat out of hell and says, “At Cutler. Looks like they are heading to the 265. I lost ‘em!”

We were now coming up to the freeway. I couldn’t see the on-ramp on our side well, and we couldn’t see the other side at all. The intersection was jammed and we couldn’t get through to see if they went straight. “We lost them at Cutler and the 265. Just now. Please, just cover it all, the 265 both ways from Cutler. The light had now turned green and the jam was breaking up. We rolled on through on Cutler, again sweeping everywhere we could to see if we saw them ahead or on one of the cross streets, which were all more commercial and bigger now, as we entered a warehouse district of dozens of low, anonymous buildings with their alleys and loading docks. A couple of streets up I saw a flash of dark green out of the corner of my eye. “There! Up and on the left.” We shot ahead and skidded to a halt about 20 yards behind what had to be the same van we had been trailing. It was parked haphazardly, partway up an alleyway and I could see the side door was open. I jumped out.

“Hey!” said my driver. Look out! Stop! See what we got here.” He had a Glock automatic out and it didn’t feel like Stop, look out, to me. But I did at least crouch over as I ran to the van, our driver running on the other side to the alley parallel, with the Glock out and pointed downward in front of him.

The van was empty. No bullet holes, no blood, no signs of struggle. And at just the moment I began to have doubts about my split-second ID, a chubby little woman, carrying a box came out the side door near the van. Though the driver’s instincts were such that he did not actually throw down on her, the sight of two obviously crazed guys, one with a big assed- pistol in his hand pretty much freaked her out. The box, which was full of colored feathers, went up and it looked like Mardi-Gras just as a police cruiser pulled up behind us, siren winding down.

Seeing the weapon, the officer on the passenger side took cover behind his door and shouted” Drop it! Put it down!” Our driver, an ex-cop, was cool enough to slowly set the pistol down, with his hands in plain sight. The bright blue cop continued to hold on him. The other cop was out now and approaching me, his hand on his weapon. I appreciated that there was no greater response than there was threat. “Move away from the gun.” And as my driver complied, hands still in the air, the cop came out from behind the door, holstering his own weapon.

“Did you get them? The little girl?”

“What little girl? Son, you are the only ‘them’ I know of right now.”

The feathers kept floating down, the fat lady was sprawled in a pile of cardboard boxes, flailing to get up. And Aurelia was gone.

After a certain amount of official paperwork gets done, Mickey, the driver (ex-M.P.and SEAL) takes us back to Mr. B's ultra-gated home not far from where the Carrier Wave is berthed. Also bazillion, but right now not the point. Right now the place is already being set up like a much more serious version of the White House situation room.

I told my story, including the clown car chase that netted the dreaded Fat Lady. There were no chuckles about that. Indeed, Herb patted me on the shoulder and said, "Well at least you tried. I appreciate that."

It is now the next day, hour 20 according to the big countdown clock that is set up near the bank of phones and computers. There is a new set of faces here today, many apparently from Interpol. One of their names caught my ear for some reason. Maurice DeClounteau.

"Mr. Stutts? I am Maurice DeClounteau. I am normally with Interpol, but for now I will be with Mr. Bottner."

"Do I know you? Seen you? Your name is familiar."

"My sister was Sophie DeClounteau..."

“Ah, yes,” I nod in acknowledgement.

“Yes. My family still loves and admires Herbert. He is still my brother, my frère. I will do what I can for him. And for Aurelia. And for poor Poppy.”

Poppy is back here at the house, her arm in a cast. (Midshaft fracture of the radius and ulna.) Face all covered with some sort of cast-ish stuff that you use on broken noses. The SOBs were pistol whipping Doc Ochs, who weighed about 90 pounds soaking wet, to get her to let go of Aurelia. Doc had her hugged to her breast in a death grip (as it turned out) and Poppy had managed to get an arm in the fray and caught one of those swings of a heavy pistol barrel meant for the doctor’s head, with her forearm. Then the asshole, whom she described as a big white male with a cheap Halloween mask, whacked her across the face and broke her nose, knocking her loopy.

For no apparent reason, when the guy, and the female accomplice (face and hands unseen for a sacklike hood and gloves) had separated Aurelia, he put two rounds in the doc’s chest. Asshole. Those were the pops I had heard clearly. The security guy had gone down first, while I was still flipping through Better Homes and Gardens. I have not spoken to Poppy directly, but she also sent down thanks for trying. She is apparently more East Texas furious than anything and has refused sedation so she can come down to the situation room and help work the problem. God help these poor criminals if she gets turned loose on them.

At least I had been right-ish about the getaway vehicle, just not exactly right. Late yesterday afternoon the local cops found a slate-gray minivan abandoned about three miles in the opposite direction from where we had apprehended the Fat Lady.

Now I am assuming that I saw gray, but because of all the trees around, I read green, forest green. Maurice walked through that with me as he almost hypnotized me into the most intense concentration, seeing the scene, recovering more of the tiniest details, several times over. I realize this is not brow-beating, but rather standard interrogation to comb through the same events several times and triangulating on the points that keep showing up.

As of this moment, in terms of hot leads however, we got bupkis, according to Mickey the Seal.

About 2 o'clock in the afternoon, there is a stir and the Interpol guys give a read on all they know so far, which isn't all that much, I mean, for Interpol, right?

There apparently has been a ransom note of some kind. It was broadcast on such super-high frequency and ultra-low time pulse, that it required careful logic technology to unwrap it at all.

Basically, sent in the space of less than a millionth of a millisecond total, the messages said. "We have her. We are watching you. You must stop or we must stop you."

"The other two stacks?" Came the question from somebody in the room. Now padded up with his hired Foreign Legion, it was felt, security was more than adequate at the other two Power plants with their Bottnerized output.

As reports came in about the first stack attack, it developed that the Radicals' action team had droned in a block of C-4, dropping it down the stack into the very base of the tower and, kablooie. Not all that sophisticated, if you ask me.

"But what sense does it make?" I asked Mickey, "I mean if they are so anti this stuff getting loose then it would seem blowing the container to smithereens might be considered, uh, counterproductive."

"These guys don't give a shit about ecology. They are straight up stone kidnappers. The explosion is a smoke screen for the kidnapping, not the other way around."

"So how does someone even conceptualize pulling off a totally successful kidnapping, including, presumably, escaping to enjoy whatever ransom you got? In a Bottnercentric world?"

"Who fucking knows? It piles up quick. You never even know if the public is going to see them as the goodguys or as the badguys. We still got a while to wait to see if we are playing white or black. That's where what you do on the blogs helps."

If the virus that took his wife had done something to his heart, and the mobilization about the VLS had mobilized his brain, this had hit him in the gut. Not distracted, even more focused. These people had killed Dr. Ochs and had nearly killed Poppy and they had his little girl.

So now we have at least three crises; Aurelia's kidnapping, the explosion, and still the VLS shadows. It would be a job to find out if they hang together in the same picture frame.

There was quickly a lot more traffic in and out of Bottner central, both people and electronic messages and data. Being a rank amateur, I have no assigned role, because there is nothing in the established playbook that I know how to do.

The only thing that Bottner himself took the time to say to me directly at this point was when he growled, “Stutts, keep your ass quiet about this. I don’t want you blabbing away something that these assholes could use. Just shut it down. Got it?”

“Yessir. Absolutely.”

He went back to his bank of computer screens, but in a few seconds, apparently thought better of something. “Stutts!”

“Yessir?”

“The VLS, you can keep working that. Yeah, we need anything on that. But DO NOT fuck up this other.” He spent about three ticks of his more ultra-precious time to hold my gaze. In that time, we had a quick silent conversation about all the possibilities, good and bad, mostly bad, that this admonition entailed. Then he broke it off and went back to central.

So I sort of lurk around the edges of both efforts, and catch infodroppings from Mickey and the guys when they were not out humping leads.

So, then, the tower aside at least for now, the two big stories at the moment, one open source and the other dead secret, the spread of VLS, and the big ramp-up of tech-power to follow Aurelia. Huge amounts of data are being brought in and analyzed instantaneously on Aurelia.

The public story, the VLS, is that not only have we made little enough progress on the cause, the scope of VLS is now front page of the legacy media on the entire West Coast; papers

and TV. Even old-style broadcast radio as it turns out, counts a lot in this demographic. There are a cajillion “boutique” radio stations in California alone. Some broadcast to an audience of twenty-thousand and some to twenty. As those shade down and down in size they too blend into the hummus-like goo of the ragged edge of the blogosphere. Lot of unfocused, un-edited fear and rage out there. The three problems; that rage, VLS, and Aurelia’s kidnapping were seemingly intertwined in that sense. I had to be very careful while picking at the resulting knot, pulling the Jenga blocks out of that tower. It was surely our professional asses on the line, but I realized, more importantly, it could be Aurelia’s life.

Time had now passed to allow for more observation, however, it was undeniably clear that there were many people, perhaps hundreds, who were showing at least some sign, or at least complaining of symptoms consistent with “Asthenia Ultima.” New names for it were still being auditioned, and VLS was still used a lot, at least around Bottnerville. There was a supposedly definitive summary of the problem to date in one of the big medical journals. It seemed that peoples’ courses are like going down a river towards a rapids, which is coincidentally some jazz ager’s definition of how one goes broke:” Gradually, and then all of a sudden.” Maybe Hemingway? F. Scott?

Anyway, it is like that with the bodies and body-ettes. For-profit nursing homes have re-tooled to offer the “product lines” like Aesthenia Care® now that there was an exploitable issue. There are very few real nursing rules or medical regimen in these cases as of yet, or so sayeth Sandy. Care for these people is becoming very expensive and very contentious. Lawyers are blinking and scratching and shaking themselves awake at the openings of their dens. Insurance actuaries are absolutely meshugganah.

It is one of those stillpoint moments when early decisions can be important. But there are no decisions to be made as yet, because no one knows what to do to prevent getting it in the first place. Everyone is walking around on eggshells.

Even given that, the absolute priority of finding Aurelia swallowed any news or insights I might have gotten from Fabricio and Co.

In the next 48 hours the band-width detailed to the search went way up again. And it yielded a second message from the kidnappers, again microflashed to us few on the fan-tail. But the dragnet did its job and actually located the transmission point. Then there had been an assault on that point, a cabin in the uplands north of the city, that very night. There were no warrants in evidence.

The big SG canines that I had heard of were with the attackers. They came down on the place out of the pines at about 3 AM and after an original wave of gunshots, there was more or less silence. Punctuated by the screams of one of the three people they found there as the dogs took off first his arm, at the elbow, and then his shoulder out of its socket.

Just on an off chance I asked the team if Charlene and Rudy could be the other two. Or more pessimistically for them, one, of them, and one of not-them, still around. For some reason, that info, i.e. the exact identification of the perps was a fundamental point of discretion in their profession. However they did not mind detailing in a non-identifying way.

The remaining badguys, faced with the clonedogs, said the other two, a man and a woman, the leader and his girlfriend, had suddenly disappeared just before the assault and they had taken the little girl with them.

The microburst message the decamping dyad had sent, the one that snagged these three hapless partners, was much more mercenary. Mentioning places and times and cyberdrops and even the changing of ransom into forms of crypto currency. Mickey, who nodded sagely when the message was decoded, allowed as how their people had been talking for some time about the security problem posed by ransoms on the new block-chain tech. "There are no stupid kidnappers anymore. They have to figure out how to get paid. Possible," he nodded.

Mickey also said the bad guys (now noted on the blackboards as "bad guys" with small "b" and small "g" as to differentiate from "Bad Guys" who still had Aurelia) had pleaded for the dogs to be pulled back. They were interrogated in the same room where their erstwhile colleague, or at least the disparate parts of him lay on the floor, some still twitching and moaning, and it turns out according to our folks who were experienced pros at this sort of info extraction, that these two didn't know squat. And info also filtered back interpretable as meaning, "not Charlene and Rudy". Seems the Big Bad Guy had co-opted a large number of these fellow travelers and get-away driver types into the whole thing with noble sounding speeches about "the fate of the planet" and "sacred duty to all humans" and after using some of them in the actual heist and getaway, had suddenly uncloaked as an out-and- out scum bag who was only after the chance at a big ransom score.

“He was the one who shot the doctor and hit that lady. We didn’t know he was going to do that, honest, we didn’t know.” In order to help them with anything else they might remember, they were being kept on ice in separate small cages, next to the dogs’ cages, with their buddy’s body parts hung in front. There was no evidence that I could see that any official, public legal entity had any idea that any of this had happened.

Several things were happening, or not happening, all at once. The time from abduction was now past 48 hours, certainly the “golden hour” of possibility in breaking things open quickly. That was just the way such things went down, according to De Clounteau and Mickey and the guys.

Also the two mal hombres who had Aurelia were obviously more ruthless than their feckless confreres. There was a theory floated about that they had sent the second message, from their common cabin, but without telling their chums. These two then counted on the pursuit to roll right over their partners, holding up any pursuers dealing with the cabin, while they used the time to get away. They book out quietly and blammo! Hacksaw chihuahua/big bad Czech shepherd dogs busting through the door on the left-behind left with very specifically goal-directed oversight. But while this was a close miss, perhaps only a matter of minutes separating the pursuers and the pursued at one point, we still had no Aurelia.

The red numbers flashed on the situation clock, which was up in the shaded end of the fantail, that shaded on into a good-sized conference room. As the hours passed, the “normal” press seemed stranger and stranger to me. The headline of “Carbon-eating Bug Plant Bombed” seemed like it was from out of some mid-century superhero comic.

My viewpoints shift by the minute under the influence of so much raw data and analysis.

There are rapidly growing demonstrations on the campus at Berkeley, and in the streets from Santa Rosa to Santa Cruz with a strangely amorphous objective (or objectives?). Too many kooks spoiling the Cal-broth.

And we still had pretty much squat about Aurelia. And a smokestack in rubble.

We strategized regarding the best way to announce the abduction. Us first, then TV etc. Out of the box there was a one-million dollar reward for credible information leading to her return. But hours passed and the marchers marched and the people in the morgues continued to fade into shadows and once again, no one out in the blogosphere had a clear idea of who were the goodguys and who were the real badguys. Mickey had been right about that too. I am at work pulsing out this VLS stuff to keep you all aware of that divide. But now De Clounteau checks anything I send out to be sure it helps and doesn't hinder, the pursuit.

They were going over everything with a fine-tooth comb, jacking up their bandwidth even higher to scan for any possible hacks to any part of their security, from routine surveillance tapes of the Santa Eucharista site, to Aureliadot, to proprietary Complexia data.

That evening, DeClounteau took a friendly hold of my elbow and steered me to the bar, currently unattended on either side by any but us. He got us a drink and sat down on the stool beside me and says "Marvin, I need to let you know that in that scar of all that data, we also looked for patterns to connect to patterns. Think, doing gene analysis, only about ten times

easier. In any event we came across a “cluster” of events. First, on Audot. We can break down anything discussed, by anyone present, put the tapes from a month in with a discriminator app and just look for the few things and people. Then we look at the next day, for instance, in this case the day of the kidnapping., and we cross reference the list of people present to cross reference with all that.

The end of all this, in this case, just as a collateral issue, I wanted to let you know that I think you may have been the one to break confidence about Aurelia’s schedule and in doing so created... exposure. Might you have mentioned her trip to the doctor to anyone? Anyone at all?”

As I thought back, it was vague, but it was there. About the shots. I was stunned. My stomach was on the deck. At minimum...minimum, I was the agent that fate chose to end Dr Ochs’ thoroughly blameless life.

I am glad he jumped right ahead instead of waiting long enough for me to have to face the split path of ways of what mattered most, Aurelia and Poppy, or my own skin. All this if only to myself, you understand. I was in that situation where I could not remember the actual transgression, but I had the overwhelming feeling that he was right. It sort of explained Charlene and Rudy, even if they were not the actual operatives, one assumes they had been told to listen carefully and report anything they heard. Told by whom?

“I have not told Herbert, nor will I. We, you and I, will mark it to bad judgement, which is the mother of experience. Obviously, that excepts any situation where I think I want to pull it out on you, for whatever reason.” He let that sit a Paris minute. “But truly, I have no reason to do so. I don’t think you are in any way an evil culprit. We’ve scratched you enough to figure that

out. We know the whereabouts and activities and associates of all the people you know. And also, I am not going to mention it again. But you do understand that you are immersed in a river of bytes forming images and transacting business. And if any of those, in any way related to you, shows even a coincidental occurrence of what you say there, and what happens tomorrow, this being a second, alerted event, you will be dropped into the sea.” He did not blink, he did not show any change of emotion like the tiniest expression when he said it. I spent the rest of the afternoon just barely not vomiting. And I spend the sleepless night talking to the black overhead and wrestling with the existential question; how can I continue to live? And as the light goes from pitch to lightest gray the answer comes; as best I can. In the best sense of best. “Now tuck in and zip up, asshole,” I hear myself whisper, resolutely.

And now we have a break of sorts. When I said that we had squat, that isn’t really true. We really do have a track on these folks and analyzing everything from credit card stubs to cigarette butts, we were always actually very close behind them, and, importantly, gaining, feeling like the endgame will be soon and inevitable. The unspoken fear concerned the dismount. Mickey said there was a fifty-fifty chance, according to the book, that a kidnap victim gets returned and in good shape. Everyone is totally keyed up, and then, when our guys kicked open what they hoped would be the final door, instead of a healthy little girl, they came up on the body of Bad Girl 2.0, with a bullet wound neatly between her eyes.

That turned things very glum in the c-suite. The vibe was that A) the guy who had Aurelia was demonstrably able to kill, close up and personal, and had now done so more than once.

“That ain’t good,” said Mickey shaking his head, alluding to Aurelia’s now dwindling odds. And B) Bad Guy no longer has whatever moderating influence the woman may have represented.

And now, too, the trail has gotten much colder. It is easier to track a bunch of people traveling together than fewer and fewer folk, now down to Badguy A and Aurelia.

We are back on the fantail deck of the yacht. We have moved the core functions of the search back, all on screen and meter and monitor and whizzing along on streaming the width of an electronic Columbia River. Now we are all back to the boat. Easier to think. More private. Surrounded by the screens and continuously moving images, we mostly stare at each other.

“By the way”, Bottner throws over his shoulder to the Peanut Gallery in general, “Has anyone found any of our bacteria? I mean in any place where they wouldn’t be expected? Any of the corpses? I mean, whatever happened to Koch’s Postulates?” he asks.

One of the junior folks quickly supplies, “Just finished looking at all the bait stations. No hits.” Presumably, if you want a carbon eater you put out a lump of coal like sugar water bait.

Later that evening Declounteau and some of Mickey’s guys sort of saunter in and after a short confab with Mr. B, are gone for quite a while, like 7PM to midnight. Mickey finds me on deck when the away team returns late, and over drinks fills in the picture. He had not been on the actual raid, but was monitoring and controlling portions of it from the situation room on board. He had de-briefed some of the guys.

He said they were tracked to one of the multimodals, the big shipping hubs where somebody might hitch out in a container to Taipei City or Buenos Aires. A huge warehouse. Lots of stacks of stuff all through it so our guys had to clear it like street to street. They brought the dogs along, just in case.

There was a shot, from the darkened end of the building. Then it got quiet. Then DeClounteau's text clicked out to our team. "STOP. BACK AWAY. NOW!!!" The team leader complied, he held up his fist to stop the unit in place. But he also let loose three of the big syn-gen shepherds into the darkness. They had disappeared and everything was quiet for a tense minute. Then movement far away, muffled and then louder, ending with a rip of automatic gunfire. And then a scream. Or actually a continued screaming as the two still living dogs got to the Bad Guy.

The dogs had been pulled off Bad Guy just enough to allow the process of interrogation. Namely, where was Aurelia? As it turned out, and fortunately, the team didn't need the guy to even be alive, because not much later the dogs also found Aurelia herself, bundled up in a blanket asleep in the back of a mini-van that was obviously packed and ready to depart for parts unknown. It was parked just beside a half -loaded transport container, the kind you see packed 20 deep on the deck of the big anonymous cargo transport ships. If they had stowed away on that particular one, the bill of lading said they would have re-appeared in 22 days in Lagos, Nigeria. What that would have been like, in a car in a container for what to a little kid would be experienced as

“forever.” What the guy had gone back in the warehouse for we didn’t get from him before he croaked.

The big clone-Charliezilla’s had done their jobs, in spades, by the way. That’s just as a piece of reportage regarding that similar issue to the effectiveness of the cloned carbon-eaters. Jangled genes. The clonedogs had sensed Aurelia and located her over a really impressive distance, on a distant loading dock outside the huge building itself. One of the guys there in security was also a veterinarian, not uncommon for infectious disease folks like Bottner’s CDC guys. He was in the strike group, saw the space, and when they got back he mentioned that if that was done by the dogs on the pure sense of smell, it was a better sense of smell than any dog he had ever seen, and he had seen some pretty fantastic noses. So, either that, possible, or something else, some other sense, also possible. Not inclining to voodoo here, mind you.

The guys let Able, one of the clones, approach Aurelia, with a heavy leash tightly held until they should see what ensued. Able didn’t hesitate. He began licking Aurelia’s wrist, which they took for a good first sign.

She seems none the worse for wear of the experience and I suppose she will have plenty of people to talk to about it if bad dreams pop up in the future. She was very brave.

Interesting to consider what this means in terms of the life arc on Aureliadot. It was clearly not daily business as usual. For instance, there would be a gap of these days in the more public daily entries. I assume that all the data, all the clues and info that was

dredged up here will somehow be archived for deep diving through Aureliadot in the future.

She and Poppy are just spending time being with each other. Probably the best way to fill any simple psychic scars as gently as possible. Both ways.

After putting their heads together De Clounteau and Bottner had just told Poppy that all the badguys were dead, mainly to keep her out of trouble. The two actual survivors, now shuttled out of the country under DeClounteau's custody, held in total black incommunicado, still with their ferocious guard dogs, and still with the now rotting arm, whether they knew it or not, would greatly prefer all this to having Poppy get loose on them. While she was what Aunt Cloddy would call, "a good Christian lady" (Sunday School perfect attendance pin through junior-high at the Mineola First Baptist Church), in this case she would have probably blown right through the forgiving N.T. Beatitudes and harkened back to some of the more esoteric and frankly harsh O.T. plagues o'God.

But given all that, with Aurelia back and safe and that episode more or less wrapped up, the mood around Bottnerville was absolutely upbeat and positively goal directed.

Now at least we are back down to a one-front war, if you don't count the feckless eco-warrior tribe. "Praise Jesus!", as Aunt Cloddy would have said. Now, only (yeah, right, only) trying to figure out what is affecting a growing number of people in the swath from North of San Francisco to Los Angeles and as far South as San Diego. Clearly focusing around areas of high computer throughput. And yes it's a panicky situation. All of that mappage is readily available. I append some here if you want to see. Now, careful that any reference to the

Aurelia issue is by necessity totally filtered out and disconnected, I am back at my job; helping to gather in and to put out, anything that might help Bottner, and the rest of the world, figure out WTF re the VLS. And the bad thing is, it doesn't matter what any map looks like by now or any amount of sensible calm information. Not to the at least fifty percent of people who are not, and will not, be capable of understanding the first thing about the biology or the physics or even the simple logic it all might eventually involve. Society around us seems to be fraying at its edges. The San Francisco Opera has canceled its season, but the Boston Bruins are still playing hockey to sold-out jam-packed crowds, many holding up signs saying things like, "Fuck Da Bug!" And no one knows who's being crazy here, the sopranos or the hockey players. No one knows what "causes" it, and thus what quarantine measures, if any, are in order.

The nuts and raisins being such as they are, there are arising several instances of custody battles over the, and here we search for the correct word, "subjects."

There are "Livers" (not pronounced like the organ of fame, but more like the northern English Football club as in "Live-er-birds") and there are "Deaders", and there is a growing experience of having someone in such a "chronic hypo-fatal" state in one's home for at least some time. Those were the activist Livers, at least at first. The data says most folks soon give it up as a bad deal for everybody involved. These victims still need total body care, turning and bathing and feeding around the clock, at least some of them, for at least some time, and they stay as vapours, lighter than their objective weight, fading, and with no recorded instance of a real "awakening" of any kind among this growing number of those affected. Paradoxically, when the early "Liver" zealots began to wear out and try to swap off for the "other" option of funereally stashing Aunt

LouLou, they found a stonily unsympathetic ear down at the County Coroner's Office, with whom they had floridly fought over the body to begin with. It was like Antigone or any of the various funerary brewhahas in the Illiad. It was the basic Greek drama all over again; who buries who, and how. And now, when.

"Nope, can't bury 'em now, or cremate 'em or anything. There isn't any evidence that they are dead. No certificate. Take'em home. Next!"

In an ultimate-macabre event, a local march featured one of the people who was far on and deeply-affected. Carried in the procession, on shoulders, in a sort of coffin-like chair, waxy and motionless and without apparent responses. Deepest bug-eyed wooden Jesu Cristi and mouldering paper-mache' Saint Gumersindo in-the-40 watt-glass penitente-box got nothing on this.

In another side-note we have seen at least a few cases where the people involved, the deceased that is, in these cases really, actually, most sincerely being the deceased, began to deteriorate at what appeared to be the norm for just plain old dead. Messy. BTW, apropos ? some of these got noted in the books as "VLS associated".

Time passes and the marches continue. Poppy gets some of the facial bandages off and her arm is healing well in its fiberglass cast. We are back again to the VLS problem. Once again sitting on the Carrier Wave, in the midst of all the brain power we can muster, and being Bottner's crowd that is a a major shit load, noodling through the few pieces and leads yet again, trying to get traction.

“So, the gene thing?” someone begins, trying to drive in some sort of peg from which to begin. We were sitting again on the fantail. The foggy, damp, Bay weather mirrors our mood. For perhaps the twentieth time we start from the root, and try to grok the coming of this plague.

“Genes? No.” Bottner blows right through this. “We’ve got too good a handle on all that. That’s not where the problem is.”

“No?” I pushed.

The history of the world, or at least of its advance through the arc of “progress” is marked by the relatively few crystalline moments when somebody put another two and two together, maybe in a dream like Kukele’s benzene snake, or whatever Kwatz! moment Einstein had to jump from the old world to the new. It would be a gas to have been sitting next to one of these folks when they suddenly looked up from their beer stein and said, “Holy crap!....and started scribbling madly on their cocktail napkin. To have actually been there at the creation. Like the man said however, “Chance favors the prepared mind” and it was here on the Carrier Wave that we had all the requisite prep.

“No,” Bottner said, almost to himself. I waited again as he seemed to be looking at some different landscape. “Maybe it’s not the bugs... maybe it’s the programs.”

“Programs?”

“The computers.”

“Pardon?”

“Like Fabricio said, maybe it’s not biology, maybe its physical. Maybe we locked up too many electrons.”

“Electrons? Whoa.” Even I know from electrons. “There are like...a lot, a really really really lot, of them. How can you run out of them?”

“Not run out, lock up. Folks have been distantly aware of the possibility for years. Kind of like the atom bomb betting pool even had long odds on setting the whole atmosphere on fire. Not the most likely event, sure, but... not zero.”

“How do you lock them up?”

“All this digitized information, everything stored or reproduced on every computer, is made from the ones and zeros, the yes and no, right?” he gently led me, like the teacher he was about to have to be, and at the same time laying it out for the swifter folks there who were holding their breaths as he laid it out for himself.

“And something has to be different in the one from the other, the ones different from the zeros.” He waited for me to catch up.

“OK.”

“That difference is that in the ones, or in the zeros, but not both, the electrons are held in a different state.” He paused to let everyone catch up. “That is, think of these as being magnetized and those as not. I’ll bet that’s why the MRI’s are funky and the CAT scans aren’t. But the important thing is that in their role as identifiers of a one or a zero, the ones which do the defining are “used” in the process. They are made different from their normal state. And if they are used for this, maybe they aren’t available to be used for anything else, like being...us. At least not in their normal way.”

(STUTTERBLOG- Public): OK kids, that is going out on Stutterblog because I, and indeed Bottner, wants everybody to think about this “Electron Stasis Theory” and anyone who has anything to add or any insight to get back to us. Preferably before our protoplasm starts to slosh around like cosmic fondue.

EMCSQUARE: Still wouldn’t be problem, because the electrons aren’t local. And yeah, there’s an infinite number of them. Think again.

Bottener looked at the screen of the computer in the big room at the back of the boat. The West Coast sun was going down as a dim but perfect red disc through the haze. Poppy was there too and she was as up to speed as I was on all this in about eight minutes.

“OK,” Bottner said, rising to walk around, which was apparently the way he thought best. “Write this back.”

Genome1: Maybe they are local. What if it’s possible to have a relative local deficit? Think of sea level. All water should be the same level, all the time. Like the universal electron matrix probabilities. But with local effects, tides, glaciers, currents piling into continents, there is a little difference in sea level in different localities. Are our huge uses of band-width, storage, locking enough electrons up locally, is that what is beginning to show up? First cases Bay area, southern Cal, highest bandwidth use. Like the Bay of Fundy for tides. Think about it.” (STUTTERBLOG-out)

We are waiting for replies. Poppy opens a bottle of wine and pours everyone a glass.

BTW, as an aside, sipping this, I again noticed that there really is a difference in this and the zin at Sandy's. Note to self: pursue this.

Plasmid71: Why aren't we seeing other effects?

Bottner nodded at me to type. Genome1: "Maybe they are there. We just don't notice inanimate things getting thin. The first thing we WOULD notice would be...us."

EMCSQUARE: Not fragile electrical circuits? We actually monitor those.

Genome1: Like, why did the Hadron burn out? The most complex, sensitive system.

EMCSQUARE: Gulp.

Poppy looked over the edge of her wine glass, her head sort of cocked to the side. "So, are they are infinite, the electrons, or aren't they?"

He sort of snorted, and then said, "Think of yourself out on the Great Plains in 1850. You're talking to the Indians, making some treaty or other. 'Oh yeah, I want to shoot a few buffalo. You got a problem with that?' Heck no, go right ahead. We got plenty. As a matter of fact, Gringo, take all you want, they're like the stars in the sky. Infinite. Can't run out.' And they really believed that. Really."

"Ah. Kinda like us with the electrons."

“When the pilgrims landed, a squirrel could go from tree to tree from the Atlantic coast to the Mississippi. Now? Yeah, right. Back then it was the big bad forest Primeval- trees endless. Scared poor little Hester Prynne. But we turned it all into Xerox copies in two hundred years. Scales of stuff can get away with you. Maybe the bad voodoo is like that?”

Having first held out my glass for another drop of the absolutely outstanding red, I asked, “So what do you do about it? Turn off the computers?” From the look on Bottner’s face, actually the way he went from sport-tan to fish-belly white in about six-seconds, it was clear that this was not such a simple question.

“Uhhhhh. I don’t think so. Stuff like, air traffic control? No.”

“Maybe just some? The biggest draws, widest bandwidth.”

“Like which ones?” It got quiet.

“Complexia?” I suggested, noting that he did not break out into a big grin at that. “And there must be a gillion that are nice, E-Bay, Tik-Tok, but not absolutely necessary. Like Aureliadot.” Poppy took that pretty well. “We can live without it...if it’s necessary. But, the question is, is this all really connected and how do we find that out.” It was silent for a moment while everyone chewed their own piece of elephant.

“That really is the question; if we turn it all off, how would we be able to tell if that was the problem?” Bottner posed. “So, instead of backing off, maybe we could push ahead faster, make it declare itself. In one controlled spot. Then we could study it.”

He could tell both Poppy and I were a little freaked out. “We assume that these folks all had the commonality of proximity to big electron storage, which we don’t yet know, but which I can assure you we will research tout goddamned suite.” He pressed a button near where he sat and said into the mic, “Orlando, get me the stat section on the line.” Then he turned back to us. “I’ll get the epi guys on it. Check out where these folks lived, worked, what their roles were, if they were in big IT. We assume the greatest use of lock-up here on the West Coast of the US, but there may be other pockets, CERN in Switzerland, Taiwan, New Delhi, Bangalore, The Pentagon, Wall Street...we’ll have our guys look around.” He got the thousand-yard stare, seeing it out in front of him.

Poppy could question it, maybe I couldn’t, “It’s all passive, so far. But you want to push it, see if you can make it happen out in the open?”

“Yeah, I mean, we don’t even know what “it” is yet. What it looks like...its manifestations. Maybe we can call it up, to study. Keep it in a cage.”

“A cage? What kind of cage? It really is like AIDs, Covid. Early on,” I remarked. “By the way, how much of this do you want me blogging? Maybe starting a panic.”

“I don’t know, maybe...like a magnetic bottle.” he said thoughtfully, “But we really don’t know if that would work, or even how to use it for this. That’s the point of doing it, to begin somewhere and go from there. But the power usage for the Mag-bot would be huge. Going in the wrong direction.

“And as far as how much to say...you’re the head blogger around here. It’s your call because, as far as ‘starting a panic’, I’m not sure you shouldn’t be doing just that. The grosser the reporting, no offense, the quicker the idea will get around and the

quicker we'll get all the brains and the brainless in the world working the problem. Your particular reporting...it's just heuristic. And we suppose that folks have got to know sooner or later, be prepared if all the big engines do go down. That part would be like Y2K come true, only with the 20 years of mad growth of it all since then."

"Yikes!" I observed sagely. "So, it sounds like The People just took over the press...and I'm not all that comfy with that if 'The People' is all like me. Like, what the fuck does 'heuristic' mean?"

"OK," he started, ignoring any misgivings. I was learning that was part of the "Bottner Method." "We need rats."

"What?" I asked,

"Have somebody go sleep on top of a big-assed Cray computer every night? I guess. Any better idea?"

"Uh, nope."

I thought maybe he had just recruited, or less charitably, that he had just designated someone to be the test rat, namely me. But no, about an hour later, as we sat on the boat working the company e-mail to get the details done, I looked up to see Mickey leading a huge, extremely athletic German Shepherd type dog by a thick leash. SG Shitzuhuahuas are one thing, but this animal looked like its geno-dam had been bred to a machine. The hair on the back of my neck stood up just being in proximity as I realized what the "poor" badguys must've felt. Just before they got their nutsack ripped off. But the animal didn't make any kind of a stink, he was just happy to be there, sitting on his haunches. Then Mickey gave a little whistle and the dog was instantly up, and ran straight at me. My heart stopped and my bowels came a hair

from loosening. As I clinched down waiting for the snap of fangs on my jugular, it all got quiet. I opened my eye and the hell-hound was licking my wrist. The one I had figured I was about to lose. And it seemed funny, but there was something familiar about the dog. I mean we know dogs have mega-sense of person memory, and this one acted like he apparently found me familiar. Think of Odysseus' old dog. Still right there on it after the twenty years. But we'd never met to begin with.

"This is Able", said Mickey.

"He the one...?"

"One of them. He was cloned from Charlie after Charlie had met and bonded with Aurelia. And you, apparently.

There were some very smart people hanging around here in the shadows.

"They made a couple of little replacements for Aurelia's puppy if it should go missing. Already started those from scratch, no pun intended." And also the dozen big dogs cloned to get totally dedicated guards who have never actually laid eyes or nose on Aurelia.

"That quick? But this guy is grown up, wow is he grown!"

"I don't know too much about that. Used a thing, new thing, called a crisper? Supposed to be able to give you new genes on the fly. Like you had been born with them," explained Mickey uncertainly. Just like I was touch weak on sub-atomic particle theory, Mickey, God love him, seemed a little sheepish about cloning tech. "Never seen Aurelia before and yet they found her in the back of a car in the whole of this great big warehouse. We're pretty sensitive to how they all behave already."

"Wow."

“Neat, huh? We can use a couple of these guys as the first rats. Bed them down on the Cray and sit back.”

It took a couple of days for Bottner to arrange the pieces and actually get the use of the big computers. Not the weeks that it would take a merely powerful, but constrained person, say a President, Premier, or a Pope, to launch a new project. Not the months for a university faculty, with side trips to the Human Subjects committee and the raft of bureaucracy. A couple of days, because it took that long to clean off the counters and decide which of the units within his organization should be used. He decided on one that hooked up White Sands Test Range in New Mexico to Los Alamos Labs, and on to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at Cal Tech in Pasadena near here. Used, among other things, to make real time magnetic bottles to control fusion reactions. Lots of speed, lots of bandwidth. Lots.

We arranged for that transmission line, now re-routed through Complexia, that megaflop, to be maximized even further. Filled with its normal work schedule throughput, in fact, maxed out. It is usually used to do things like model the change in magnetic bottles, or to get more and more granular in the interpretation of human EEGs, all the way down to crude, spooky 1920-ish TV fuzzy images of the content of human thought, or at least mood. All you need is a really, really fast, really really big, computer to track all that. Lots of flops. Tera, Peta, Yowzalota. Paradoxically, we were now questioning if such storage itself was toxic.

We kept that run time filled up, and also squeezed in Mandelbrot equations in the seams, and then we turned the analytic amps up to 11.

It did not take long, at the speed of data passage, electron flow, through these units, for the first local effects to begin to show up. The clones continued to act normally for the first couple of days, and then they began to be a little lethargic.

We spent a lot of time near them, physically examining them and having them get up and do things often throughout the days, but while continuing to care for the dogs we also took precaution to stay, between times, as much as possible, away from this assumed center of the problem. No idea if it makes us safer, or by how much. We watch each other a lot, too. A couple of the younger folks wore the lead lined aprons of x-ray techs, just to see what that might do in the long run. No one really had a clue.

Over the next several days, the faithful clones were clearly showing effects. It was difficult to agree on what effects they were, but all agreed something. The first thing I could say with any certainty was that when you gave them a scratch, it felt vaguely different in some way. Certainly, in the expected Pacinian sense of touch, pressure mostly. But it was also something different. As much as I hated to say it, it felt like somebody involved was melting. But touching them wasn't exactly like dipping your fingers into something liquifying, like wax, it was as though your own fingers, at some very tip-end function almost shared in the melting. But when you pulled your fingers away, they were surely not burned, as by a match or strong chemical. Nor obviously

deformed in any way. Perhaps a slight loss of that Pacinian touch sense. That was an unattached clue.

Another was that you couldn't get good MRI images on these dogs. The farther gone they were, the fuzzier the electroschiz on the picture. That was a big clue because it leads more on to the trail of the physics side. Circuits and polarities. Spins and magnetic fields. Maybe.

The materials engineering department went at the few samples we harvested under anesthesia, from the dogs. Magnetic polarity, conductance, the readings were not the same as "normal" control tissue, but no scalar could be determined yet. When it came along I assume it will probably be something like the Millibottner.

In the meantime, word came of an attempted assault on one of the other smokestacks. This one was repulsed, now given serious professional defense and lack of total surprise by the attackers. The fan-tail situation room had bloomed overnight. Multi-screens and radio frequencies, great pots of strong coffee.

This time the anti-Botts had dropped two people in by black parachute in the middle watches of a moonless night and had gotten as far as starting to scale the tower itself. An old-fashioned, army surplus satchel charge was found in a backpack. So that side wasn't all just kidnappers and evil intent. Some well-meaning idiots. I felt better, and worse, and then better again. Very confusing.

Sandy has made herself pretty scarce, and I wonder more and more about the rest of her tribe. Good folks, if a bit stiff, and sometimes a little too judgmental for a

modified barfly like me perhaps. But not bad-hearted like the kidnap crew, maybe just a little too caught up in the nuts and raisins thing. Mixed-up, in more than one sense.

It does not appear that the two groups of guerillas are connected. The second group of bomb-throwing self-righteous eco-freaks appears to be less sinister, at least in a strategic way, than the first DIY CYA BG kidnapper. They are sincere fools. There must be an Italian term for that status, *sciocco sincero*, or maybe German, *AufrichtigDumkopf*.

No word beyond that, at least for the time being on the actual raiders. They are apparently alive and being detained, also with no warrants in evidence. Wondering about the Charlene-and-Rudy eco-guerilla crowd, on the one hand, I don't know how I feel about that Bill of Rights cha cha sidestep that Bottner and his guys were now so routinely pulling. But on the other side of the scale, the body count up-and-down the coast is now in the thousands. No one else is even up on the overall picture of this thing forming. Bottner is way ahead, whatever comes of it. Like when he did the first genome, a lack of bureaucracy sure helps speed things along. Of course, the question is how objective he can really be. So far at least, he seems to be transparent (no irony) and purely focused on the societal good. But martial law is martial law, whoever the marshal happens to be. I am blogging a lot, trying to keep this spin on things, but then, the question is also how objective I can be. So far Bottner has not stepped on my tail about any of the VLS stuff. But truly, the few official Public Health announcements about VLS just seem sort of lame and bumbling both in terms of their content and in providing any degree of calming leadership so far.

I haven't been back to Sandy's in a while. Not out of any lack of gratitude or loss of family spirit. I had been caught up in the high-level whirl of things in Bottnerville, for days and days and Arabian-nights days. I had also noticed that it seemed more and more difficult to track Sandy down. She had given me a key back when I had first moved in, and I still had stuff in "my" bedroom there. But when I went by, the place was dark, no one bubbling around in the kitchen like usual, no wine corks popping, no dinner table buzz. No tribe in evidence. No cousin. Not picking up the phone or texts.

When I finally did get her to contact me, finally via a simple paper note stuck on the kitchen counter for her to find if she came back around, and arranged to get together, it was clear that she was paranoid as hell, or at least she was worried that someone was "on her trail." We met for coffee, and she didn't seem disposed to talk about the other folks. She really tightened up when the subject touched on Charlene.

I pushed it a little. "Has anyone heard anything from the Gonzo Marxists?" I don't have any idea if they are behind the bombing, or the kidnapping, just curious. And I haven't mentioned to Sandy the second bombing run. Or De Clounteau's d'accuse of me about Aurelia's info.

"No. Haven't heard a thing about them," her voice was a touch strained, it seemed, "They just sort of disappeared. Charlene is on extended leave at work and that's all I know."

I don't know if squaring that circle would lead to these folks being the bomber people. I don't think they are the same, but certainly close in sympathy; at least they

think they are, until the bear really comes. And God himself could not help them if they *have* been involved, in *any* way, passing on information, even the most oblique and peripheral in the kidnapping, and Poppy got wind of it.

“Marvin, are you OK?” Sandy asked.

“Yeah, sure, why?”

“You look a little odd.”

“I think you and Aunt Cloddy been saying that since I was, like, five.”

“Yeah”, she said distractedly. “Who I really worry about is Chuck and Bob. They don’t have anything to do with any of this...”

“What is ‘this?’ And if they DON’T know, then that begs, who does?”

“I don’t know. Forget I said anything. Except for the “odd” thing.” She studied me, leaning in close to my face. Since I don’t get any free medical type exams very often I just sat still.

“You don’t use, like Brylcreem in your hair, do you?”

“Nope, I’m a Dapper Dan, man.”

“Well, your hair looks, funny.”

“Funny?”

“Yeah, kind of shiny. The *one* bad thing that you are not, that you didn’t get the same genes as our uncles, and aunts, was that you have a pretty good stand of hair. And since I last saw you, there is this weird thing that you look like your hair is thinning. But its only from certain angles.” She said this as she craned her neck back and forth and around like she was appraising a Van Gogh or something.

“And you haven’t heard from Charlene and her guy?” I nosed on. (I was going to venture that I had “reposte’d” her observation on my hair, but that figure, in the age of IT would be totally wasted.)

“Rudy? Nope, not a peep.”

“And you don’t think the authorities, or the Bottners, would like to have a chat with them?”

“The cops? That would be bad enough. But Bottner on your ass? Uh uh, I don’t think so.”

I suspect that Sandy, good old Sandy, being who she is, later contacted some of her folks by their clandestine tribal signals, probably most low tech, like a bougainvillea behind her left ear, but enough to let them know to continue to lie low.

The Leaving, and Coming, and Leaving, of Marv

The next morning, back on the Carrier Wave, amongst the flow of people coming and going to help with the VLS Project, there arrived a Dr. Quillen, a distingue’ lady of perhaps fifty, from Stanford neurology. Just the touch of reassuring gray in her hair, and killer little laugh lines around her eyes as she did the meet and greets. Someone who looked like maybe she could

teach you how to do brain surgery, or maybe to do a schuss turn on skis. As she came onto the fantail, she shook hands with the science and IT folks Bottner introduced, leaving out the commoners of the crew and security. Today the in-crowd, for no obvious reason, included me in the introductions. Dr. Quillen paused, holding my hand. Her deep green eyes closed and I couldn't help thinking of the old trope of the spiritualist going into a spontaneous trance to commune with the otherworld. Except she opened her eyes almost immediately and reached out, without the least tentativeness, to touch my face.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, a bit too earnestly for my tastes.

"Uh, fine. Fine. Why do you ask?" I started to flirt back, but suddenly it dawned on me that as attractive as she was, she didn't appear to be the flirtatious sort. My chest suddenly felt a couple of ways tight. "You're the second person who's asked in the last couple of days."

She was quiet for a few beats, let out a deep sigh, and then said, indicating her hand and mine, "That doesn't feel normal." It took a second for this to register and to sink in. I thought of the dogs on the Crays.

"Oops," I choked out.

"Maybe oops. Maybe. I would like to spend some more time with you, if that's alright?"

Tarmac skin: Like a rubber tire on a hot July tarmac parking lot. Sort of trading molecules at the margins. In this version no particular heat like actual summer sun. Some kind of effect of overload in electron exposure sets off the changes, manifesting in the skin wherein there seems to be some type of temporary micro-fusion between bodies upon touch. Relatively scarce usable electrons being competed for by close

bodies. A flow of non-committed electrons as though down a gradient. I remember the old semipermeable membrane lecture in biology somewhere. We were correct in one early assumption which was that solid objects do have the effect, though its manifestation, the dissolution of a measurable millionth of an inch layer on the surface of the fused objects wasn't yet showing up until some critical parts, known for their close tolerances, or actually intolerances, like reactors and space craft, and livers, began to "fail" in function.

We were concerned that the crews of the Space station, the ones with months long tours, whether some of the folks might begin (as you would guess from the tremendous communication and data flow from that craft) showing early signs. Poor devils, couldn't survive without all the data flow needed to simply keep the station habitable, but then that put them in the electron stasis crosshairs.

Note: G. Quillen

Patient Stutts, M.

"Pt with tarmac skin. States he is surprised to be questioned, but admits others have also done so. In last two weeks.

States he feels well. He is involved in the search for the causes of VLS, with significant band-width exposure, and now seems to have been "infected/affected" and in at least the early stages of the clinical disease/effect/syndrome.

There is an odd appearance particularly his hair. There is an odd effect of appearance with movement. Subtle shifting there and not-there, being and non-being."

Dr Q. herself started from the very beginning of working with VLS patients, at Stanford/UCSF Hospital, not wearing any particular protective gear. She had just told a bunch of resident physicians in her keep, “Keep your wits about you generally, but who knows what will prove out to be the fomite, effect, or vector?”

STUTTERBLOG: Here again, now a couple of weeks on. When asked to think deeply about one’s emotions or senses, like that of, say, motivation, or one’s biological sense of physical pressure, the air around you, the resistance of the surfaces you are up against. heat, cold, light, there is an edge beyond which it seems you begin to lose connection, across that fluid boundary of progressive VLS. Eventually one arrives at a point of debility because of the loss of “normal” orientation to the whole range of things that normally go to make up our actuality in the world. Eventually that is what makes these VLS lives end up on the slab, untenable in the world other than as vapo-gelatinous slugs. And hey, if that’s what you need to play out your particular prophetic karma, more power to ‘ya, but it’s definitely bringing me down.

I sort of assume that at least some things I should look out for on my way toward that endpoint is blurring or dimming of vision, maybe loss of hearing, smell, or taste. The connection factors that mediate between the inner world and the outer. Where wert thou when I created the thalamus? What exactly, how it will manifest, I can only guess. Not too much of that so far. STUTTERBLOG, out.

And then there are the many who have no notice, the sudden heart attack or lightning-strike industrial accident. Really, simply, dead. And presumably, free to “go on.” Against the growing backdrop here across the country these are perhaps to be envied at last.

This situation, however, was altogether different. It was more on par with the guy sitting in a bathtub being told that the tub will silt in, with him in in, in X days, or weeks, or months, more or less. What, I ask myself, is going on? It is hard to orient to anything.

STUTTERBLOG (?): I am not quite sure if I am awake or not, nor where I actually am at this moment, if anyone is receiving whatever this is I seem to be spontaneously sending out by way of communication.

I go for a walk, down the trodden gangplank of the Carrier Wave, across the docks, by the storage and maintenance shacks and then hearing most acutely the crunch of the gravelly beach. What is it I am looking for here? Experiences to weigh against priors. Security has a guy with me, just sort of loosely around. I was doing ok and then next thing I know I am looking up, at faces and an indoor ceiling, certainly not the Carrier Wave.

“Marvin. Do you know what happened to you? It looked to us like you disappeared, for a little while anyway. Do you know where you are now?”

“The lodge? Teton?”

“Exactly. And you know why we are here?”

“Yes ma’am.” In answering Dr. Quillen I was simultaneously shattered and put at least partly back together in the same moment, so reassuring was her presence when she first told me I had “it.” How many humans, through the history of the world, had a moment when they were first aware of their own personal “it.” All the Gangetic millions who died, “left th’ world twixt first light and last” of acute plagues like cholera or pox, or died in bed, visited at last by common pneumonia, “the old man’s friend.” There was a moment when all that went before, all the rest of their existence, didn’t matter. “You have cancer. Your heart is giving out, your kidneys or your liver..., six months..., your affairs. It will just get worse.” Your nerves are shot. It’s a lot to process. I am told that we get tired of, or at least bored with, being frightened, like sailors in the Nth day of a life-threatening storm, and then things get more normal for at least a while.

But my vision, my physical senses remain sharp, like the urbane ghosts of old black-and-white TV (still great), not the gurgling zombie dreck pay-per-view we got nowadays. I am advised by these smart folks who are involved to back away, to get away from the areas of increased processing or even electron stream flow. I moved back to Sandy’s, and with no one much there, even unplugged the TV and computer Alexa-oid walkie-talker stuff.

STUTTERBLOG: Cold showers, brisk walks, plenty of fiber. No avail. It just seemed to Dr Q and the other folks when I presented for follow up that the effect is progressing. There are longer and longer periods when I’m just not there. And I mean that in at least

a little bit stronger form than just referring to inattention. I repeat, *I was not there*.

STUTTERBLOG, out.

They recommended an entire change of residence and I thought, Merde! And just when this his yachting life was getting good. Maybe that should be my epitaph, "Just Getting Good."

Anyway, Orlando, the Bottner bursar simply said, "Pack what you want for cold weather, and we got the heavy stuff like coats and gloves and ski-boots covered. Standby in an hour and Mickey's guys will come get you here and not leave you until you're there." Turns out that the Bottners had also been bourgeois enough to have bought into the Rocky Mountain winter wonderland scene and drastically overbuilt for the small number of family and friends that the palatial place maintained at any one time, on vacations, or holing up for more bio-psycho-socially extended residence.

As a matter of fact, since Mr. B's passions had turned to big, sailing, vessels, they hadn't given the Tetons a thought. It was a long way from anywhere and we (that is to say me and the folks now taking care of me, led by Ginny Quillen) had more than enough room to stretch out. That's apparently where I had actually been, already up in the Tetons, not the ship and the beach, when I blew an epistemological tire, got the here and there, the now and then all mixed up. That disorientation is another aspect of the syndrome. I came back around pretty quickly though.

Then we waited. We waited on me. To do exactly what?

Because I am on electron quarantine I am not formally blogging in any way. So this is the part that's all just between you and me, whoever and whatever we are. But to

these folks here F-T-F in the lodge, I keep reporting that I feel basically well. Though I admit that I have attributed some mental and physical slowing to mere altitude, my consciousness waves in and waves out. Otherwise, I am not exercising, I have no extra energy, but 9,000 ft. makes at least a physiological excuse. The tarmac effect makes every physical move like trying to walk in deep sand, or like swimming in syrup. All I want to do is sleep. I am aware that the medical guys came in and that it gets light at some times of the day and its dark the rest of the time.

I got very near the edge of that total blending with the big, hot Parking Lot in the Sky, and then my energy returned a bit, and moving was easier. I don't mean snapped totally back on. I just mean for a day, I felt almost normal. The next day I felt like hammered shit again. But it was a glimmer.

The kids in front of the lodge stopped keeping me LAN connected to them or indeed to any grid whatsoever, beyond 64-bit video games, hooked up to the old style of EEG electrode cap. No cell phones, which, I find, I really don't mind. Partly done to minimize the presumptive pathogenic state, namely what a conference of the mixed disciplines of physics, electrical engineering, and chemistry, along with pathology and infectious disease operators now formally call "electron stasis syndrome", ESS, still VLS to me.

The other reason was that I felt less and less need for any outside information. Again, I just want to "sleep", though this sleep state is something clearly different in wavelength than anything in the human REM cycle. Again, I am not here. I am there. The background sense is of a misty river-bank, on the coolish side. The way it feels to me,

the emotive response, is that this new Land of Farie feels good. But in the background there is occasionally a sense of impending doom, of threat, impending panic, and then it becomes clear that the “threat” is like some TV ad for Life Annuity for Golfers Insurance Co. of Danville, IL or some such absurd worldly dreck, and it passes.

But though still fading, here I am back at least more awake in one of the interludes, with enough spunk to file this report. I’ll keep them coming as long as I can.

STUTTERBLOG: I don’t really have a clue (or a care) of how long I have been here. Too much trouble to ask the kids at the desk. Objectively, couldn’t be any place better. I suppose if I pass unto utter ash in the end, this would be a good place to do it, unless we are talking a half-life rate of decay of my situation, always approaching, but never achieving, death, for say, several decades or centuries, enough that this Xanadu and all its works would have long crumbled into the mould, and for better or worse, the future would have inflicted itself upon the world around it, leaving my half-faded remains to, what, wander the mountains? For Eterne? Get a cooler named after me? Run into D.B. Cooper? STUTTERBLOG, out.

Mickey of the Seals shows up in the normal rotation of security in the Bottner empire. First and foremost, he’s probably the person who I will believe over any other for news from Bottnerville centro. He knows the total situation pretty well. He gets it.

I find it...? Humorous? Ironic? I’ll find it... Anyway that I’ve got this great blogger’s trough of information and most of the time I just want to sleep, whatever.

Yesterday, maybe the day before, I remember not only being awake but being, for at least some period of time, outside. There is snow. That is another example of the “thereness” or not, most of the time I don’t think I am susceptible to any effects of the cold, but it is at least an odd sensation nonetheless.

April 26,..... Quillen

Clinical note: Stutts, M.

The winking effect of being fully tangible one moment and then just a bit off of that in the next seems to be progressing. His subjective sensation is that of having been in a kind of sleep, and he says he prefers “being” there to being here.

Except for the fade, physically he seems a normal person for age, who is getting a little pudgy with the inactivity, but no actual parts or pieces falling off.”

We, mostly Dr. Quillan, have decided to be more limited in our physiological studies; we determined if we keep pulling blood samples, we could make me anemic as a frick’n ghost, which at the moment is doubly inconvenient because I am already pale to the point that on some days I only sort of shimmer in direct sunlight. I’ve seen the video.

It’s what I was talking about before, the quarantine, like the cold water cure for an alcoholic. We don’t get down to zero amps of computational current, but pretty close, just sort of the coarse-bran paleo gustatory pre-web equivalent.

We don't muck with electrons here and we hope they won't muck with us.

But part of the lab-rat, objective-duty side of this very cushy if somewhat rustic deal is at least one single portrait-shot of me a day, a la Aureliadot. Indeed, we use the same stuff, actually the same program, or a tiny offshoot of it, to record. But only that relatively infinitesimal amount needed for one still photo a day vs 3x video plus, all on-line 24/7. It at least keeps the app open for the return of better times.

I haven't cared about time for...some time. Eating? I don't actually know, now. I'm not hungry.

I spent a span of just feeling life, what there was of it. Not what I was doing, but what I was being.

I am self-suspect of the veracity of any report I might make, but as far as I can glean, with a strange sense of grokking in and out of the various information streams whizzing by, back on the coast. How do I know? I don't know how I know, I guess if anything it just feels like Sandy's house's electric meter is out there clicking along, and WiFi flowing in and out, and somehow, if I turn my attention towards her, I either know it, or at least intuit it. But it's not the meter, it's Sandy herself. Sandy is back at her place. And back at her job. Her fear of the VLS is apparently greater than her worries about being lumped together in some way with Charlene and the Marxist cadre, assuming that they were themselves responsible for any of the recent madness of Aurelia's abduction or the tower blown, or for that matter the plague itself.

So she is back at work in the basement. "What are the numbers today from Ventura County?" She says to Bob the Deiner.

Bob pitches a clipboard gently onto her desk from his, cramped as they were in the Public Health office. It showed a great big mountainous looking rise in the case loads in the last several days. "Crap. We can't let that out. People would go crazy. Maybe if we do it on some log scale to make it look small and flat. They won't know the difference."

"Getting just a little cynical there, aren't we?"

"Me?" Sandy reacted, "I'm fucking Pollyanna here, compared to what it looks like we should be."

Bottnerville, at least in my current version of it, is in these glorious mountains. That includes the truly dramatic experience of at least once per day, being loaded onto a sled and pulled around slowly outdoors. Almost worth the cost of that particular ticket. Not quite, though. Most of the passage of time is not a psychological sleigh ride.

I realize that maybe it was too late to have a conversation on the issue. But I can't escape the fear of what's coming. A real low point.

I just "dormed up" the more deeply in response.

Note: Quillen Late March/early April

Stutts, M

Communication becomes more and more problematic. Marv is very ethereal appearing, especially at some angles and in some lights. It is a feature of the syndrome.

"Faded", is the consensus term we use here. Daily a bit more faded. Speech ceased many days ago and I hang my head to say that if he is sending messages in some mode, or even in thought,

I am not receiving them, though I am wracking my brain to figure out how. Still following serial EEGs.

Phys Exam: Temp TLTM (Too low to measure) Pulse none. Intake/output none.

There have been zero metabolic or nourishment in or wastes out in more than six weeks now. His decline continues to follow its course. Still unclear as to what end. I need to begin to think about discussions with his physician cousin re advanced directives or more to the point now, legal control and responsibility for those such as he is to become very shortly.”

The winter deepened. Still being sledded around each day and it is still magnificent. I just want to stay out here in it. But no, my people won’t understand it. Not yet.

The low red sun shown in the clearstories as it transited the day. Across the room the light washes in a stately wave on along to the evening. Then comes the night. The dense clear blackness punctuated only with stars. They took me out a few times at night. Again the sights, a Rocky Mountain moonrise over the snowfields, are almost worth being this sick to be here to see them.

There have apparently been many days when no one had more than a brief check-in contact with me. I suppose I am becoming mausoleic. Nothing new to report.

That went on for a long time, weeks, then months. And then I woke up. Over a number of days, weeks maybe, and a bit more to get my wits fully about me again. The snow was passing outside. And at about the same speed, the world and I grew back to “normal” by summer. Pretty anticlimactic, no?

The process was not exactly the reverse of the “descent”. I attribute it, by the way, to the actual beneficial effect of the low electron-flow ambiance over time. I came near some edge, or at least the presumed edge. And then the tide rolled back out. Dr. Quillen is still here and seems relieved.

“Hey, big guy, Glad you’re back.” Again with the smile lines.

“Whew. Glad to be back. Though I gotta say, it’s pretty interesting. In a dull Lutheran Sunday kind of way.”

“We missed you.” She and I spend a lot of time talking about the experience as I am getting my feet back under me.

Now months later, and I have reconstituted physically at least to some extent, and largely because of my unique experience, I am a coming pundit/ talking-head presence on one of the nets. Not so much the limited STUTTERBLOG anymore. Murrow on the Red Scare, Cronkite on Viet Nam and space, Wolfe Blitzer at the beginning of the long mid-east kashizzle, and now me with the VLS. The plague continues to grow and is the big news of this year and probably some more years to come. I am counting on having some sort of immunity built up, though I have no real reason to expect that. It just comfortably fits with the ancient and optimistic models of plagues past.

Ginny Quillen is not so sanguine, ever the scientist. “Yeah, well we need to keep an eye on it. Just let me know if anything funky seems to be happening, right?” I am wary of places with lots of electronic flow around them, like, ironically, communications centers. But it is the modern age, and one need not be sitting in an electric chair to converse with the world.

Bottner owns the station, by the way, indeed the majority share of the network. Again I commend him for not being more self-serving with his power. I try not to abuse the privileged place.

They know by now that the problem is not Bottner's bacteria. "They" being the base of scientific community and even reasonably knowledgeable common folk. Indeed, the intense scrutiny, and the benign result of no *E. Bottnerii* loose following the first smokestack attack actually led to a speedier passage of regulatory OKs, and the practice is now spreading rapidly, with three pilots scheduled in the next 6 months in China, and others dotted around the globe. At least there was that progress on that different ecological front. But we, the Bottnerians had to be honest even about that, in terms of "Known unknowns" because the logic was that while the bugs were blessings about the atmosphere in eating the carbon out of the plant stacks, the plants that had the stacks were producing, wait for it, more electrical current, and the safer the world felt about that, the more the electro show went on, and presumably the more E.E.S. The mitigation for that, reasoned Mr. B., was to preferentially place these bugs in stacks in third world countries, where E.E.S. was not (yet) a problem and where the need for the power was still basic and useful, "Below the knee of the curve" as he put it to us in the evening wine smokers on the fan-tail, as the Pacific sun did its uproarious dive into the sea. "But that means we are also responsible to help them keep from getting addicted. It's pretty paternalistic to tell folks, yeah, you can have power for your warm cuddlies, schools, hospitals, water pumps, but don't go getting any ideas about any Las Vegas or Times Square." Damn, I thought, if only Sandy and her tribe could be here now. *That's* trying to bowl down the middle of the existential lanes.

But none of that gave immunity from the electro-glut in places like SoCal, of E.S.S., nor even complete immunity from the growing idiocy of the lower half of our own society, once het up, now generically intent on randomly burning the witches along with the grammas.

“Bottner Bugs Scavenging Unchecked!” Screamed the headline of “The Niggler”, one of the blogs I followed and appreciated as pretty representative. Seems, according to it, that a lot of people have the idea of what the Bottner bugs are supposed to do wrapped up in a different scenario. Per the Nig, Bottner actually, actively sent forth the bugs, aerosolized, spritzed at the entrance to malls, everywhere, and with the hope that when people begin to shrivel up, the bugs which were responsible would somehow return to their kennels to be offloaded of their scavenged carbon before being reassigned another such beat.

The carbon, our carbon, by the way, now a digested bacterial by-product, was to be used as the basic blancmange substrate of a new generation of architectural and machine age 3-D printers. Printers which, for the record, were in fact, another large long-term business interest of Bottner’s, thus, in the pretzeled mind of the Nigsters, that proved, for a depressingly large number of people out there in the midlands Qua priori, sine qua fuscit, and ipsit delendo, the point; Bottner was bad for ya’! We read it on the web! We believe it, that settles it!

STUTTERBLOG *Private subscriptions: A big issue just now in the Stasis-pHERE is exactly how to get out of there. Once you are sinking into that stuff, unless you have some sort of spontaneous miracle of recovery like I seem to have done, at some point somebody, somewhere, somehow, has to make a decision and take an action regarding whether you are alive or dead and whether to keep whatever there is of you around and in what form. Being

plain old buried can be really problematic because we know, or at least I do, from experience that one can be “gone”, i.e. ready for the coffin, or indeed in it, and then “come back.” Assumed to be most unpleasant if that happens, and unfortunately no one knows how long that might go on there in a coffin.

There has been a rush to cremation, as being “certain”, but jeeze, wouldn’t that be a bad day to be concious just by coincidence?

Aquamation, or slugging yourself to goo in potassium hydroxide seems a little less rude, but we don’t know how much sentience the goo keeps. STUTTERBLOG, out.

There are whole swaths of the flyover midlands where people are setting up the equivalent of the old Indian burial scaffoldings out on the vastness of the primeval prairies and forests from Southern Illinois down to East Texas. Actually, nowadays there isn’t all that much real isolated primeval prairie left any more, like nada zippo, so the new gonzo Indian burial grounds are popping up in places like abandoned strip mall space, or highway on-off ramp right of ways. The idea is not to “do” anything about your passing, afraid to declare it *as* passing. Just put you on a platform, with a jug of water, largely ceremonial, and go away. Period. Not easy to do, but after six or eight months of constant worry about the corpse*, in their house, people finally harden up to it.

Being just left at ground level, which implies interaction with scavenging animals, is not cool. Higher up, maybe the birds get you, but that’s difficult even for them, owing to your odd state.

There are reports, still few and far between of people, like me, who seem to have turned a corner and reconstituted themselves. No one knows what favors of fate or lineage go into being these people. Something equivalent to different blood types or perhaps some mitigating activity perhaps, but no clear pattern has established itself yet. Bottner has epidemiologists all over it, as does CDC and WHO. They say they appreciated the blogs that I kept on the way down into, and back out of, this state.

There have also been reports and discussion about animals. Some domesticated, and some feral, who seem to be ghosts, themselves either affected primarily by being near an electron flow source, or else consuming the bodies of the ghostly, and who themselves take on the ghostliness.

In the end, just bowing to practical pressures, leaving people to the elements, on the ground, is becoming very common after all. Strangely, the new purgatorios are sort of the old stomping grounds of the homeless; underpasses, abandoned fields, near city dumps. The demi-dead now the homeless again.

Boot Hill makes sense. I once came upon a small cemetery in New Mexico, surrounded by a crumbling adobe wall. It is a simple town cemetery and most of it features the clean if simple headstones of the town's people for a couple of hundred years back. Same families. But there are those whose family either didn't keep up with them or didn't have the means to do anything about it when they passed. In the absence of getus, no headstone for you, wooden cross. Fifty-fifty on making it through first Halloween with a marker. Popular with the brujos and brujas for use in their mal ojo spells. No one checking in on you, coming to see you and

how you are doing, to remember you at least a little on Dia del los Muertos every year at samain when the light is leaving again. Then the seasons change and the slow, crawling rot sets in on the crosses that remain. In time there is a weather-beaten cohort, all left on their own lonely side of the campo santo, with no markers and no memory.

And on the wall, facing back and down on them, her face to the west as theirs are to the hopeful East, there is a sandstone angel, hand-carved there when the roads were still hardpan tracks and the quickest thing around was a buckboard wagon. Wind and time and blood- red summer evening suns for a century have left her with no remaining features; a perfect, faceless angel watching over nameless graves. These new urban camping grounds for the hypo-dead, lacking even such tiny poetry, are sad beyond saying. Turns out, Asphodel smells like diesel fumes.

There is a lot of exhumation going on. Some official and some not. People who lost family in the time leading up to the overt plague, have difficulty convincing themselves that Momma is really gone, not just lying down there fuming. Questionable reports say that they have actually dug up a few “live” ones, in Taiwan, and like, Romania, but then they’ve always worried about stuff like that in Romania.

The world is entering a time of a new division. Those whose lives have become integrated with the high band-use internet of things are on one general side, mundane godlings with feet of clay and hearts of silicon, demanding the use of all the band-width required to continue their very well regulated life, (regulated except this one little problem). Party on.

On the other side are the folks who have all along sort of muttered under their breathes about how they don’t need any of the accoutrements of the net, can live closer to the land and

who say ya'll don't need to send all these electrons to do their bidding, can manage on their native own, thank you very much, though the data from Fed Ex and Netflix more and more belies their own addicted hypocrisy and says different.

It has begun to come to violence. A partisan attack shut down a big E-coin computer-mill in the Northwest. A rising ESS case load there locally seemed to require some action. Fairly self-contained assault. Even civilized. Columbia River dropped 8 degrees, and the salmon came back.

Attack on KU in Lawrence Kansas, same week. Pretty minimal computational use there, compared to places like Berkeley and MIT. It is a big place though, locally, socially. Not a tech hub of even the third order however.

This raid was not led by students or thinkers. In fact, it was the first time in a long time to see any young people anywhere doing anything on behalf of anything traditionally civic. But the students and bourgeois of the town were simply overwhelmed, physically, suddenly, by a disorderly cadre of what could best be described as white trash. The town saw a column of pickup trucks with flags and drums, weapons and placards, mostly damning, among other things, the vague evils of esoteric science, vidi "NO MESSING WITH OUR GENES" "STOP THE SUPERBUGS", most fairly passe' even for this crowd, and all mentally unfocused. Considerable destruction, some outright theft and much mayhem for several tense days and fire-touched nights. Then the perps dribbled back into the underbrush of society, as clueless as when they came.

But it was all supposedly undertaken in the name of “genetic purity”, by which many mean bodily normal, as opposed to chromosomally fried around the edges by band pressure. O.K. so be that.

But others mean one subculture against other subcultures. Ur-Megiddo. Heroditus, first pages about the Greeks and the Anatolians, somebody stole somebody’s wife away in a boat. Voila La Belle Hellene. From there, it’s third-rate Iliad all the way up to today’s version.

There has been another, third attack event. Not the Complexia towers. This one much like the one up in the Northwest, indeed involving some of the same people mentioned in that first Columbia River “civil disobedience.” Another large cloud-site of aggregate servers pulled down. Once again, the besiegers weren’t there to randomly destroy. Precise actions, limited to areas away from people. Basically, just one large main electrical conduit severed as it crossed open spaces in the countryside near Eugene, Oregon. Having accomplished this part of their mission, at least some of them, the more articulate and sensible, reminding me of Sandy, and Chuck and the BobSquares, hunkered down to wait for the authorities to come and collect them for their civil disobedience. They were led away by armed troops to begin the likely public diplomacy to follow. But that was not what was going to happen.

No more than ten minutes later and the troops stopped, out of range of the first layer of the press, brusquely huddled up the detainees, and promptly shot them all dead, leaving their bodies in the roadside ditch. Not sure who the “armed troops” are. State or Nat? Vigilante? No one seems to know.

I still keep up with Mickey over at Bottnerville when I am not there myself. He says Mr. B and family are somewhere off the coast. Where, is not important. Just that they are safe. I assume accompanied closely by the Shadow support boat.

Mickey says there have already been cuts in Complexia itself. The equivalent of about a third of what they had been doing is now cut away. Rational pruning? What isn't working as a result? Heard some airline travel schedules got boogered up, fantasy football shot all to hell, and to be sure, the movement of at least some "necessary" consumables. Otherwise, some classified stuff. But hey, if it's classified from me, then why do I care about it?

I really do lament the loss of Aureliadot, the un-interrupted arc they envisioned.

But I suppose as innocent as it was, it still represented a pretty big appropriation of everything around them.

I suppose one can date the beginning of the actual "wars" with the murders of the Eugene Twelve, and the subsequent declaration of operations of "The First Idaho Irregulars", who publicly claimed responsibility, followed by more scattered freebooters. From that point, beginning about a year after the first cases of VLS, there were daily attacks, all across the country. Now less and less focused on any actual problem, more diffusely directed by "us" at "them." And though VLS cases slowed simply because of peoples' natural individual fear and response to being close to big-band, and as at least those who could, and those who would, avoided at least some of the heavier use corridors. In places where there was little in the way of active mitigation, the people kept soaking up their MTV, and thus cases kept piling up and up.

I had word from Bottner, from the office deck of the Carrier Wave. He wants me to be as aggressive as I can regarding putting out the best, most optimistic version we have of reality just now, which is pretty bleak, to tell the truth.

“Don’t spare the budget. This may be us going down, but if it is, I want us to go down swinging. Civilization.”

The days seem dark. There are now a half-dozen of at least noticeable renegade groups staging fairly large attacks every few days across the country. Some are headed by what can only be called petty warlords. Mexico of the early naughts.

Late one night, a very specific set of the remaining highway traffic suddenly disappeared from the interstate a hundred miles east of El Paso. The heist was pulled off with great precision and discipline on the part of the perps. They had absconded with three specific tractor trailers. In these they had captured the military’s next basic laser-based weapons chassis. Using this, a couple of hours later, before anyone knew they had boosted it, they melted their way into the base weapons bunkers at Ft Bliss, and using the stolen trailers they took a further 10,000 M-4 carbines and a couple of million rounds of ammo for them. Some dog-ass wannabe militia claimed responsibility, as though, by now anyone gave a specific crap.

These wars, that candidly have made my career, really didn’t become big enough to be historic until the time of the Big Conclave. Close to a million people, given all sides, and their offshoots, and their old family anthropologists, all sort of unofficially gathering up in the flats of Western Kansas. Odd mix when seen from above, or no doubt when walking through it. Some patches, tribal plats, purring along neatly under solar powered minimalist function. And then

there will be a row of several camps, much more activity in evidence, and the whole of it jumping with shadows thrown by raw bonfires.

Many of these larger troops incorporate at least one inspirationalist congregation, which adds the dimension of speaking in tongues to the already fragmented bonfire light. These are not times nor places for the propagation of rational thought. Or of much organized thought of any kind. One sociological note aside: for whatever reason, the incidence of straight up wartime rape has not been high. It is a weird collection of libidos and repressions that is running around loose out there. Fortunately, this set seem to be phlegmatic, cold natured. More oafish Minnesota bachelor farmers with pitchforks and torches than Norse Vikings with horny helmets and big bad axes. Some say it's the opiates that are gushing through widening gaps in control of such things. The old Oxy Economy is revived in places. Ten Oxy's for a new pair of Levis. A thousand for a pretty good used truck. And Fentanyl, oye."

These small armies have run into the same problem the cartels in Mexico bumped up against; the folks they dominate eventually want stuff, like water, lights, tortillas, and it became the cartels' problem. How to replace Seguridad Social and the Catholic Church with something like what it takes to keep a polis of people happy. Or at least your old lady off your ass.

But US society ain't anywhere close to the final stage of smoothing out details like that yet. There are just too many people who have been waiting too long to get their particular barbarian yayas off. Some yayas, at least, will be gotten off.

The U.S. Army, the real, formal army, is "stable but brittle" according to Mickey's contacts in that realm, who had themselves heard the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs use that phrase, in an informal situation. The officer corps remained its solid self, while the "scum of the

earth” that the ranks are in any army, had apparently been swilling in almost 100% hopped up tele-agitprop in every ready room, gym, and enlisted club in the US military 24/7 for several years now.

There were a lot of people who didn’t know exactly who it was they hated or why they did, but hate they did, none the less. There are always the young men who do not want to settle down to plumbing or HVAC or working the QuickieMart or phone-bank shifts. Walking around with large weapons is more fun. And as the biguns began to eat-the littleuns, concentrating toward a few fairly large meta-organizations, some are now large enough to provide regular mess, and in a few places even some pay. Upon what specie is not always known. Ya’ll take the Queen’s salt, ya’ll carry the Queen’s rifle. But who knows the Queen, and who even knows where salt comes from anymore? Payrolls are being made to some of these units, the distribution being totally underground from that point on. Crypto coins, and merchandise of vague provenance, even Oxys and Fentanyl themselves, are being used to negotiate things on the ground. This is not voodoo economics, this is steampunk narco-feudalism.

STUTTERBLOG private subscription: OK, kids, Cousin Marv is going on leave again. We have been monitoring me for any return of my prior ESS. So far had been so good except Dr Q notes what she calls a little stickiness around the edges, on my physical. I feel great. But then I felt great before I nearly whatevered last time. By those lights, however, the real true first symptom of every major disease is that you felt really well. “I was feeling fine, Doc, but then...” Ba dum cha, get it? Hyuk hyuk.

Anyway I am going back to the Grand Tetons for another round of the retro-tech Iced-Tea cure. I may still be blogging, but cut way back. Practically telegraphic. If anyone had the intention of seeing me in person for any reason, give it six months. Whatever is left of me then will call whatever is left of you. Beep. STUTTERBLOG, out.

It's a weird sanitorium we have set up here. The lodge and the surroundings are still magnificent. Der ElektronZauberberg. Bottner is still more wrapped up in favor of his navy, easier to defend the Carrier Wave than here at Fort Zinfandel. He is also working on some things in the air. Big structures now in the works for a long time.

The kids at the front desk, once again cut me off from flow. Since the whole big house here is retro per perhaps nineteen-fifties lodge, pinewood paneling with some oil lights, and at least partial wood-fired heat and movies on film, it feels ok, homey old sincere homey, not new ironic Homey. But no urls or nodes of any kind. Definitely *not* on the internet of things. The kids who man the front obviously hate it and rotate back to California pretty quickly. A couple of them have been brought back though, sort of in my condition, quietly fading in other rooms.

I can tell what it is that has Dr Q worried. My hair is starting to shizz again and even I have to admit to feeling the odd shock of tarmac skin when I touch things. We determined some time ago that the Tarmac isn't catching, per se. If you have VLS then tarmac is a possible sign as well as a symptom, but you don't "give" it to anyone else through touching or proximity. It's more like cancer in that sense. That is one thing Bottner's huge data analysis capability has helped with immensely. But again, it's the bad guy, too. A conundrum.

Cousin Sandy has been with the team up here in the mountains, courtesy of her new gig in Bottner's epi bunch. Dr. Quillen tracked her down and met with her and asked Herb specifically to bring her on board. She has seen me at as low a flame as I got down to last trip. I'm glad she's here. She is pretty much always on call as far as doing something about me is concerned. Short of her mother, my Aunt Cloddy, I can't think of anyone who would do more to stick up for me. It's a piece of home and that helps.

"The first time, you had gotten far enough gone that to all of us you had already died. Dead. And then you came back."

"Well, I'm sure glad you guys didn't just box me up."

She was constantly in attendance now, along with Ginny Quillen, as I once again approached what was charitably called "basic goo." Nothing metabolic in or out for weeks, physical aspect getting more faded, more mottled. But still here, "playing indoors" as I call it. This second episode is more interesting as there is at least hope of resolution, and thus I am trying to think more about what is happening to me, thinking of what I might do to affect its course, to learn something as I go. Hopefully, another roundtrip ticket. Some OJT.

Parts and different views of parts of the patient sort of boil up into being, and thus, into view, as others are bubbling downward to at least invisibility or even on to some irredeemable bardo, or purgatory. The race was between how much was bubbling up and how much down, and at the moment it appeared to all around that the up was losing out to the down and at this rate I would not "be" in many more days. Everyones' heads are sort of bobbing along together

in the great room on that. Sandy's bob at least came with a squint's worth of healthy skepticism. "OK, so...?"

Silence around.

"So what happens...after? And exactly what is, "after?" Seeing how she would be the designated goo-ee for whatever after everyone else had drawn their line, thrown their own shovel of dirt in and left, Sandy was curious. "Just have a handsome ceramic goo vat hanging around?"

Playing on the thing that they had tried to do with the dogs, sending out the therapy dog vibe for the last comfort of the masses of hypo-dead, they had moved Able, along with his remaining partner, Baker, from on top of the Cray back on the high flow West Coast and brought them here, partly as the animal version of the low flow cure, to see how they responded. Though there wasn't any specific body of the pooches left visible, the Crays had been far too powerful in their stasis action for that, I could definitely sense their presence. Especially Able, as he was the one who had once run at me scaring the bejesus out of me, but ending up licking my wrist and my face and letting me give him a good round of doggie scratch and belly rub. We connected. At some level, he became "my dog" and our mutual presences comforted one another. Because I had the higher powers of rationalizing, and had already come back out of this once and was still scared shitless I can only imagine what Able was going through. Over the weeks, he and I headed gradually further and further down into Tartarus together until we faded so far that I passed out of normal physics and biology. Sandy and Dr Quillen could only watch and wait. At least they had a dynamite place in which to do it.

“If you absolutely have to do some grieving,” allowed Sandy, “I highly recommend Bottner’s place to do it,” she said, opening another bottle of a light rose’. She was psycho prepped to just take my residua home to California, or back to East Texas where we had grown up.

But, once again, I foxed them. Or actually, possumed. That’s what the phenomenon began to be called. “Possuming”, and then waking up was not unknown now, though still fairly rare. That’s what I had done so remarkably the first time and so prosaically this time.

“Yeah, he’s awake,” I heard Ginny Quillen’s voice. That was the first intelligible thing I realized I heard as I came out of the second wave. I was very, very much aware of being alive, this very moment, and it was sort of stunning. I had once heard that the French guy, Voltaire had been asked if he thought people who believed in reincarnation were looney. He said he was totally blown away that he was even here once. But being here twice, now three times, if you count the original “reg’lar ‘ol” life of Marvin, it began to feel more like a larger field of play. It has taken some weeks however before I have returned to any public normalcy.

It may not be so much that I am a part of a small group of people who have the capacity to reemerge from VLS, as it may be that people like me coincidentally do it in a convenient temporal span. Too short, a day, and it is written off, nobody noticed the blink. Too long, a decade, is too diffuse to follow continually, at least so far. The proof of that lies and will lie, in a lot of coffins, especially piled up around SoCal. Do not open til Christmas. I begin to relate more to the Dia de los Muertos crowd and even the Shinto priests in the funny hats.

The country has become more unrecognizable during your ‘Ol Cousin Marv’s hibernation. I awaken to this spring (note also about the same time of year that the first

possuming spell broke) and the map, if one should care to create one, would show a scattering of boil-like population centers. Some temporary and recent, ten-thousand people moving every few days in the countryside. Some are traditionally mid-American towns, Hamlin, and Tulsa, and Cucamonga, now just hunkered down and armed in self-defense and fully committed to a different chafing ideology. The big cities, New York, Chicago, L.A and such, maybe Phoenix, Houston, Denver, Seattle, they continue to rumble along much as before, if with perhaps a bit more ridged grip on civic resources, though at least quasi-civic means still get allocated and used, with food lines in the nicer parts. Food riots in the hood. Very quickly the age-old weakness of monarchies appear as those resources are more and more channeled into fewer and fewer, more and more dubious paths. Small armies are abuilding

One of the things that has in fact become clear about us Possums, as far as the question, do we recover “fully”. There are clearly those who have. The purest and most objective example is Manuela Cardon-Principe, a young Spanish pianist, who is involved in very forward art in electronic music, and thus all the bandwidth that would go along with such imagination. When she fell ill she was taken into the interior of Spanish Morocco to the old estate of her family on the edge of the Berberian Riff, with little but sand and wind to surround her. When she awoke she returned to her concert schedule. There was considerable debate amongst formal critics as to whether the affliction had harmed her muse. Nearly everyone said there was a slight difference in her playing, noticeable to those who are cognoscenti, but as to whether it represented a breakdown in her playing, or simply a different parsing, a new syllabification, this is a topic for a few long form professional journalists, not me of the tin ear.

For the rest of us there are varying degrees of regression and return. One common effect noted by nearly everyone who comes back, like scars with smallpox, and the loss of smell back with Covid, is a noticeable tendency to run the past, present, and future together both functionally and linguistically.

Well, like Kinky said: "Time is what they invented to keep it all from happenin' at once."

Amazingly people really haven't changed much about their routines in the population centers, and even in those zones where at least some change early on, at least a little "mitigation" of band-width use, would have saved more pain later on they largely just elected to leave the electro- tap on and running. No guts, no will to change, just bland momentum. "Well, if it gets me, it gets me." A sense of resignation. "I want my MTV," became the rallying cry and anthem of a whole set of folks. "See you at the mall!" Yeah, let's talk about that farther along, at least while you can. Sorry kids, not to be morbid, or worse, hypo-morbid.

The Bottners have asked me to come back down to the Pacific on the Carrier Wave with them. It was orbiting about a thousand-mile loop off the West coast, and was able to accommodate small boat dockings for supplies and passengers. The Shadow Wave dropped me off on the aft party deck on one of their supply runs, on a golden afternoon. I got my old state room back, thanks no doubt to Orlando. It is, coincidentally, the most forward and thus removed from the big computer feeds, located mostly aft.

"Marvin! How are you, buddy?" Mr. B. booms. Poppy is there, A little subdued. She has the added dimension of this maturing experience. I suspect she will do pretty well after all. Aurelia clings to her a bit more closely.

“I am currently very opaque, thank you. Doing very well. And thank you for the continued support during these blink outs.” It was clear from the blank looks that they didn’t know about our quartering ourselves on their Teton place. But a shrug and a look between them, and later, coincidentally, Bottner graciously tendered an invitation to use the place, and Godspeed the use.

“Are you back to your fighting weight. I mean back to your normal?”

“I think so, but I doubt that one goes back to what they were after one of these events. You tell me if I’ve changed.”

“Well, one thing,” he jumped right in, “You write a lot more now about the effect of this thing on you as an individual. I get that that needs to be documented, but that’s what Dr. Q is doing, no? To cut to the chase, I need you to turn back to the larger stage and do more of your work, which by the way, we think is super great,” Poppy silently applauding her agreement, “and which needs to help shape this thing up a little more. We are now the mainstream press. And I don’t have a sense of what’s going on out there. You’ve been good at keeping me up to speed on at least a couple of occasions. Get us back up to speed. Both what we are finding out, and what we are putting out.”

So the next day I started back around the old loop of sources, counting on the passage of these dire months to yield more news to glean. I went to see Ron Fabricio. His hair was gray. I don’t remember that.

“So, you got this thing fixed?”

“Yeah, right,” he muttered. I sat across from him at his desk, and he poured both of us a discretely respectable tot of scotch at the 2PM meeting. “It’s tough, it’s tough,” he murmured, applying himself to the glass.

He swirled the liquor and sipped it. “It’s all right there. I mean. We don’t know a lot about the specific biophysics, but you can stop it by just throttling back. I mean, you’re proof. It’s just nobody wants to.”

“They want to go down swinging?”

“Shopping.”

“Ya?” I finished my drink and said good bye. “Good luck, Ron.”

“Good luck to us all,” he said, still looking into the bottom of his glass.

The situation as it stands now just about two years into The Effect is thus:
Much of the world is safe, ironically due to low bandwidth, but paradoxically it is exactly that toxic bandwidth that most of that world is lobbying for more and more. And if we don’t give it to them, it will come in there in Mandarin.

But to stay intentionally near the great first-world river of bytes that has risen past its banks and stripped the flesh off a memorable sized cohort of people is simply not reasonable. The degree of social disruption as first one person and then another is blinked out, with all the loss of their function that that entails, multiplied x thousands through the economy, and then add to that the awful load on families of caring for them in at least some way, and you would think that these people would feel the burn. But apparently not.

How account for the vast rise of those who had high connectivity, saw the effect come, and shrugged, preferring to continue that degree of connectivity? Even if it puts their odds way up there in the reverse lotto that the world has become? They are the Doomed Half, but they know they are doomed and they choose it that way, by God. Bloody minded.

And there is an odd confluence of these upper, wired with the lower, white-trash ethos of the current aging generation, to commit “suicides of despair”; alcohol, drugs, suicide by police with a new “Come and Take It” tattoo over their heart to give the cops an aiming point.

The Pustular Half, anarchists now physically scattered around the country like a case of pox, is philosophically, or at least psychologically, centered around a fairly strong mandate toward dissolution of the US and a reshuffle. Not likely to happen, per Mickey and his guys at DOJ. Bottner and his guys know everyone, and *their* people one layer down, despite what Herb says about walking blind. There is still a pretty healthy federal presence around, certainly changed and streamlined. Just maybe not so much in Deepest Texas, but then, what’s new?

But these irregularly organized, roving bands of countrymen are themselves undergoing structural civic changes. There are white churches in the depths of Bible Belt East Texas who “charitably” offer their own congregations’ busses, which are a considerable fleet, to local black families who have been told straight up, “Pack up and get out. No questions, just go. Go peaceful and we will help along the way. Oh, and we will be praying for you.” Thus the church busses. I didn’t say the effect was necessarily progressive. And there really isn’t anyone around to appeal to.

There is, by the by, almost no incidence of VLS in the true sticks. Still on vinyl, maybe cassette? Cool. Pick up a couple of CDs when you go out to the Dairy Queen.

A few bit-coin “ moonshine stills” in the back-ass end of Idaho and Truth or Consequences, New Mexico using a lot of syphoned-off flow, big heat signatures, but otherwise a deep darkness in that “flyover” of mid-continent America.

There is no personal contagiousness either way, just the degree of flow you are near and perhaps something about your particular native genes.

The two social groups, that is to say those who chose to swim in the high electron tide versus those who have for many and many generations, back to the real European cast-off founding, lacked any capability to rise out of their own hillbilly wastes culturally, are now strangely, not at odds. With an odd array and indeed mix of leaders and divines and pundits (ahem).

In the heartlands the lights are gradually going out. Fireflies better be as good as we remember. Because they are now what is happening on the town square.

One of the better effects of this later-day and pettifogged Neo-Whigism is that someone took the unencumbered strides of moving the Oxy-trash who hung like maggots around the cities’ centers, dragging them down, until forcibly removed. Many injured in the process, truncheon-to-head sorts of things, and at least a few dead Outright. Outright was a designation that the deceased was dead in the whole, old traditional sense and would start going ripe on you pretty gosh darn quick. Lucky them. I mean if ya just had to have gotten dead just then. Remote reports about people who saw the angles involved and weighed it to a fare-the-well indeed, committing overt, Traditional suicide hoping that would assure them of a traditional Outright death. Stewed sheep or roasted goats.

Stutterblog: Don't know where I was when we last spoke. I am back at the Tetonberg, sinking once again into electrical stasis, this an as yet unheard of third time. Wish me luck.

Stutterblog, out.

The Bottneroid crew and Sandy and Ginny Quillen are here.

"Marvin," says Quillen, getting my antennae up as it always did when Mom or Aunt Cloddy called me by the full name, often just prior to a whack in the head. Ironical that, as she then went on, "Marvin, I want to talk to you about something. Mr. Bottner knows, and he is all for it."

"Yeah?" I am intrigued at anything new at this point, though also strangely disconnected at the same time.

"I don't suppose you have ever heard of a medical treatment called deep brain stimulation?"

'Like Rolfing your lobes?'

"Not quite so...crude."

"Yeah?"

"It's really been around for a long time, just not like this. When people have certain problems, like Parkinson disease or epilepsy, one way to treat it is to insert a couple of thin needles actually into the brain."

"Ouch?"

“Brain doesn’t feel anything. So you slide these guys in, just the right spots and turn on just a tiny little bit of current, and it stops the worst of the seizures, loosens Parkinsons up.”

“So, I don’t have those things, do I?”

“No, no. We’re sort of getting around to the thing of it, you see.”

“The thing of it?”

“OK, that was all just to keep you from freaking out when we suggest anything inside your brain. It’s pretty common, right? I mean we did it to the dogs a long time ago. It’s the only way we really know where they are.”

“If you say so.”

“So, the thing is, all those uses are all putting current, signal, into the brain, in one way or another. What we want to do is hook you up and monitor what is coming out.”

“Lucky you.”

“Your output is charming, Marv.”

“What kind of output?”

Here she took a breath. That breath that people take just before they break up with you or tell you that your computer battery is totally shot. Never anything much good after that kind of breath. “I hate to talk about it, but we have to...” I let her go on. “You are headed down again, you know that. And when you are possumed it’s deuced difficult for us to know how you are. If you’re...”

“Alive or dead?”

“For starters that will do, yeah. But maybe we can do better than just that. Maybe.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe.”

The syndrome itself, seems to be progressing much more quickly this time. Almost never awake. I don't even know if I am really posting in any way or if these are my last and centripetal thoughts spiraling in tighter and tighter until at some point I simply fly up my own ass and disappear. There is clearly an effect of “ghosting” for most (though not all) victims. You are simply fading away like bad special effects shot on film. I got pretty far along that path the first time. Really far the second time. That time it was, what?, “dead” plus two, three months when I finally woke up?

Longer than that now, at least by some, and pretty obviously worse this time. But how much more? Something short of waxy Lenin or paper-mache' Mao, please. They have to put the equivalent of one of those little wineglass ID tags on me, just to know where I am.

It is night. Moon up. We are all walking along, or rather they are walking and I am in the sled being pulled along across moonlight fields of new fallen snow. The eternal passengers' dilemma, to see the site but leave the track? A truly Zen question. Perhaps this state I am in and am further approaching, is like some kind of koan. To be or not, in blank verse. My ability to function in the “solid” world is very diminished. Questions of getting traction, or of the tarmac kicking in, all minute to minute so it just behooves one, at least in my situation, to sit and be catered to when possible, and also to put forth at least some effort to stay in connection with the solid. Things that are on you, that mark you, like clothing, or some piece of ID jewelry, all seem to take on the state of fade of their host.

What we fear, the living death thing, is that we fade to a point that we are not easily seen, and if we don't have the resources to cordon off our last known address and keep it a temple sacrosanct, we could see our last resting place, like out on an old K-Mart parking lot getting resurfaced, all rolled up and scrambled together with the crumbled asphalt and disturbed layer of dirt. And used in the repave to follow. Not so different when you think about it, from a traditional burial. But with the new twist of not knowing exactly how dead Theely Joe actually was, or is, or isn't. But in this case, our consciousness, even if not plugged directly into the passing airwaves, is sort of amalgamated into the new parking lot, or the basement of the strip mall. To be left. To be there, but never heard from or seen again, and no one knows for how long.

I'll try to send something later.

Million hits million hits million hits. Piled up over months on Stutterblog.

Sandy finally had to make decisions. And then Aunt Cloddy, God love her, told Ginny Quillen and the Bottners that she would watch over my remains. She owned several lots in town down there in East Texas destined to be homes, but on the one nearest her, and the prettiest, she built a tall, sturdy wooden platform in the breeze and under some shade trees. Marvin is "in residence" there vs "interred." And she checks, from time to time, to see if any kind of sign of Marv's revivification had happened at some longer interval.

So far, she reports, it has been quiet.

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PART II- The Revenge of Aunt Cloddy

Claudeline Pearl Stutts Boudreau Putney Hankins Harkins Hawkins Tusk was
dangerously cute when she was young. She bustled in and out from the honky-tonks every few

years bringing another new husband, to the point that we couldn't easily remember the names, and so we just began to number them, and when she got up to Six we just stopped trying. That was Uncle Six, Vernon Tusk, whom I mentioned to you in regard to cement trucks and funerals versus autopsies.

My cousin Sandy is a Boudreau. Not the most stable of childhoods.

Anyway Cloddy was always a go-getter, care taker, neighborhood go-to. A few months ago she stirred herself up and agreed to take care of the...somethings, of her nephew Marvin, tada me, who was afflicted with a third recrudescence of VSL or Electron Stasis Syndrome. Now, on with her tale, with some assists from others who were there when I have been mentally and physic-ally AWOL.

Before she brought me back to the old neighborhood, amongst my travels to yachting sailboats and high-country skiing lodges, the neurophysiology faculty at Stanford and gotten me, Marv, to agree to have some needlelike probes inserted in my brain called Deep Brain Stimulators, or DBS. The idea was that either sooner or perhaps later, I might be party to simply sending out indications of my existence, the first step. Then perhaps something as specific as my mood. And if we figured a way to have very little electron flow out or in to prevent even more damage, but to subject that small amount of flow to amplification at some distant site, we could eventually discern more than mere emotion. With enough band-width, and processor speed, perhaps like Philo Farnsworth busy at his bench, we can begin to apply more pixels and sharper images of human nervous output until we might tell what a person was substantively thinking.

“They” wanted me hooked up and “they” would be monitoring the circuit. Aunt Cloddy would have my “remains.” Those would be on a raised platform, suspiciously like a raised back-of-the-garage deck, in a nice knotty-pine, under a set of thick overhanging white-oak trees. Direct sun early in the morning and in the late afternoon.

The first monitor strips from the DBS reported that I was mostly Theta-esque and cruisin’. By the end of the first month I had managed to figure out like Mr. Musk’s monkeys, how to swat back at Pong, without moving, just by thought.

Aunt Cloddy was very good, almost “religious” I should say, about checking in on me. There really isn’t much to see of me on the platform. I am mostly an article of faith. She does not come every day. Now more like once every couple of weeks. The flowers are nice. And if I could tell her (Vidi the whole DBS project above) If, as I say, I could tell her, I rather enjoy the whole being outside thing. With the shady oaks, I am content against what little of the climate affects me in any way. Sometime I think I can hear something, birdsong perhaps, or there will be just a patchy sense of feeling my elbow against the ever softening wood of the deck. Sometimes light, sometimes dark, indifferent. I’m back here in East Texas, like some down-home Shinto temple. That’s me on the inside.

On the outside, in the meantime, Cloddy Pearl, the Widow Tusk, has taken about all she is planning to take.

“You can’t have that platform,... that grave, there!” A hapless functionary from the State had brayed at her from the curb. If Cloddy had had her pistol about her he was dead as orange

pulp. But she settled for shooting him the finger and not removing the unfiltered Camel from her lips even as she told him he could kiss her rosy-red ass.

“This is my property, right? Fuck off!” Aunt Cloddy was standing up above shoulder level on the stairs up to the platform, where she had just been to check on Marvin’s well-being, or indeed his any-being.

By now, a group was gathering. Mostly close neighbors of many years, a few neo-gentry, not a few landscape crews, blaring the mower and screaming the blower and watching bemused at what went down.

“This isn’t the eighteen-hundreds...” the fellow pointed out.

“What is your problem mister?” Cloddy, with hand on hip.

“You just can’t let a body rot out in the open like that.”

“It’s private. It’s not out anywhere where anyone else needs to be involved. And he’s not rotting, thank you. You know the situation with some of us folks, relatives?”

“Look lady...” he began. Suddenly there was an absolute groundswell of those neighbors who weren’t going to stand for the guv’met to hassle their beloved neighbor. And he was disappeared on down to his undershorts, tied to a pole, and carried to the most rural edge of town. “Don’t bring your Yankee ass back here, and tell those other sumbitches up there...” and so on.

Cloddy, never one to hide her little light under a bushel, ascended to Marv’s platform, and gave a short thank you to those who had supported her, and that was all she meant to do. But something suddenly clicked the same way in a bunch of people. All in all, impressively, that turned out to be nearly a hundred souls. While historically the salt of the earth types, the last

months had just left a lot of people rattled and adrift. They were just plain scared and had felt more and more alone. But something in Cloddy called to them like a bugle, whether she had meant for it to or not. And they stayed around her house, and in the lot where Marv's Deck was located, even after she had gone in. And come evening, they began to throw down bedrolls and bring a few barbeque grills, and by the end of the next week these hundred have grown to over a thousand. Waiting on Cloddy Pearl's next word. These are no longer guests, this is an army. Cloddy herself cannot for the life of her think of any reason she, personally, needs an army.

"Sandra Jane...", Aunt Cloddy rarely called her goody-two-shoes daughter, my cousin Sandy, by her full full name like she did me. "They all just went nuts!" she said, as though awe struck. "All these people, I mean. They want me to lead them. Lead them where? To do what?"

"Jeeze, Mom..." Sandy is nonplussed. "I mean, like, what are they eating?"

"No problem with that, least for the next week. Rich 'doner' over in Corsicana sent two eighteen- wheelers packed with MRE's. Praise Jesus."

"Glad about the rations, but I was more worried about them eating mushrooms. You know? Well, what's it like back there?" Sandy had been away from back "there," in Indiscriminate, East Texas, since her first year in college, actually before that, as she had managed a year of high school exchange out to California, and she had been gob- smacked by the West Coast life. Got back out there as quick as she could and stayed there. Being party, as I am, to both sides, I applaud her taste.

"Oh, Baby, you would *not* recognize it here now."

"Mom, I didn't recognize it there ten years ago."

"Well it is, to say the least, pretty cra-cra. I just don't know what to do now."

“Well, what do you think of just trying to keep them as civilized as possible? That would go a long way toward who plays you in the movie.”

“They’re really pretty cooperative now.”

“Just keep them going in the direction they want to go. And then suggest a direction. And then go that way. And see if they follow you.”

“That it?”

“Pretty much. That and keep feeding them.”

“Whew. That’s going to be tough. I don’t know what it’s like there on the big bad West Coast, but out here, the Walmart trucks have pretty much stopped. Shelves are empty empty empty.”

“And...?”

“What happens if..., the food does run out? The real choice I see is do I leave them quietly as I can now, and we’re all on our own, no blood no foul? Or, start working like hell on every food source I can, farming, scavenging, trade in kind, stoop labor, whatever. Because the third way will most likely be to gather up and march over to one of the nice little places nearby, like Yantis or Alba, and overrun them and take their provender. Not all that friendly. That’s all the possibles I see, Hon.”

Aunt Cloddy had checked possible means of quietly leaving East Texas. Sandy had, at one time or another, offered her the bedroom in which Marvin is currently not staying. But that was last seriously considered back before these maladies and wars and the beginning of their current situations. Not at all easy now. And anyway, after “praying on it”, Cloddy the perennial

optimist allowed it might be fun to actually try to stay alive, and do it, if possible without fighting or killing anybody.

Within a couple of months, two things were clear on the floor; there were damned few people in Cloddy's "Army" with a whole lot of skills, at much of anything. Not to say none, but these folks, benign as they were, were after all, genetic white-trash themselves. In the abrupt shock of acute weening from Costco and KFC, it turns out they were pretty helpless. A lot of the country had been coasting on the "sturdy American yeoman" trope for a long time, since the introduction of Bisquick and plastic-wrapped ground hamburger meat at the first Piggly Wiggly in like, 1923. It took a depressingly short time to see that, as they say, "This cotton ain't gonna pick itself." Or in this case, endive and okra and maybe gentrified pigeon peas. And secondly, only a few people had ever, no-shit, done anything approaching real farming. Some of the basic skills transferred, but now in totally different circumstances, without Tractor Supply Co. and Home Depot right down the street even rudimentary farming would prove well-nigh impossible. It was tough enough even with all the modern advantages that were now ghosted away. It would clearly take more than one growing season to get their civic feces co-local enough to do peaceful farming. Cloddy didn't want anyone to starve to death in that first year. It would be ironic if one fell into step behind Cloddy's flag, sort of middle-of-the-road-get-along-if-we-can-without-too-many-electrons, only to physically starve to death.

Cloddy finally couldn't see any way around it. When the kids got hungry, and the folks had finally nothing to divert and amuse them, and finally nothing with which to actually feed them, after trying every thing they could collectively think of, they gathered again around their civic center, what they called "Marv's Platform" and Cloddy laid it out for them as sensibly as

she could, hoping to avoid the senselessness of simple unruly mob behavior. She did pretty well, given the givens they were given.

Before they had turned to actual hit and run warfare, they had tried one last tack to stay on the “right” side of history, should there be any such. Instead of the nowadays version wherein getting-done-what-you-are-there-to-do as quickly as possible is a big premium, at least in the short run, for one’s psyche, Cloddy’s people had tried walking slowly into the first couple of towns, little Kemp and Tolosa, and tried to talk folks there, many of whom were related, into some new arrangement, that somehow yielded at least some of what had been “their” stuff becoming “our” stuff. Mostly food. Even when you were the dominant, the one with the whip hand, offering life with perhaps some degree of subjugation just didn’t work, never has, never will. Physical stuff and fear of losing it, multiplied times pride equals no good feelings, nor sensible decisions. Then comes raw force, at least as much as you can muster, which for the rank amateurs all these involved folk were, yields messy, pathetic scenes. Cloddy cried in private after she had had to burn down a little white clapboard Baptist Church in New Hope that had been the scene of her own second marriage, or maybe third, she wasn’t sure, but it teared her up nonetheless. Sure, she was efficient, but she had a woman’s heart.

Subjugated peoples may eventually intermarry back up, like the Saxons and the Normans finally being the English in their pride. But that took three hundred years, slow years when “I.T.” things got scribed on parchment. No time now. But a lot of survivors swallowed their pride and found themselves welcome in this new band that was organically forming. I mean they pretty much all spoke the same Middle Cracker dialect.

The Bottners are at sea somewhere off the coast of Oregon, because it's summer. Their VLS work goes on. What exactly that consists of becomes more and more manifold. They are still way ahead of everyone at things like actually doing measured amounts of web work and keeping close eyes on their work force, searching for the sweet spot of rational use of the net. Enough to get the basics done. Not too luxurious so as to stick you with the syndrome.

The carbonivorous bugs are going like gangbusters world-wide, many third world countries adopting them and finding their hours of juice actually going up at least a bit while their killing smog began to clear. And no sign of VLS in Ghana or Honduras so far. The Bottners had to work, every day, to think hard and seriously, about how to direct the wealth that was now increased just that much more from providing a new, hit technology, even without exploiting its profitability to the max.

In the evenings, as a sort of habit that they had shared into, just as the sun sank into the sea, Herb and Poppy called up a cocktail and sat behind a screen watching a pattern of essentially unchanging regularity. And Poppy with her eyes closed, her truly great ear deeply attuned, concentrated for a full two minutes as the evening light failed. And every evening they would snap off the still silent receiver from Marvs' DBS output yet again. The trick, for Bottner, is how to not polish 'Ol Marv off, or hasten any date in the bardo, by requiring much flow going on at this end. Looking, listening for a tiny signal out, then amplifying it only after it had reached the Carrier Wave. But to date, nothing but the wind and the waves and the Manhattans.

One evening, as the sun sank in a perfect red glow, and they sat on the fantail, talking and watching the screen, there came a blip.

“Did you see that?” Poppy sat up. Bottner focused. Then after a gap of perhaps ten seconds, there came another jump in the screen waves.

“Interference?” muttered Bottner to himself. Then after running a quick check on the set up and seeing another two of the spikes, he said, “By God, I think that’s him.”

Then over the next few days stuff started coming in more regularly. Not much at first. The equivalent of a new mom thinking just maybe she had felt her baby kick for the first times. A blip on an LCD screen. Then another, not quite the same as the Theta purgatory. Over the next days Bottner knew something was up and he had Dr. Quillen on the scene, staring at the EEG waves now passing calmly in front of her in the evening dimness of what was now called “the office deck”.

“This is not background,” Quillen announced. “It doesn’t look like any of the usual patterns, but its him. I’m sure of it.” As a neurophysiologist Quillen had much experience with EEGs, both in the “standard form” and with various experimental set-ups, like this one. She said some of it was like it was for an early telegrapher using the Morse keys. In that century when telegraphs were the height of technology, many of the folks working the keys in the thousands of little stations, mostly following the railroads, had come to have their own “signature” taps. It was common for one telegrapher to be able to tell exactly who was “on the key,” on the other end, like being able to tell what musician was playing a given piece. Gin Quillen and her young post-docs had spent enough time interfacing between themselves with these brain wave patterns that they could begin to tell exactly whose scan among them they were reading, and further, they felt that they could do at least some level of subjective interpretation. IF you accepted that that was possible, in turn it might simply be something which itself could be

automated, albeit with ever finer algorithms. Like the commonly used “Computer Assisted Interpretation” of mammograms or of EKGs. Been around in principle for quite a while. If you could begin to do that kind of thing with human neuro-wave emanations, like EEGs, then you were pretty much at the head of the class.

“So, how is he?” Bottner got to cases, asking Quillen about me.

“Can’t say much. It looks pretty regular, not seizures...I am going to go out on a limb, comparing this to the baselines we did, I think I will say he’s not in the midst of panic or terror or anything all that bad. But these basic wave patterns are different... they are not Alpha or even Theta. Different.”

“We just watch?”

“For now, I mean. But at some point are we thinking of sending something that way? A little wake up jolt?”

“What do you think?”

“Well, let’s not go so fast we run right over him with band-width. For now, can we just hold on that? I’d like to see if he might be coming back out again? On his own. From way deep this time. And who knows how long it might take or if we will even be able to see him at all this time. We can always send afferent signal later. Have you spoken to the Aunt, the one who has his...remains?”

“His Aunt Claudalene,” said Poppy. “I’ve talked with her a couple of times before. She’s from over near where I grew up. We’re trying to get her now, but you know, it’s weird out there. Someone said she is running her own army out amongst the crazies now.” Quillen’s eyes sort of popped open at this surprising piece of news.

“She doesn’t have any equipment there, like this, does she?” indicating the receiver screen.

“Nope, just keeps Marv outta the rain, sort of. That’s one piece of good news, that he is much out in the rain, and yet these waves are calm. He said, sort of as he was blinking out last time, that the weather didn’t bother him much. Outside was better than inside.”

“And she’s got an army?”

“So far it’s still on the fence as to whether it’s an army, or just some sort of multi-muffled quasi-civil-system of sensible keep-the-pipes-flowing administration,” she unconsciously rapped out. “Probably both.”

Turns out Poppy’s grandfather on the Legget side had been one of the most famous cattle auctioneers across the South back in the heyday of “moving meat.” There were people at this moment doing deep delving analyses for dissertation approval about whether Poppy Leggett’s famously fluid verbal arena performances represented a tiny, fundamental inclusion of rhythms that laid right over old audios of Grandpa’s smooth torrent on the auction stand. Poppy herself allowed as it could indeed be true. She could remember at perhaps eight or ten-years old, going many times to see the auctions. Some in Dallas at the State Fair, and one with Grandpa as the main guy on the mic at one of the largest Fat Stock and Cattle Shows in the world, in cattle famous Ft. Worth.

“And they carry...Marvin...around with them?” Quillen asked.

“Claim to. There’s a deck like they laid him out on. At least they carry that around. Like a kind of shrine? May be the same one, I don’t know.”

“Maybe we ought to collect him back to the Lodge. Quiet like. Let them keep on with the platform thing.”

In another part of the Piney Woods, that night, Cloddy rolled over the little old town of Mexia, TX.

Cloddy allowed, “A bunch of people got killed and we got their stuff. Food. We all stay away from the big centers like, San Antonio, Houston, DFW. Their reaction forces have the inside communication lines. No percentages. But it’s like some of us, some of the strongest, are like coyotes jumping down on these little mouse-towns. People are fleeing, which is mostly OK because they usually leave a lot of food behind, that we don’t have to fight them for, and big tools and machines once in a while. We need earth movers to prep our camp when we move sometimes.”

Everybody has drones out over everybody else. Our guys, that is to say, Cloddy’s people, the more craftish basement gamers, even do a pretty good trade in a sort of mini-barrage balloon, like they had over London in WWI and WWII, only just to go up over one specific piece of property, or campground “territory.” Blimps, but designed thin and as long as possible and so that fine but tough wire hung far down below snags any aircraft, mostly drones, flying around below them. To snag the bad drones, the one’s that take pictures and drop shit, hanging them up on their hangie-down wires is the point. Birds are on their own, we want the nosy drones down, morta.

“But, the big problem, we’re running out of little towns. We won’t be able to survive just scrapping amongst ourselves. We could join up, get big enough to take on the next layer, not

just bigger towns, but maybe even small cities. Those cities have their own set of problems, too small to defend themselves like the big Metros, and too big to just up stakes and move in with the neighbors. But they got a lot more stuff, supplies.”

Aunt Cloddy has theories of war. Really. “You don’t always have to win today,” she would say, “You just have to always win tomorrow.” Well, not much of a whole theory of warlike drum-roll declaration of hot-headed Vici. But she and her people were holding their own. Very good sense of how to avoid fights, and the few times fighting was deemed necessary, deemed so by whom? By Cloddy, mostly.

The people, now in the thousands, migrating for survival, still turned to her for sound council and so far, successful living in the midst of this shitstorm.

They made it a point to be able to be pretty ruthless and effective at what they were about. And so far distance-between, and size-of, had allowed the larger scavenging troupes to avoid one another. Those boundaries were becoming short and small and there was increasing friction at the edges.

In theory, there should not be such a thing as a siege nowadays. But just ask the good people of Waxahachie, TX. It was short as sieges went, on and done in no more than six days, first to last. More raid than siege, but with the two or three days the good burghers had in which to decide up or down, in or out, top or bottom; the terms of surrender, it still qualified perhaps as a siegette.

Too quick for the central, Federal, power to respond. Until the last day, when any of Cloddy’s folk still in the city were on a hasty way out anyway. The planes showed up, sort of after the fact, from down in San Antonio, no doubt, and after suppressing any knot of

resistance with their Gatling guns, proceeded to lazily fly by, evenly spaced and at about 600 feet up. No one on the ground had any ordnance that would do any more than rattle off their hardened bellies.

The planes dropped small bomblets of napalm. The rear guard got toasted. They are always pretty paranoid about “death from above.”

“That’s our quandary. If we stay small, we get no high-tech defenses to have to deal with. But we step up, look like an early threat to the big cities, and bam! Spent uranium up yer ass.”

That by the way, has everything to do with Aunt Cloddy’s Theory of War. Really.

“Go far enough back,” she would quietly instruct by an evening campfire, “and maybe somebody had an advantage over someone if they were bigger or taller or something, but the weapons were pretty even stevens over a really long time. Rocks and spears. And then came things like, armor, and gunpowder. And at that point, there began to be an imbalance between sides, with one side able to claim the title of “the state” which is all sweet at tax-time, and for running the armory, but mostly crappy “taxation” otherwise. But the point is, one side has a tech, like armor or powder, which allows them to stay in power. Like 1789 and all that. Napoleon was who he was because he had trained to be an artillery officer. He knew where the state cannon were stored and how to get them limbered up and into action ASAP. Cannon were the definitive weapon of their time, as aircraft and beyond are today. “Armed citizens” can’t stand against a definitive weapon.

The Civil War and the French-German War of 1870s was the knee of the curve, from basic barrel-fed muskets to clip fed repeating rifles and machine guns in one generation. And

the next jump up in state tech power, with air cover for troops on the ground was in the very next generation in WWI. Each time, each bump against each other through history, in terms of their arms, the gap between the common soldier d'état and the citizen gets greater and greater. But that doesn't necessarily cover foreigners. Then it might be all even-steven. Arms races and all that crap. Different."

When discussion centered on how good it was that people had had their own guns when this all started, Cloddy allowed as how it was fought out at a couple of levels. Our level on the ground. But also higher up where the officer corps finally split. It had the steel to merely split, not to hysterically fragment. There were in essence two armies. One side with a bit more coastal strength, and another with maybe a lot of armor. But basically, it was "The Old United States Army", or else the new guys, with no one name settled upon them, yet.

"We weren't really armed out here because of that Walmart-bought stuff. That was cowboys and Indians and cap pistols. And a lot of us shot a lot of us accidentally. Stupid."

When we-the-people "really" got armed was when they broke into the armory at the Federal Prison in Seagoville, outside of Dallas. There is certainly a lot of old stuff, pre-VietNam M14's and such, antiques, but there were enough M-16 pattern rifles all firing the same cartridge for everyone who wanted one. A few hard-core hung on to their own weapon of choice, seeing themselves in the Rambo role. And a few on the other end of the bell who just didn't want to have anything to do with weapons, thank you. Well, alright.

Nowadays the gap between Government and unhappy citizens is almost utter. OK so I take my bad-assed sniper rifle up on the barricades. Hey, look up! Say, cheese! Red goo.

But if my generalissimo up the line has planes to fight these planes, and so forth and so on up to the evenness of the balance, then, at that point, a “well regulated militia” with standard arms, casting in on one side or the other, then, it makes sense, averred Cloddy. “ But after its fought out, if the guerillas don’t get wiped totally out, there is war in the land and no one sleeps. Nothing gets decided if things go guerilla. If we’re going to fight let’s do it in places that have names. And dates.” That was Aunt Cloddy Thought. Take that Uncle Ho. This was Cloddy on the Long March.

“Anyway,” she said, “The things I hear make me think that “our” side may be winning.”

“What do you win?”

“Year-round food,” she said without missing a beat. Then sort of shifting the subject, she said, “Hey, I heard that there was a battle of sorts over above the Himalayas, lots of big drones.”

“Yeah? Who was fighting?”

“China and us. It’s started. Pray for gradual. Another reason to keep the army side up, at least for a while longer. The CCP see it all going to hell here, they may just walk right on in. Who knows what that would be like? Maybe, just maybe, the Chinese will “get it” about not blowing stuff up if possible, and not being any meaner to people than you have to be.”

An age-old conundrum that. Historically, about the last place to look for dispassionate reason is within an army recently having broken through your unfortunate city’s defenses. The Forlorn Hope is throwing a party and you all are footing the tab. They will be bringing your own beer. *Repondez sil fricking vous plait, Mofo.*

“The larger world is falling apart from Pole to Pole. Half of it’s on fire and the other half is underwater. Cloddy enjoyed the world news, like on the BBC. Or used to. “It’s just got so hard now...” Cloddy abides.

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OK. It’s Marvin. I’m back, at least some of the way. Don’t have clear idea of our timing. Send, receive, something different, all that mixed up. I will be “listening” pretty constantly, as if I have anything else to do here and now. At least with my re awakening, there is now a now again. I am awake and I know I am awake. I am still way way down frozen fish. I can play monkey-puzzle pong program, that, for now is about it for fun around here. But the course of things, recognizably, is upward, I use that upward as a metaphor only. But you get the idea. I don’t mean to be a raving directionist. About ninety nine percent of even my limited consciousness, is going “rogue”, i.e. not picked up (yet) by the implant system. The probe that was sunk into my frontal lobes, near Broca’s area, is now self-teaching how to best fold things into denser packets of speech or at least communication equivalents. All the processing and analysis is being done “off station” far away from me, back at Complexia.

Only the tiniest amperage flows occasionally out from here. But when that small bolus of electron flow arrives at the computation centers at Complexia, I would be gratified to find how heartily the “Marv Project” is consciously supported, big amplification applied, and that the computational power required is faced up to for its gross usage, and still thought worth the cost. On par with air-traffic control. BTW; People who fly a lot have measurably more VLS. But then such people also live in bigger brighter environs between flights, as a rule.

So, a jump at a time, it is not terribly long until we have built up our communications again between Tetons and the office deck of The Carrier Wave.

I am still not far back from shadowy. It is taking longer this time to return to my “normal” state of bodysense. In fact, a bit frighteningly, I still only exist, at least can be seen and felt, very very vaguely. It is still difficult to interact with analog material objects. Typing is not facile if your fingertips melt into the keyboard. We are still in the infancy of direct Wavecom.

The best marker for me, I think ironically, is that if you know exactly where to look, and you look very very closely, and perhaps in the best light, you would see a set of fine wires, six or eight and a small indistinct “button” base for them. The overlying skin, indeed covering maters, Pia and Dura,(Italian sisters, I think I dated them) and brain itself not being back to solid enough to block the view of the spiderweb of wires.

But, as I said, indeed chirped, I’m back. If being a VLS Possum teaches you anything, it’s patience. I have played a lot of institutional Pong in my time. It is existence while waiting for Godot to unthaw you. Still seems like avoidance of circuitry is the antidote and some respond better to that than others. I can tell you that each descent is quicker and each remission is slower, and perhaps less complete.

But for now, there is conversation, indeed we are up to the point of techno -supported badinage. They with cocktails, I alas dry, each evening. I am physically, i.e. the wire nidus thingy and my accompanying brain, in the Tetons, and Ginny Quillen is with me and has superb monitoring capability here, indeed has been waiting patiently for just this occurrence of remission. She and I have already started “unofficial” groping attempts at more directly intuiting each others’ wave forms. The infancy of wavecom.

I have no idea how I got here from out on the deck in East Texas, which by the way, Cloddy was still carrying around and attending to very simply. Folding it up and rebuilding at any stop of any length. People come and do their quiet or loud hozannas there. Kind of like a weird little country “church”; all pulpit and no pews. Sometimes people gather up there and sing old hymns together to calm themselves down. Psycho choir loft.

Calm, darkish room here. One weird effect, the long haulers have all grown toenails, like Dracula, but just from the fact that no one thinks to do them, and they sort of fade there earliest, and for a lot of folk, given the crudeness of their toenails they end up with double curly fries, before anyone takes it on as a “cause.” And just a side note, if you think that’s TMI, remember I’m just killing time here, too.

One evening I sent a message to Sandy, who I knew was often at the virtual PM Marv monitoring sessions, and like Ginny Quillen “attended” from here. We were all novices at blending wave forms but we were lurching in that direction.

“How U. How Clod.” I floated that snappy repartee a la the zen of not paying attention to attention itself. I was a backward adolescent in a French Language course.

What we were doing at this point was rapidly reading the incoming and outgoing EEGs established between us. Vanishingly small differences are sussed out of wavy lines emanating from my head, and as time goes on, the weeks pass, it feels easier and easier to feel simpatico with the signal coming in from the Carrier Wave. By now I could readtuit (the portmanteau capacity combining objective wave reading and subjective intuition of its content) Sandy’s extended response regarding Aunt Cloddy. I could “feel” the news. I was surprised, at least mildly, about Cloddy’s Army. There was suddenly something about China (?), or at least that’s

what I thought. But without any context I could only file that, whatever “that” was, away. With the others. We are inching toward each other from, and for, our own ends. Next iteration needs to pay more attention to amygdalic connection, working memory is really hard just now.

There was clearly a picture of a fight, like at night, on the edge of a city. LaGrange, popped into my head. Possibly from a totally outside source, but also now, because of the further improvement that Dr. Quillen has instituted, some of my ingrams are from “just across the way” i.e. from one frontal lobe across to the other side. My neurons are better at dealing with my other neurons than with outside interfaces. Everything much richer.

Now I “get” the China reference. And I understand the significance of Aunt Cloddy, and even of myself in the suddenly three-dimensional history that is currently playing out. There is a widespread low-level war, being waged across the American heartland. It was, after all, in my defense that Aunty had first risen the troops in East Texas. My platform shrine is out there with them, it’s just sans me.

Foreign powers are exploiting this fragmentation, as such fragmentations have been exploited since Knossos and Ur. Drone conflicts had passed from the news and new Beijing headlines are now prosaic, “Belt and Road Contracts are announced in North and South America.”

Ginny Quillen is, thankfully, around a lot and she has kept me UTD re the “science” of all this, to date. Interestingly, I can understand her own EEGs much more clearly and easily than the others, almost as if we “speak” a more common language. TBD. One thing I have noticed; she and I share the same sense of humor. She’s fun. Not much of that floating around out there just now.

Private Note: Quillen

Am in a terrible dilemma. It has become clear that M. and I are attracted to each other, but he is deeply debilitated by ESS and for me to interact with him it must be wavecom. But that requires that I be essentially asleep here, while my wave energy is enmeshed with M.

These episodes are intensely personal and I hate to speak about it publicly. But we were first and foremost a research unit, with a mandate to report what is happening in the field, so I will at least keep the notes, but, at least for now private. Simply put, it is very tempting to continue to enmesh. But it turns out it is very difficult to synchronize worlds between the state of VSL and not. See also; clinical notes.

The “cause” of VLS has been “settled.” I think a brief study of the science and politics of HIV in the early eighties would be instructive at this point, if one has the means.

Basically, the generally accepted version as of the effects of the syndrome is that it's pretty dose dependent; you use lot of band, or are around where it is used, and you might be caught in the flow and the resulting patch of “static” electrons, and you may begin to have VLS Symptoms. Probably, though no one knows how to objectively measure symptoms – that is what Bottner is trying so desperately to do matching workers flow-history to their physical condition looking for any cases where people “caught” a mild case and then if coincidentally, or else on purpose, they moved to areas of lower flow, they bounced back. Their folks were ones who had noted symptoms and acted quickly and in that act had renounced the use of the web and flow. Some actually either got better, or else they just lost the neurosis that was their actual problem. But one of the hallmarks of the Syndrome was that, like some kind of e-leprosy,

for most people, like a cancer, once you got it started, no matter what you did, it continued to progress, in some people very rapidly, all gone to smoke in a month, and for others a slow, leaden time looking at themselves a lot in the mirror as they became vampire.

There were others who, in spite of the illogic, when presented with the evidence of the cause of the problem, simply rejected not only the truth of the whole idea, but merely its relevance to them and their lives, and continued, in some cases by clearly stated choice, to go all the way down to fade-out still clinging to their old ways. I want my MTV. Articles of consumerist faith. “Meet you at the mall” was an ironic and fatalistic rallying cry of a certain type of American who a hundred fundamentalist years ago would have said “We’ll meet again in heaven.” But then you might not blame the New Evangelists because they had literally been born and raised in the connected, streaming world and simply lacked the imagination to understand that there could be any other way. Such was the great cocooning of the world after the internet of things and then the metaverse, like a great sea of gradually warming quicksand.

I am hearing that sieges really began to be logical things again, out of the archaic age, because of the new, more simplistic realities. Sometimes against hardened centers of wealth and power, and lasting seasons of time. A siege in the rain is the worst.

It is difficult to conceive of the load of decision that descended upon my Aunty. She is being spoken of as representative, if not leader, of one of the two or three largest aggressive population centers, corsairs, players, in Texas, indeed in the Southwest. Beyond Waco to the north the next big stop on the old Amtrack Texas Eagle is Ft. Worth. But Ft. Worth, having

recently ripped themselves away from the supercilious Dallasites, Cloddy judged them to be a probable hard point and suggested at her people's open session that Dallas itself, though larger, was more spiritually and civically flabby, and would be easier to crack to any extent. Especially if we were willing to accept as allies the poorer, more rural part of the city. It was the experience of her "cabinet" that there are a ton of people in Dallas ready at any moment to sell each other out. None quicker performed than the complete repudiation of the entire southern half of Dallas as a sop to Cloddy's power. Since she had attained to air-defense capabilities, she was punching more equal to her real weight.

And so it was that a line, of "us" versus "them", is hardened along the artery of I-30 as it passes through the middle of Dallas east and west. The razor wire went up overnight. Everything south of I-30 is your fair game, invaders. Good luck to all. But don't come north beyond that line. "We are ready and willing to really crush you. That's anybody." So sayeth the downtown canyons of Dallas.

Incidentally, the rise of The Company had really started a couple of decades ago with the industrialization of the prison system in the US. Back then, black people, having no voice to speak of, were the stuffing of the per "bed" per day contracts. Now they had become too vocal, too transparent, and they were replaced by the least vocal, least transparent, most exploitable folks on the planet, i.e. the migrants from "foreign countries".

"This is on this side," they said in the notices hung on the bridges. "That," meaning Cloddy's folk as well as the old residents, "is on that side and it should stay there." Every city in the world has its version of such a river or a road that marks the nice side of town from the other. At least that's what they teach the young ladies at the Normal School.

But, we're getting off the point. And, by the way, the electricity to much of the southern half of the city went dark right after Cloddy's folk took over. There were still pockets, standards and lightpoles of lights from place to place, but in between there was profound darkness on the moonless nights. Light was never meant to push away all the darkness, all the time. But we (even though I wasn't there in more than perhaps the wisp of electrocloud, I think of these folks, the folks from my old home stomping grounds as "mine" and I speak of "we") had forgotten what really being in the dark meant, and it's pretty terrifying in itself.

And the people of South Dallas gathered around these few poles and standards of remaining light in the darkness, and a few fires, and watched the new folk, Cloddy's folk, come streaming in past them to settle there as best they could, a few episodes of clash of pride or temper, but, in the end, surprisingly smooth.

The night before attempting to march in, Cloddy had sat with a couple from the neighborhood who had represented this sad part of the city for a long time as best they could, a local AME Bishop and his Lady wife. Through their good offices this entry into what is after all a full-fledged city, as complex as any creature God ever created, and now wounded and left for us to feed on like a sacrificial goat, might just be orderly and civilized. They had immediately suggested a large wooded and open park on the southeast side, near where the river ran, as a place for our first ten thousand for the time being. It was Ok for Cloddy's folk, and it was well isolated from most of the rest of even that butt-end of the city, by the flow of the Trinity River and the surrounding urban forest along its course. Coincidentally the multimodal transport hub was nearest there too.

So the wayfarers also survived at least a little as time went on by hijacking trains, now much fewer, much more heavily armed, hauling too-big-to-truck machines and supplies. Where this highjacking became too blatant, or where the roving mobs dared to actually damage the track system, threatening the flow of mass goods between the great nodal cities, the larger powers reacted violently and massively. But also, most hopefully, Cloddy had arranged, over at least some kind of quasi-official com net, to actually effect trades with others still holding the rail lines.

Though there was little industry in the sacrificed southern area of the city to begin with, and that had been shut down for a while, there was still inventory, stock, things like tile, made locally, and stored up at the one major factory around, and the mysterious everyday output of a jillion small machine shops, and abandoned HVAC workshops. These were coopted and contents sold away. Since they would have otherwise likely rotted, and since Cloddy's people did at least give a nod and a sop to the locals, some at least of whom had made the tile and the machines, there was a kind of what the Bishop was currently preaching from the pulpit, "Victory there for all."

The only words from north of I-30 were indeed discouraging. "Don't think of crossing this line." And little else. The interstate, drawn and built as it was, served as a 250 foot-wide, eight lane, clear field of fire. A killing zone if it were to come to that. And the new people and the folks already there, with no place else to go, all stand along the edge of the Great Dry Moat of the highway works. The newcomers are busy carting off anything they can find of value on this south side. Which is, dispiritingly for all parties, almost not worth the effort. There are a couple of big box stores and warehouses that yield a lot of

food, of which lot they share out at least a little to the locals. But much of it is low nutritional quality (hey, I love Cheetos, too, ok?) and in any event the supply chains for all but the most central needs are greatly curtailed, partly because of fear of using their computers to conduct business even if things were up and running out there. Again, it is Bottner who is wearing out horses generating data to answer the functional question, “How much juice can I be exposed to and stay healthy, and my customers? How can I stay in business?” Everybody else just seems to be waving jazz-hands and crying out feebly.

I am still glutenously floating upward, to parts familiar. More and more such parts, and able more and more to communicate with the Carrier Wave crowd.

At this point, with Cloddy Pearl in the field locally, we heard of international ado, China and Taiwan (no brainer) China/South America (take that in your round eye, you hairy barbarian.) And with less and less central power in North America it just looked like a growing natural fit for the Belt and Road. The B&R. Last week, according to Cloddy, several letters showed up thereabouts which painted a very foreign face in the heartland. Simultaneously sent to the responsible government of many of the larger middle-American towns, in essence bribes. Basically, to leave the back door open. In return for which, what else, prosperity. “Oh, and by the way keep this between ourselves, OK?” went on the letters. Limited offer, act now, brother -in-law discount. Let us build in your town, Lots of jobs, lots of new money. Just work with us on this, we need to get this on the ground ASAP, so block for us, or even cloak us, through the

administrative stuff. Just so we work to our common end. So came the whispers from Beijing.

At just this time, phones began to buzz. In lots of small well-dispersed towns and cities across the Old States, not yet dragged down by the EES and not yet swept up on by the mauraders. Mayors, commissioners, council people, sell this parcel, buy that, or hold to watch the growth. A small piece of not exactly insider information, but just plain old “the street.” Something was about to happen over at...” or, “I heard it’s about to pop in ...”

Next thing you know, not just one place, but a whole lot, each led to believe it was a small individual market in its acquiescence, now finding out that they were a part of a whole universe of such business dealings and many, very many who ended up by having sold at least a few of their central parcels to the Chinese state’s beard companies. Court actions were already under way in several states to determine the basic OK-ness of having such strong foreign presence of any stripe. Overnight the CCP had bought its way into a pretty granular salting of properties and businesses that it now owned across interior America.

Just another part of the growing weirdness.

So where were we? The Balkans, as it were, aflame, all around us, yet again. Wars and rumor of wars. Film at eleven. And my cave, the psychic space I inhabit just now in my rehab, is gradually growing larger. We now regularly simply feel our way through each other’s EEG patterns and know. It is at least as different as speaking some

other language, say Bantu. But the engineers there ("there" being the Big Complexia Campus) have done miracles regarding only letting me actually be exposed to a very small amount of current and flow. Once stuff was ready to come in here, it was down-stepped a bunch. But I can get pod casts, music, some news. The good doctor Dr. Quillen and I continue afternoons laying down the basics of enmeshed wavcom.

"I will be gone for a while, a week, maybe," she floated. In our present state my response was a simple slight shift of attention toward.

"I'm thinking of getting DBS implants." There was a silent moment and then we both convulsed with the ESS version of laughter at the same bawdy, comical image.

"Bigger...brain lobes?"

"Hey, be serious, I need these...for the work." As the gelastic waves settled, she was reasonable. "This involves you. Too. You know?" There was an indeterminant moment of less coherent, scrambled attentions. "OK, I know it's my decision anyway." She was tucking the mood away nicely. Banking embers for now.

This in its intimacy was a perfect expression of how the degree to which the lover leans into the issues and concerns of the beloved, determines the depth of the relationship as a matter of course. Relationships are not just 3 dimensional, they are 4 dimensional, as they change with time. We needed to apply as much time as possible. This was the great center of my life just now. That and getting over this bout of the syndrome. I felt like some half-pay British India military pensioner, having yet another "bout of the Fever," years after the first episode.

Such was my life. Along with the evenings spent “talking” to the Bottneroids, and still continuing to come up gradually for air, so to speak.

Tonight, Mickey the Seal was “on the key” from the screens on the fantail of the Carrier Wave. I knew I could trust Mickey’s assessments of the outside world. As to our interface on this occasion, he was one of the first to be using a proprietary Complexia “Accelerator” app which allow for less and less experienced, and non-DBS’ed folks to use these kinds of wave-based com channels that a lot of people were now dealing with. Its roll out was one reason for Ginny to delay her own potentially more powerful, but more permanent and committed DBS decision.

“Hey, Big Guy,” greeted Mickey’s EEG.

“Yo, Georgio.” My microburst back.

“How you doin’?” No actual words were being spoken, merely thought, or felt or intuited by wave interaction. Larger than old fashioned “brain waves,” something more comprehensive and immersively enveloping. If brain waves on EEGs charts are scribbled lines, these are more like small discrete versions of the aurora borealis’ shifting curtain in their basic motion.

“Man, I really need to get at least haptic here. Get me the Claudia Schiffer autograph model. That and a case of Tuberg and a doctor’s note, says I was uh, sick Monday morning.”

“Yeah right. You and your freakin’ love life. I’ll pipe in some porn. No kiddie or snuff or anything. Just good clean all-American fun. What you do with it... what you *can* do with it, is up to you. ‘K?’”

“You hear any news about the Chinese, about foreign events?”

“You mean the drone things?”

“Yeah, in the Himalayas.”

“And yesterday,” he said, “There was another really big day, out in the middle of nowhere above the Pacific. At least they’re not crashing around like Godzilla smashing the Ginza or Wall Street while they’re trying to decide what to do next. Like they all took it out to the parking lot.”

“So this madness may actually happen?” I figured Mickey would know the Las Vegas odds of damn near any geopolitical event that you could come up with.

“The money is still betting that this is not going to be a big destructive event. Probably a lot of these highly flammable videos set to thumping rock music to pump up ego, or else very peaceful, calming screens and New Age up in the clouds over places like Syria and Turkey.”

“Are they really fighting?”

“Not many actual humans lost so far. It all depends if it ends up this high kinetic route, drones mostly, or if it’s a mushier, business, property assimilation over ten years, fifteen.”

There is a theory just now at the Complexia think-tank that China, at least the PRC, cycles at about fifteen years, and has since 1950. In ‘65 there was Little Red Book Maoism. In 1980 the drive began that led in the next 15 years seeing places like Beijing become in some parts modernized, from bicycles to cars, from cities of a few million to meta-cities (not merely mega) which will get to the next order of magnitude. Won’t be

long until there is a municipality (we will not more clearly define municipality for the nonce) with 100 million people in “one” place with one name. Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, more than a few “metas”. By then, Omaha will be Red, and I don’t mean Republican, at least its Chamber of Commerce, but no one is actually sure, in the face of the crisis and its destruction, whether that will matter two whits.

The VLS patterns in the rest of the world are not as dense as in the US, a more or less direct reflection of the degree of electron flow patterns. Fewer “hot spots” in Asia, but some, like Bangalore, Singapore, Seoul absolutely nuts. Shrines going up in the corridors of Big Net in Japan that are very much like the Shinto temples some of them once were. In both cases, priests and acolytes formed up to do Mass equivalents for the spirits of their dead. Only now, there were a *lot* of these spirits, and frankly, being not quite as dead as usual, some of them have attitude and have gotten downright pushy. Whole streets of ghosts in Tokyo, now become tourist destinations. Eeeww.

“And this lap around mecha-Eden also includes selling a shit load of stuff here,” Mickey waved on. “Not likely we’ll see anybody fighting anybody. More likely just start noticing everything in the stores will have Chinese writing on it.” In a couple of generations, might be fifty-fifty whether you speak Chinese. Give up that French shit. Spanish if you need your house painted.

Anyway,” Mickey says, “There is some news about rumblings in South America. Venezuela and Brazil mostly. And the Chinese are way up there asses down there financially. Like they want to establish a fixed “trading” base. First since Jemmy Monroe flexed our first national muscle away back when. They are in our backyard now.

Just today the blogs said that the Chinese were pissed at a US navy transit of some area in one of “their” China Seas. They have gotten a lot more brazen lately and this spokesperson said that there might be Chinese ships operating in the Gulf of Mexico soon. And how would we like that, huh? After all, some of it is beyond national defense zones. It gives one pause.

The Venezuelans have not been happy people for a long time. And the Chinese got tons of balm in Gilead. So now rumblings of traffic up and down the length of Central America, with an apparent landing of a significant amount of what appears to be Venezuelan armor. At division strength, along with appropriate infantry and even air cavalry units. And now they were coming ashore, unopposed, on the Gulf side, across the isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mexico. Now they are across southern Mexico and on the Pacific side. Nicer real estate in general. And latest is, they’re about to head this way. North.

“Fuck...”

“So far they got no air cover. So they’re fucked,” Mickey indicated, “But they wouldn’t go this far if they didn’t have a plan to cover the situation...”

“So nobody knows who’s fucked?”

“Pretty much everybody. See you...’scuse me, wave you, next week.”

From that, we turn to something, right here, right now serious. There has been a loud outcry among Cloddy’s people about the repeated sexual depredations of a couple of rascals among the folks. Clear cut acts of cruelty mediated by sex and plain meanness by a

couple of mullet headed skunks. And now two sisters, one in her mid-teens and the other pre-pubescent, had been raped by these two drool buckets. There had been debates around military strategies or trade issues in the informal peoples' Council, but never, so far, a felony crime in need of a formal court system.

Now, Cloddy was simply being asked to bless the extermination of these two. There was sufficient evidence. Eyewitnesses. Two for sure. "As well as enough other evidence."

"I can't see anything better," allowed Cloddy. "I am not told of anyone sticking up for these guys or rejecting the verdict?" She waited here, still and listening for a full two minutes. "And I cannot imagine carrying them along in our midst, even with a rope around their leg. Just, no. Why do that? We are way gone beyond penitentiary re-hab-ilitation here. It's simply separating them off. If that's forever, what we're saying here, why stretch it out on the county's dime? Bring a rope."

And about thirty seconds later, as her words spread through the crowd waiting in the front yard of the neatly kept clapboard house where she was staying, as if on cue, two sets of two shots rang out from the temporary shed where the prisoners were lodged.

"I hated to do that, but it needed doing. How are the girls?"

Cloddy lay awake nights, not worrying about her heavy load or even her needed pronouncements, like the one today, but about the world that the two girls were growing up in compared to the idyllic, if limited, childhood she had been lucky enough to have in mid-twentieth century America. No wonder, she thought, of course some folks are going willingly down over the big band-width waterfall, staying either true, or numb, depending on the angle of view.

But those are folks in the big cities, thought Cloddy. We are still so country we just executed two guys in the front yard tool shed. No question in my mind they deserved it. No miscarriage was done. We, and I, she reassured herself, haven't yet come too far off the rails of Righteousness. Yet. "We own up to it."

The SDal Bishop is sitting on the porch of the house Cloddy is living in. It is on a commonplace shady street in Old South Dallas and has a rather nice growth of the ash and oak that have watched over the yard for eighty years. The Bishop's memories turn in that direction more often nowadays. The Assimilation of the peoples is actually going pretty well, considering how bad it could be.

The new folk continue to dole out at least a little of the stuff they come upon in scavenging and freebooting outside South Dallas, and that which the trades bring in, to the locals. Aunt Cloddy has a Theory of Revolutions. Really. At dinner the talk is about revolutions, seeing as how it is difficult to discern if we are currently in one or not.

Cloddy snaps the cap off another colbeer. "Revolutions have to have a little sort of echo effect. Like the Mexicans. Shit on for centuries and then 1900 they grab it back. But the guys who do the grabbing, the Grals. And Presidente's have all the goodies and the people have nada, so the government says to the people, "OK here's your part."

And the people say, "No, not enough." So off with that bunches' heads and a new government comes in, settles it down and cuts its cuts, remembering what happened to their predecessors, they cut the people a bit thicker slice. "Nope." Still not enough, so another round of musical firing squads and some more fighting, (note: even though this is the 1930's by this point, in

Mexico, at least, the tech difference between the government's force and that of the guerilla-ized people was not that great. No aircraft to speak of, and both sides had mobile artillery.) So, at that point, slightly better offer this time, the people begin to actually feel that they might have something to lose, that the wealth that they achieve, rare though it is at all, has now started to build a Mexican middle class. Bingo. That's the prize."

And Cloddy realizes that it is like that with the people of this city. "We hear your petition and agree, we can dial it back a little, share out a little more. To keep the peace."

"We appreciate it."

"But what's going to happen when there isn't so much to slosh about."

"What," asked the Bishop, "do you think?"

"Wow." Cloddy put her two fingers to her forehead, right on her "Migraine spot". This Spot didn't hurt at the moment, it was just dealing with the inescapable. "By next Spring people better be useful or they better be gone," she said, not at all threateningly, "And I'll tell you something else, friendly. Things being what they are and people being who and what they are, it would also help if people around here were white. I know that's not fair."

"I understand," said the Bishop with great dignity, "that the great mass of your folks have no real function. Can't farm, can't build. At least some of us can."

"If it was up to me, that's who I'd keep. You can cut away that much white trash while you're at it. Good trade. When they were getting all those kids up here starting to cross the border, a while back, I thought, good on 'em. They have to have moxie to get up here, 13, 14 years old, those we need to keep. But we should be able to send back our snot-nosed teenagers in return one for one.

“I hate to say it but things are going to get grittier here. If I could manage to not be here...it’s not fair. I know. Basically anybody not working who is black is scrap. Anybody who is white and who doesn’t work may get the benefit of the privilege they always talk about.”

“For Black people it’s like we are living in a lake,” allowed the minister, “and as long as the weather’s calm, if you work real hard treading water, you can manage to stay afloat, until, I guess you get too tired. Lord help you if you miss a stroke.”

But ‘ol white trash here in this part of the world,” Cloddy filled in, “Is like an old catfish lying in the ooze on the bottom. He got gills. He doesn’t have to work at it.”

And somehow the gist of these conversations, the understandings that they represented, were bruited about in the community, to both new and old people, and day to day now it was probably true that though it was clearly not normal times, it was reasonably difficult to discern that one was moving around in the streets of an occupied, (betrayed and occupied) city. People went about the threadbare work they did before, perhaps a bit more publicly and demonstratively as the “of use” message sank in.

There were few nodes of electricity at all, one of the larger representative ones being at the Southeast Division of what had been the DPD. Hanky Lou always went there to charge her wheelchair and then did her route, pulling along at last, as many as three other non-motor chairs like the little engine that could. Motorating around South Dallas on a sort of little grocery-run route for the folks she pulled. Which was all cute until this had been going on for months, the cold of winter still grasping, food running low and resentments high. Hanky had driven her brightly bedazzled chair, Chichibamba, into a knot of white folks waiting to cart off a load of newly found government cheese. She squeezed off the claymore handle and laid a

whole raft of outsiders low. The cheese had disappeared into the neighborhood, as had Hanky. Cloddy nixed the idea of sending patrols house to house to look for her or to “punish the offenders.”

“Ain’t anybody read anything about that kind of shit in the last hundred years?”

So, everyone weathers the year to the coming of spring in a kind of uneasy truce. Cloddy’s people are now probably 45,000 in a demi-city of 200,000 maybe less. There are arms everywhere, but here massed white, heavy arms suppress light, unfocused black Saturday night poppers and blades.

Because the future is uncertain, many people show up at the new style agriculture in fields that spring up in the medians and rights of way off the highways. Locals and new folks, all flailing around, but at least sort of doing it together. Putting in crops. And as far as they honestly knew, there weren’t any VLS faders’ bodies occupying some dimension of the land.

Still never much word from the Northside. Snide congratulations on not having boiled each other and eaten each other out of a big pot. At some ironic level the message from whom to whom is a question as to exactly who did not get eaten by whom, about how things are actually going in NDal its own self. Their folks still ardently man the I-30 Line and there has been a great big increase in bandwidth in and out of what used to be just that northern half of the city. But in the main they are now actually free of the civic drag of the southern half, leaving a much different, “wholly modern North side. “The New ‘NDal,’ as it promoted itself to the larger world, “is open for business.”

There is sporadic passage of a few folks, across the heavily monitored bridges that interrupt the highway moat every couple of miles through town. Traders, local diplomats,

government entities. Strict check points and rude signage and barbed wire and shoot to kill orders. The stuff of a thousand tin-pot border conflicts over the centuries.

Rumor has it that the North has actually inflicted the VLS on a lot of its citizens in maintaining its hi-tech defenses. A lot of the relevant industries and technologies can and still do function there as profitable enterprises whose services are exported to other flashy centers of bandwidth usage around the country and world-wide.

Cloddy is invited to, and attends, a meeting in Highland Park, forever the poshest section of the North City. Late in the afternoon, sun still goes down in painted clouds. She approaches one of the bridges.

“Hey, ya’ll.” She waves to let the check point guards know she hasn’t just wandered up. These guys, all rank amateurs, conscripted into these jobs by the Company all puff up but don’t really know what to do about this old lady marching over their bridge with walking stick of ash in her hand, more as a whopping cudgel than a crutch. They are as useful here as towsacks full of cow turds.

There is damned little in the way of connected communication between north and south. “No, I got no papers. Mr.Blackheart asked me over.” The towsacks make a couple of nervous radio calls and grumble her on through.

The reason for their invitation, obviously, is so that they might quiz her on the situation in the South, to take their counsel and make plans. In fact however, she found she was absolutely ignored, and the majority of the time was taken up by the “droll” stories told by one of the NDal bank presidents about opera and his wine cellars.

“OK, don’t say I didn’t give you a chance,” thought Cloddy.

But it set her thinking about the coming Spring. Things were at some kind of stability now, and there is still some humor in the local peeps. And with Spring coming, the new ag fields, bleeding off the ragged energy, can perhaps turn a crop of profit and salvation this winter.

And perhaps, she thought, this might be a good time to quietly fold up her tent and go. She contacted Sandy discreetly. Sandy, now working for Bottner with Project Marv, solicited Complexia for transportation for her Mom to come West. Quieter the better.

Bottner dispatched the Pressure Wave, one of his newest project vessels. An eight-hundred foot Zeplinoid with air-to-air and air-to-ground landing capability by small Rogallo-wing pusher prop ferry craft, electric and quiet as big bugs. Requiring one circle deeper knowledge, skill, and attention than even the Carrier Wave ocean crew.

In their normal work for Bottner's R&D empire there are three such flying arks already in the air, used as common carriers. They filled a slot in the shipping of things, some faster some slower, some smaller some bigger bulk loads, and for things that were time sensitive. US to Europe in 18 hours. US Coast to coast, 16 hours. Between a train and a plane for speed. But able to carry an enormous lode of whatever. Enough to supply a whole city of cross-country truck crops, en masse, for instance. Still reasonably fresh.

Often nowadays, too, at least one of the three would be involved with working a forest fire somewhere in the West. They all had the capacity to simply drop away the bottom one half, and move the big lifting upper section on to a different mission payload in a different bottom half, quickly bolted on, like the old B-58 "Hustler" named for that same rapid mission turn-

around capability. For this job, the ability was to have water carriers, which could be strapped to the lifter and over a fire scene in relatively short time with a whole cloud load of water. Many hundreds of times more than the largest jet water bombers can carry.

Pressure Wave as dispatched to fetch Cloddy, was a fairly stripped-down version of the airship, to allow for maneuverability, as well as maximal possible speed and altitude, and it went about its rescue work fairly stealthily. They did not make a great deal of noise, and running with their lights off, on infrared, in the depths of night easy to be mistaken for a great dark patch in the sky or clouds looming on the horizon.

And so in just less a week, Cloddy was waiting by a country lane south of the whole city, beyond the thick trees of the Great Trinity Forest, in the dark of the night, when there came a waspish whine and she looked around to see a small aircraft just about to touch down on the tarmac road. A green glow framing the pilot's face, it set down "about like a dragonfly." She jumped in the empty seat, placing her small pack on her lap after strapping in. Then whoosh, they were rolling down the road and airborne, lifting slowly because of the double load. The pilot nodded to her but speech was difficult in the wind. She noted that he was immersed in the green image from his goggles.

And then, after about 15 minute's flying time, they closed with what for her seemed a terrifying abyss of blackness in front of them, but what turned out to be the firm, fifty-yard wide, flat back-structure of the Pressure Wave high against the night sky, briefly lined down its spine in the lights of a small runway.

They lightly touched down and were briskly recovered from this small airborne airstrip, by a couple of the crew folding back wings and rolling them into their small bays within the great ship.

Cloddy entered the vessel through the hatchway between the landing bay and the interior of the nearly 11 million usable feet of space. They ran it with efficiency, fewest crew the better, working now with thirty here in the air, supported by about a thousand of pharaoh's logistical army on the ground one place and another.

Cloddy wasn't that surprised to find the first person she saw as she came in the door was none other than our own Herb Bottner. One would not have been surprised to find that these Zeps weren't always followed by a surplus F117 Night Hawk or two, rigged as "ship-tenders," just orbiting about.

"Glad to see you Ma'am," said Bottner offering his hand, which Cloddy shook enthusiastically.

"You don't know how glad I am to see you," she assured him.

They made the ponderous turn into the West wind and for just moment the strange and powerful sense of rising, almost vertically, was pretty overwhelming. Everyone gave Cloddy a few minutes to sit and collect herself. She consciously dropped her shoulders and rolled through them, knowing if she did not now, she would pay later with poor sleep from the aches, as her shoulders had been skewered up into her neck for the last twelve hours. Bones popped and cracked. She took a deep breath and suddenly saw no reason not to feel great. She was out of the mess down there.

“Thanks for this ride. I feel maybe a little underdressed here?” She indicated the imposing tech surroundings of the Pressure Wave. They were standing in front of a twenty-foot section of window. That was the secret of these beasts; if you looked at the edge of that window, you wouldn’t see any mechanical flanges or screws or clamps, nothing to mar the smooth transition from solid, opaque wall to clear-as-clearest glass window. It was all more or less continuously created and repaired and replaced by a constantly functioning corps de ballet of small autonomous mobile 3-D printers, Roomba-ing around, sniffing out and weaving together any small tears in the material, replacing a firm surface with a softer one for a given load, or figuring the physics of carrying two empty 600 foot long water bladders strapped under, and then deploying them and using them turnabout, based at the nearest large lake; one is sucking up thousands and thousands of gallons of water to prepare while the other such bladder device is clamped to the bottom for the Pressure Wave, in the act of being emptied over a fire, or often out in front of what is afire, aiming to steer the blaze away from critical areas.

“We have this little job to do on the way. Do you want to go in with us?” asked Bottner, always the gentleman, a number of hours into the trip as they approached the Sierras. “I’m told you are a lady with grit and might be interested.

If not, it’s no problem to simply let you off the same way we collected you, with the ultralites. The mother ship can’t go too close over the burbs n’ghetto. We fly low and for some god-damned reason, or unreason, people just gotta take a shot or two at us when we are over the power centers. But we can get you home, I promise. Anyway, if you want to stay, you are

most welcome and we'll get you better oriented. But once we get where its hot, our ultralights don't fly. Too dancy in the updrafts.

"Our objectives are already plotted in to GPS down to the square yard. We can rain, one inch, over one acre, in one minute, and we can continue for several minutes on each refill. Then dry, we hie it back to the base lake, unclamp and bolt from the bottom bag (Bo Ba, possibly from Bottom Bag),"and lift over to the full Bag # 2, (or Dolores, for no reason) just as quickly clamp and bolt back on and whoosh." Or at least whooooooosssshh. Bo Ba and Dolores are already on scene, sucking up water at a nearby mountain lake, waiting for their carrier.

There were three redundant computers (damn the flow limits, this is ultra-critical air traffic control) translating the captain's natural language orders, peppered with all the technical acronyms one would expect. These figured and largely executed the movements of the control surfaces, the heat pumps, the vents amid the ambient wind and temperature, times to where you wanted to go, with the balancing of whatever was slung underneath. All as it changed in a thousand ways minute by minute. Lots of calculus, way more than any wet brain could keep up with.

On these fire-run rigging ups, special attention has been spent on making sure there is no non-shielded surface on bottom, or sides vulnerable to actual flame. The surfacing bots have been busy. So far she was a pretty sturdy battle wagon in this war on forest fires. Bottner had traded a lot of tax break on this project because he was gladly using it in public service, while at the same time running the coolest R&D platform in the entire cooliverse on the three dirigibles. Materials, was the name of the game for the air project. Learning how to use Bottner derived substrate in Bottner designed 3-D printers to produce some of the kinkiest materials in the

world. Totally flexible batteries that can be incorporated into the very substance of the ship's inner envelope, like the flexible solar cells that make up the outer shell yet with weight in the range yard for yard, of the equivalent weight of transparently thin silk. The entire external envelope has been replaced, and is being replaced, over time, without a great deal of fuss, by the small squad of Bottner propriatery, mobile "skin-bots" who gradually rewove and shifted the skin to be more heat resistant in itself, at the cost of only a very small amount of weight. This in turn allowed closer approach to the fires when that was the mission, the heat of which in turn, gave more lift to lift the mass of water. All circular, all logical.

Though there is a crap load of room in 11 million cubic feet, they do keep a big portion of that, the innermost 3 or 4 million feet, pretty hot, like 160 degrees hot, for the lift, you know. They use what they can of the lift from fires beneath, but it requires multi redundant computerized aero-navigating in those conditions. Keeping everything in trim when the updrafts come as huge buffets is an art and a skill and a technology all in one.

They determined that it would easily be possible to heat that inner sac to 250 degrees or even more, depending on the grade of the 3-d covering ordered, and the hotter the temperature the more the lift for the craft. And lift is, after all, ka-ching, billable hours, baby. The decision to keep it to one-sixty was because at that temp people could get hit by a little steam if an accident occurred and probably get through it. At 250-275, heat beyond mere steam, it sort of instantly etches you. Potential headlines and bad PR too ferocious. Also, Bottner concedes, not too great for the crew if, God forbid, it should happen. And another point in Bottner's general good guy column.

It took the best part of three hours to navigate through the natural weather above and the fire storm below and make the appointed water drops. They made it back, with Cloddy now a true believer in the Bottner version of things. They would soon be replaced in the fire brigade in the sky by one of the sister ships, the Friendly Wave, having been named during the short tenure of a Complexia PR operative. And though Poppy really liked the name, as it made her think of driving Texas country roads, she didn't like the big-city exec any better for that. But some sense of play was eventually allowed, and in time the third of the big aerial sisters showed up in its names and colors; Pressure Wave, Friendly Wave and finally, Vapor Wave, completing the fleet with Carrier Wave and Shadow Wave on the water.

It had been an interesting trip, Cloddy allowed, as soon as she finally got good and sat down in Sandy's living room. The Pressure Wave ran a half-dozen heat-shielded scout drones from in and out the flight deck where Cloddy had come in. Sometimes they would come in far too hot to handle with a bare hand, some almost glowing cherry red, and yet still functioning. Indeed the crew just learned to land them in shallow tanks of water on the dorsal deck to save time in the cooling. Again though, a Bottner materials coup.

The drones kept tabs on fire crews on the ground. One of the great things about the Pressure Wave series is that with one of them hovering anywhere in the immediate vicinity, if a crew on the ground feels threatened, trapped, they can radio out to a direct line on Pressure Wave which will immediately vector in on them and dump as much water as it takes to walk them out.

So while Cloddy is on the bridge they got such a call.

“We’re boxed in! Mayday! Mayday!”

And the ship proceeds but having just rained a bunch on the programmed spots, they have only limited water left. On this occasion, indeed remarkable, they break their own rule about no ultralights in hot zones. Everybody was wearing sealed Bottner Materials fire gear. So they could stand it even when their 3-D printed wings began to glow at the edges. They did four sorties by each of the two two-seaters, got eight guys, the whole fire-crew up and out, wrapped in quick emergency suits till they were out of the inferno. Indeed, they got on board, and Bottner served them Lobster Thermador and some really good wine that Poppy had Orlando send along for the hotshots.

“I’ll drink me some wine,” said Cloddy, sitting down with these guys, “Don’t get me wrong. But I just luv me some colbeer.” A lot of raucous table thumping at that.

Sandy knew this about her Mom and had a supply of both laid in when she finally got there.

And as it turned out, Cloddy had just about a week, enough time to drink a few peaceful beers, when there was a knock on the door. It was folks from back in Texas. And they were there to take her back.

“Bleedin’ hell! Can you people not leave me the fuck alone?”

As there was no longer any “police” or “sheriff” to call to intercede in the things that used to be, after a lot of sputtering, and a gentle moving of her stuff, specifically her barely opened pack, off they went, headed East again. Cloddy was spitting nails, and stayed that way as the little convoy felt its way back “home.”

“We’re real sorry to kidnap you, Ms. Tusk.” Winston Fortner, the one-time mayor of their little town, had been more or less serving in her locum. He was far out of his natural depth, and was more than happy to turn the whole thing back over to her with pledges of fullest support, thoughts, prayers, and wishes.

“So am I. So why did you do it then? These pinheads haven’t said squat since we left California.”

“There’s just too many decisions per minute,” whined poor Winston, a nice enough guy, if you were part time running a small-town city hall or dry goods business. “Funny, some of the folks, younger ones are pointing out that the reason everything seems so hard is that we don’t use the net to get a lot of things done. Sound familiar?”

“Depressingly so. Dast!...where’s a beer?”

Ironically, one of the first things that Cloddy did when she was shanghaied *back* to East Texas was to *upgrade* their WiFi capability and security thereto. That gave anxious, antsy people something to do to take their minds off the real, hard, cold world. Cloddy figured if there were folks who were religious about avoiding the flow, they could vote with their feet. There was a real, hard world to live in. And as they came more on-line there appeared more stuff. Merchandise of all types. E-bays’s nightmare cousin. And at the more wholesale level, there was now also a serious network of local power-bloc players, like Cloddy, to be able to trade a field’s worth of corn for a field’s worth of sweet potatoes, or a couple of hundred truck tires, or say, a couple of hundred Claymore mines.

Interestingly, for me, in regard to communication systems, it was at this time that Bottner showed back up yet again as a looming shadow in the night. He was there this time to

pick up Cloddy again, more ad hoc, for at least a couple of days. He had Dr. Quillen on board the Pressure Wave and they had an EEG receiving system like on the Carrier Wave. They wanted to get it as close as they could to my cuerpo's last known position at the Lodge and see how the more mobile monitoring and wave mixing platform worked. They had also brought a very advanced version of the "Accelerator" for use in direct brain wave communication by folks without the DBS leads.

"Would you like to try it with Marvin?" Dr Quillen offered Cloddy.

"Alright." And so Cloddy on her end was put into a sort of a stretch cap, with electrodes at the right places. Not as focused as the implant system on my end, where the probe was actually planted within the signaling structures.

But with the new App, and the fancy footwork to route the greatest flow away from me, who is after all still recovering up from exactly that stuff, they managed to link up.

I am of course a de facto pro by now, or as close to it as there is anywhere around. Cloddy felt very odd at first, very optically disoriented. Then the actual "picture" of what was happening snapped suddenly into focus, like one of those click-bait optical illusion sites. It was as though you were watching the shifting red clouds behind your eyelids, just roiling about randomly. And then, eyes still closed, you suddenly turned toward the sun. You would certainly be able to define that there was something different in that direction. And with the accelerator, that sense of presence was jumped up one more log level; one could "see" another being in the waves. And Cloddy learned that this was what the IT guys called a "zen" technology. Once you understood how to be in the same space as another person, you quickly understood that working harder at it was futile. What made the leap was learning to relax one's thoughts

(assuming that that emptied the common space) and allow the other EEG waves to be the whole of the field. When that happened in both directions, kazinga, you were enmeshed.

She just sort of relaxed, and the sensation in which she was immersed included a new sort of sense or intuition, more feeling, in the physical sense, but also “hearing”, as the voice of someone you know inside your head, or “seeing” the image of a memory.

And add to that a standard of what you likely really did know from such a “conversation” and what might be illusion of self-imposition. It was like the gurus had said for centuries; the more you are filling up your own head with noise, the less you can hear. No standards for legal spats. I have not yet used any such info as quotable in any blog outta here. My official info sources are all analog. I have not used any quote from anyone on a blended EEG session. But when it goes well, it’s just like home, at least the feeling.

We are now, by the way, experimenting with having multiple people on conference blended EEGs. Sort of a Zoom well-of-the-souls. And in the other, earlier project, they had hooked Able and the other big dog, Baker, up to an EEG deep probe like me and what we were getting as output is a very rich, non-verbal, sense of other. Emotionally very satisfying. We are sending out those waves broadcast, on the possibility that some of those who are in hidden stasis, in the basements and the weedy patches that they found before they passed into smoke may be able to sense those waves and perhaps take some comfort. Even without having any mechanical hook up to reception equipment themselves. The first attempts at this had been more on the order of “prayer at a distance”, but as we learn more about the character of wave forms, and more about monitoring and amplifying them, we are able to provide at least some good things for some people who are in a very tight existential spot. At least we think so.

But now it is just Aunt Cloddy and me, Marvin in the conversation. It was a strange mixture of feeling the waves and hearing (whether in the otic system, or an easily created false memory entirely mediated in the cortex) and seeing by flashes.

"I hear you have been busy," I observed.

"Whore on payday Saturday night."

"Sandy said you might not be quite in sync with your people."

"Not *my* anything. These ones are as good as you're liable to put together around here. But I'm wore out. Their like spoilt little kids. They just want Momma to pay attention while they play. They can do whatever, leave me alone."

"But you left Sandy's and are back in Texas?"

"For a spell there, where I was, California or Texas or Kalamazoo, was sort of out of my hands either way. I been stole now a couple of times."

"What do you think of Herb and Poppy?"

"Salt of the Earth by me. They've got some neat toys, for sure."

"People want that stuff. Pacific sunset life. Flying around in one harness or another, chit chatting with the souls of the dear departed, savin' the world one smokestack at a time."

"Uh huh."

They really are working hard at this. Not saying there shouldn't be a lot of other people thinking and speaking about this VLS thing, but my civic advice; leave the Bottners to be what they are."

"You trust them?" Cloddy asked.

"Bottner, Poppy? Yeah, I do. I mean nothing is ironclad outside of fairy tales..."

“He’s not liable to go insane?”

“Don’t see it so far. At least around me the sum total of his talk has put him solidly on the good guy side of the ledger. Can be a little overbearing, but usually, you want to follow him to wherever it is he is bulling along to be knocking you down in the process.”

“Well, OK, you speak for him. But its still your responsibility to keep an eye on him for all the rest of us.”

“Yes’em. What next for you?”

I felt the equivalent of a sigh, “I suppose go back to Dallas and try to keep the mongrels and the wolves from snapping at each other. Though why, I don’t know.”

We EEGhugged and SWAK’ed

“You know how to get me now,” I vibed. “I’m getting better.”

“Well, they also serve who only stand and wait, or in this case, wave.”

“Good luck with the SDal. Giv’em a big ‘ol kiss on the cheek for me. I really feel for them down there. Send news, and gossip. Especially gossip. And as I have little to occupy myself every day but to plot against all of you fully electronated types out in the move it and see it jump-ball-world of today. If you need plotting done, send me details and diagrams. Have Gun Will, uh, ya know... yeah.”

Mickey’s recent news about Venezuelan armor units now deployed into at least southern Mexico was worrisome. I had thought briefly about the possibility that what we were seeing was not necessarily a moving army, but rather a moving show room and parking lot for stuff like tanks, and cannon, that folks like us, might want to buy. That seemed rather aggressive, and I realize that worrying about the degree of “aggression” of your basic column of

armor was a little weird, but I am actually thinking in terms of their pure late-night, “avoid disappointment” sales pitch style. “Two, that’s two, T-74 heavy tanks for the low, low price of only a million five in three easy payments! Operators standing by!”

The structure of the remaining old U.S. and its military was still sufficiently reactive to be able and willing to turn everything immediately north of the border up to I-10 through New Mexico across to California into a killing ground, should that appear necessary. The Venezuelans actually brought light armor across that border in a couple of places, (Knocking down a big-assed section of the old Trumphenwall, as a live-fire demonstration, and also it seemed, just for good old fun.) But then they just lined some of them up, perhaps 20 machines altogether in 2 rows, shut them off and popped the hatches. Tents went up in the desert nearby, but not too nearby, with corporate buffet and whiskey and of course colbeer, freely available. Far more were left just south of the line, in northernmost Mexico. Hagglng was done.

Cloddy, as befit her status with the East Texas/Dallas Home Fries, was apprised of these wares to be had on the border.

“They’re here, huh?”

“Just dipped a toe across.”

“And what happened to those two rows of ten tanks that they brought for shill?”

“There was a competition based out of the local Raytheon plant in Tucson, as to how to program a set of surface-to-surface missiles 130 or 140 miles away. The brochure guaranteed a solid hit to within 3 feet at that range. And in this case, to make all twenty to hit at the same moment. That was lot of hypersonic traffic coming in to this little patch of cactus and scrub all at once when it hit. Very impressive.

The big picture, per Bottner is that this stuff at the border, while certainly flashy, might take our eye off the folks who were likely to come into the vacuum back down there in Southern Mexico. “One day soon, you may see a Chinese Navy ship off Acapulco.” was a commonly repeated comment.

And then when one did show up, it was in the Sea of Cortez. The Battle of Rocky Point pitted a CPLA (Chinese Peoples’ Liberation Army) landing force, coming across long stretches of flat sand, against troops, mostly Mexican, with more US Fed/Vol as time went on. The probing Chinese sank all their shit up to the hubs in those sand flats. Then they did the best they could to salvage what pride and equipment they could recover and get gracefully away. We assume that heads rolled, literally. And that seemed enough international chit chat for a while. The Chinese didn’t care, it was just a probe to them. The cost of doing business, literally. And it seemed that it was all just taking place on a different, less important level somehow.

So by this point, a couple of years and three waves of the VLS rolling over me, we are doing pretty good at actual communication, and in letting me share, at least to some extent the wash and whoosh of the world. Remember, we are still, ultimately dealing with, and limited by, the connections we can make via meshing EEG-like waves. It’s not like you can project an objective image on a white board. We’re working on that. Even sans the Claudia Schiffer haptic I can stay pretty busy here. In the same way that “analog” music was “digitized”, we took digitized music and laid it down as “electronolated”, as in, suffused with the waves.

Quantum entanglement blew through town and the wave com efforts have necessarily grown. Using Accelerator and upping that speed and clarity with the entangled models, we are

pretty much standing there talking to each other, like at a cocktail party. Only not speech, all waves now, though those can be “translated” now into at least print or even audio for the mass of people still not affected, waiting “outside” to see what will be done with them by those “inside”.

EEG wave forms. Not your old basic diagnostic EEG. Those are still garnered and interpreted as to their Alpha-ness versus Theta-ness, and connected with certain basic other events, like stages of sleep, and association with seizures. Maybe grossly define great fear and great calm.

Enough people had elected (you almost have to brazen it, or else be totally helpless at someone else’s mercy, in order to get the EES nowadays. Mostly just basic cussedness) to ride it on down to Mecha Disneyland who also had the getus to have a DBS probe placed and hooked up. In fact it got to be fairly common, or at least not totally whack, to get one placed, get mission control set up, and then pull the trigger, often intentionally turning up their data flow locally until they are clearly in the throes of VLS, spending a lot of emotional time, at least for sad cowboys, saying goodbyes. And when it was progressed even further, to be said goodbye to, and if you went to ground above the salt, your functional shrine Shintoistically tended to, by those around you.

Back to the more political side of things, Cloddy’s people have gradually knited together many of the tiny points at the membrane edges between them and the locals there in South Dallas. Perhaps being one of the conquering newcomers from the countryside might live on as a

kind of warrior caste, like kshatriyas in India. They now live among and along with the Old People south of I-30, with hard-line North Dallas on the other side, who are hardened up professionally and really hi-tech militarily for a mere city. Lots of money and not much taste. Newly bought squadron of ex-Brazilian Airforce Fighter jets. Listed, and maintained, as a favor up the line, as official military-reserve connected. But they flew out of Dallas Love Field, with a special designated control tower linked back to downtown NDal, not even to the nearest US air force, away south in San Antonio. Nowadays taking precedence over passenger planes, as had happened with rail traffic when freight became king over people, a century before. Cloddy's folk saw them circling occasionally, like the pack of vultures they were, just as a warning, but we knew that most of the time they were busy up away north. It is been cold and rainy this year and makes Cloddy's folk more glad to be tucked away here, under the underbelly of the hard shell of the City of Dallas.

Dallas was the first of what came to be understood as "Charter Cities." Analogous to "charter schools", both of which ran on the principles of a lot of stuff for the "fittest." And like the charter schools, able to ditch the disruptive and dull. The ability to scrape off, to at least some extent, those parts of the civic body that weren't firm and young and white; in Dallas' case, the South Dallas scrape was almost exactly half the geographic area of the filling-station map of the city.

Lots of stuff be poppin' and jivin' in El Norte. Much larger police presence. Much larger. But all crisply subservient like it was Switzerland or something. Geesh.

"The lights are on in Dallas," brazened the city's PR blitz. The place has always lived or died in neon, first back-alley, Deep Ellum sweat jazz dive-bars in down-low red and just-

able-to-see-your-way-down-the-broken-sidewalk greens, now become soaring takismo downtown skyline, and it continued the practice, lending an even more incredible view as seen from the almost completely dark Near South Side, living both in their shadow in the day and in their light at night. Lots of really big buildings, trimmed in various rainbow neon. The I.M. Pei tower on the West is recognizably emerald-green neon, the big Chase bank in 50 stories of electric blue. The Magnolia in its historic Flying Red Horse.

Dallas' physical history, at least from the early forties to the mid-sixties was dominated from high atop the 30 stories of the Magnolia Hotel. Pegasus, the neon "Flying Red Horse" of Magnolia Oil, is a pretty cool civic totem in Dallas. Back in those days you could see him, small against the distant western sky, with little else to compete with him visually. Certainly not from my range six or eight miles out in East Texas.

By way of explanation to the question, "How are things in North Dal?" I simply report that for some reason the Dallas City Council recently passed an ordinance requiring that every citizen have at least one home holiday display, like Christmas lights, or Pumpkins lit up. But it only, to date, gives "suggestions" of acceptable displays but does not require they be re any *particular*, synchronous holiday. You can work out the permutations if you like.

So driving down essentially every domestic street, you are presented with a phantasmagoria of joyless reds and greens and snowy whites, interspersed with no small number of morbid purple green, and black light effects, the straight-up red and white of a cold Valentine's Day, and Red White and Blue, all in lights, the more the better. The people make their shadowy ways out to the trash cans and back, keeping their heads down and their lights

on. When the clueless bureaucrats who passed the law realized the zeal with which their semi-self deputized Company police force enforced these Mandatory Pro-Sumptuary Laws, it did not slow the practice one bit.

The young aggressive types in the downtown urban canyons were like the aggressive young anywhere and anytime. And amongst them, as in any age, there were those destined to go down in history as really bad guys. When the list is assembled, it should most definitely include the sparkplug of The Company, its brain, John E. Blackheart.