

everynight

Legal Stuff

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Catering by various servers at Perkins Family Restaurants, Garfield's, and The Drake Diner

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everynight

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For Sean Meier.
Which two were
the victims, in
the end?

By the Entity:

Postwar

The Lost Kingdom [LK1]

History Lab

The Trouble with Mars [LK2]

Revenant

The Intrinsic Power of the Colour Blue [LK3]

All God's Creatures

Phobivore [SB95]

97C; The Discovery of the Lost Pen [LK4]

97B: Martian People Suck [LK5]

97A: The Nicest Parts of Hell [LK6]

One of Those Nights

The Hotel Foxtrot [LK7]

Aspiria [LK8]

Beyond the Mesphos [LKLast]

everynight [FC2K]

News of the Stoopid [NotS]

97D [LK0]

Damnitology

Duhmerica

Paroxysm

And Another Thing

Slackerhood

Acts of God

Acrocorinthus

Superchav

Every night
Before I sleep
I write a book
I cannot keep

BLANK

00000000

Diatribes on the wall down there.

THE PEN IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

And beneath:

HYPertext IS MIGHTIER THAN THE PEN.

And the tag:

KILROY 2017

And the sidewalk beneath—cracked, but pristine of Krylon. Kilroy watched the shadows lengthen before the setting sun.

It hadn't always been this way.

everynight

darrenjames

Part One:
Every Night

everynight

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00000001

Calvin Hamlet was fourteen years old in 1999. The Millennial Generation.

00000010

He'd seen the Star Wars Trilogy on VHS in Pan&Scan years before it had been rereleased into the cinema. He'd heard of Richard Nixon and Elvis Presley; he had vague memories of Ronald Reagan and Jon Bon Jovi. He was too young for Legos and too old for Pokémon.

00000011

His grandparents were divorced, and largely Missing in Action. His mother's tassel from the Class of 1987 still hung from the rearview mirror of her dying 1986 Mustang. Dad was as accessible as Nixon and Elvis.

00000100

He'd been born too late.

00000101

In earlier times, he'd have had a chance, he supposed. There had been times in history when you could still do pretty well for yourself even if you were an American of English descent without any discernible handicaps. But in 1999, the world was a different place than it was depicted as having been in the EBooks he pirated from the 'net.

00000110

His mother was Jenny Hamlet. His grandmother was Paula Hamlet. He had no idea who his great grandmother had been—or if she still existed.

He knew his grandmother, of course. Jenny had been sixteen when he'd been born, so the two of them had lived at home with Paula for years. Paula's ex-husband had moved across the country back in the seventies; Calvin had never actually met him, though he could remember a few conversations over the speakerphone. Then Jenny and Paula had got into a fight he hadn't understood, and he'd been carted off to a new city, just as he was beginning to figure out the politics of kindergarten.

Since then, he'd been here in Chicago. Jenny

had picked Chicago for its size and notoriety. He'd been born in Marietta, Georgia—just outside Atlanta. He'd since become a solid Yank, watching his Cubs lose again and again to the Braves.

00000111

At the age of fourteen, his life was already beginning to end. He wasn't dumb; he knew what was going on out there. Half the kids he knew in school would drop out before senior year. He might well be one of them. It wasn't a matter of grades—he understood the brainless information he was fed; it was a matter of reason. There was no reason at all. Five years ahead of him, dropouts and graduates worked side by side at McDonald's and Burger King and Pizza Hut. Five years ahead of *them*, the graduates of the University of Chicago were the supervisors in the same restaurants. And five years further on, those twice Calvin's age were finally moving into McManagement.

Unless he was missing something, there was no incentive at all to do what he was told. There were laws against certain things, but nothing seemed to reward him for going along with the undocumented wishes of society. If there was a point to any of it, he hadn't got that memo.

He was alive and living in Shytown. No less, no more. His life was beginning to end. Or, his life was going to change. Either way, life as he knew it had outlived its usefulness.

00001000

Calvin Hamlet was fourteen years old when he became an adult.

00001001

At first glance, he was a kid sitting in a booth in the smoking section of the restaurant, playing with one of those organiser thingys with a keyboard; a mobile phone sat nearby, waiting for a call, perhaps. But the palmtop was an old HP660LX; its flashcard modem was connected to the Motorola StarTac 7762; Calvin Hamlet was online, watching rather a humble bidding war take place on eBay.com.

Too humble. In the final hour of the auction, the three remaining bidders had been inching toward the reserve by merely a dollar at a time. Calvin drummed his fingers impatiently against his temple and refreshed the screen. Fifty-two minutes remaining; reserve marginally met; a dollar here, a dollar there. Slow day out there in AsciiLand

He scrolled down on the small, panoramic screen. The palmtops were a dying breed now. They'd once been pretty big, and might be big again in the future. Now, the sublaptops were grabbing the type-as-you-surf hackers, and the PalmPilots were catering to the touch-and-read users. The SixSixty's battery outlived those of the sublaptops made by Sony and Toshiba, though its rechargeable bank didn't last quite as long as the doubleAs had in the old Three Twenties; then again, the SixSixty was running a lot faster than the ThreeTwenty, had geometric RAM enhancements, and was in colour. He'd never used a PalmPilot; there was something wrong with a computer whose screen was taller than it was wide.

Beneath the bidding information, which was positioned up 'above the fold', as the newspapers called the topmost area of a document, was the description of his offering.

Rare Pokémon Card

This is a very rare, First Edition Charizard card for use with *Pokémon*.

It is in near mint condition, without scratches or creases.

High bidder to pay US\$2.00 S&H

He scrolled back up and refreshed the screen. He could currently count on twenty-three bucks for the card. He'd acquired the card at the mall—casually walking up and talking to its previous owner, hands in pockets, for several minutes before leaning in to intimate that a girl [who the little geek wound up 'just missing'] was looking in the latter's direction and smiling at him; somewhere in there, the hand he'd laid onto the card—which was indeed rare—created a sticky and explainable bond, which held the thing long enough to transport it back into the pocket of his jacket.

It had been innocent enough a manoeuvre, in the event that he'd been caught stealing the thing; but he hadn't been. Free card.

Free or not, the card should have got him more than twenty-three bucks. It wasn't over yet: there was the packaging and shipping [which the high bidder would overpay for] once the cheque or money order cleared. It could be as much as two weeks before he was past all of this. He should have set the reserve for at least thirty.

Too late now, of course. If he refused to sell it at any price above twenty, he could expect his rating to drop, making it more difficult to list anything again in the future. Bad business, after all.

He refreshed again. Twenty-four bucks; forty-three minutes remaining. *Damn.*

Still, there was hope—the three remaining bidders were taking sequential turns: hopper429 had kicked it to US\$22, magition had one-upped hopper429 to US\$23, and now royalflush had taken the lead, setting the card's value at its current figure. hopper429 would probably be next again, sweetening the deal up to twenty-five. Then, if magition really wanted the thing, he'd offer twenty-six; royalflush would offer twenty-seven; hopper429 would offer twenty-eight...it might get up above thirty after all, if these three really wanted a war.

He refreshed again. They were still holding at twenty-four. Forty-two minutes remained.

Calvin shrugged at the screen. Whatever. Twenty-four bucks was about the same as thirty-four when there was no invested capital in the deal. Pure profit. The American Way.

He abandoned the Pokémon card for a moment, shifting over to his other auctions, just to have a look at the progress. He'd listed them all at about

the same time of day, but on different days, so the compact disc he'd happened across had nearly twenty-five hours left to meet its twenty dollar reserve, and the ageing Epson printer he'd been donated had nearly fifty hours left to reach its fifty dollar reserve—the printer was already up to forty-five, so he was likely to finish up there with sixty or so. He returned to the war for the card. Twenty-four bucks; thirty-nine minutes left. hopper429 must have given up. *Pity.*

00001010

The waitress slowed at his booth, grabbing his coffee-pot and shaking it decisively. 'Okay on coffee, Kiddo?' she asked.

'Yup,' he said, eyes on the screen.

'You know it's getting dark out there?'

Calvin glanced up at her, and out the window.

'Oh. Okay.' He glanced back at her for a moment, before returning to the palmtop.

'Your mother know you're here?'

Calvin rolled his eyes surreptitiously. 'Yeah.'

'So you've got a ride?'

Calvin looked up at her. 'Is this a hint?'

'A hint? You lost me.'

Calvin shook his head at the palmtop. 'Usually questions like that preface the old "been here quite a while" speech.'

The waitress grinned. 'Been here quite a while, haven't you.'

'About two hours.'

'Yeah.'

'You want me to split?' Calvin asked, looking at her again.

She grinned again, and glanced at the half-empty smoking section. 'Not an emergency. I'll let you know. You still doing okay?'

'Mostly. Got a cigarette?'

'Um, yeah? How old are you.'

'Fourteen. You?'

'Nineteen. You smoke at fourteen?'

'How old were you when you started?'

'Um...thirteen.'

'So are we in sanctimonious waitress mode, or charitable waitress mode today, ah...Lisa?'

'I didn't give this to you,' she said, rolling a Marlboro Light from her palm, down her fingers, and across the table to rest against the side of the palmtop.

'And I didn't thank you for it,' Calvin added, a coy smirk on his unlined face.

'You don't act fifteen, y'know.'

'Fourteen. Chronologically, anyway. Mentally, I'm probably too old for you.'

She laughed, and seemed to really notice the palmtop for the first time. 'Are you online?' she asked, shocked.

'Yeah. Until one of the batteries dies, anyway.'

'Batteries?'

'There's the one in the palmtop, which isn't too bad; the one on the phone might last another twenty minutes.' He turned the phone so he could see its screen. There were two bars left on the main battery; the auxiliary battery had emptied thirty minutes earlier.

'Wow.'

'Yeah,' Calvin told her, casually, lighting his new cigarette, 'Science marches on.'

'Are you rich or something?'

He refreshed the screen again: twenty-four bucks; thirty-six minutes. 'Not at *this* rate.' He killed the connexion and closed his phone. He could track down the high bidder later. In fact, eBay.com would EMail him with the final results. Watching the card sell for less than thirty was just morbid curiosity. And he had enough stress IRL.

Detaching the cord from the PCMCIA modem, he sat back and looked at Lisa again. 'So.'

'So?'

He shrugged. 'You looked talkative.'

At that, she glanced about, watching for signs that her other customers might want something which, if they didn't have it soon, would hurt her tips. It was smooth sailing out there, though; she wasn't late for anything yet.

She shook her head, distantly. 'Not really,' she muttered; then, realising she'd said so out loud, snapped her attention back to Calvin and amended: 'Not really *busy*. I've got a minute.'

'Okay,' Calvin said.

She stared at him, and then laughed. 'I guess we ran out of stuff to talk about though, huh.'

'There's always stuff to talk about,' Calvin promised, 'Rarely anything important, but there's always stuff.'

'Why talk about it if it's not important?'

'I don't,' Calvin said, smoking his cigarette, 'But they do.' He tilted the cigarette out toward the rest of the smoking section. 'I sit here doing what I do, and listen to them. It's amazing the unimportant bullshit they can produce. For hours and hours. The faces change; the names change; the bullshit never runs out.'

She shrugged at the rest of the smoking section. 'People are people.'

'And clichés are clichés,' he added, not insultingly.

'Yeah. Anyway: le'me know if you need anything else.'

'Okay,' he said, nodding, as he slid the palm-top round so he could see it from his new, laid-back angle. Still, he watched her until she nodded back and went off toward the kitchen again.

'Cute kid,' he muttered to the Palmtop, closing its WindowsCE version of Explorer and opening its word processor.

00001011

He stared at the blank screen beneath the functions and above the tray. The cursor blinked in casual expectancy of input. He didn't really have any for it.

00001100

Writing was funny that way. He'd start off with nothing at all. On one hand, he'd have done nothing to

regret in the beginning; on the other, he'd not've begun yet. Writing was also resistant to commands. The flow chart was excruciatingly linear. First came the idea; second came the words. Words without the idea were words; ideas without words were stories waiting to happen. And screens without words were blank. And his screen was without words.

00001101

His screen wasn't always this wordless; he could write stories. In his mind, he could *exist* to write stories. He didn't know if he was any *good* at writing, but he knew he was good at *trying*. But only if he had an idea with which to make the attempt.

And ideas were shy animals. Like flies, maybe. If he wanted one to land, so he could do something about it, it never would; if he wasn't particularly prepared for one, it would buzz about and terrorise him until he could get to whatever tool might subdue it—at which point it would fail to return until he was no longer ready for it again.

Flies, and ideas, were annoying when they were flying about; flattened—black and white—on paper, they became art. Whether anyone would ever want that art was yet another question. Still, having the thing stuck to paper was better than having it buzz about his head, driving him mad.

00001110

There was something almost insulting in the observation that a stolen Pokémon card could sell for twenty-four bucks on eBay.com, while a captured and rendered idea on paper might get seven ninety-five in paperback at amazon.com. And that was before amazon.com took fifty-five percent, leaving the rest to

pay off printers and marketers. The author would get a dollar, maybe? Fifty cents? It was fine if the thing sold a million copies, or ten million; but making one sixteenth—maybe—of the cover price for catching the idea, smashing it onto the paper, and convincing someone—anyone—that it was worth looking at...it didn't seem quite fair to him.

On the other hand, it was largely free. A film required millions in order to be made. And millions might see it. But a book was nothing more than a pen and a notebook—or a palmtop and a printer—and a month or two of inordinate amounts of free time.

00001111

He'd heard about the history of publishing. Authors writing entire novels in pencil on legal pads, or embedding ink into onionskin on old Underwoods, leaving the typesetter to figure out how the thing should be printed. Strikeouts to be dodged, margins to be aligned, spelling to be corrected...the author's job had become a lot easier in recent years, but his job description had become a lot longer.

Not that it concerned him much. Writer or not, he was a budding control freak. He preferred the ability to typeset and spellcheck his stuff in a word processor over the simplicity of handing it over to some unseen editor and hoping for the best. And it was all less than relevant anyway: he wasn't a novelist; he was a fourteen-year-old kid in a restaurant at sunset with a palmtop to monitor the sale of his stolen Pokémon card and a disquieting lack of swatable ideas on hand.

00010000

He groaned quietly at the palmtop and shut it off,

pushing it away and pulling the hardcover out of his backpack. *Hearts in Atlantis*, by the good Mister King. He'd got through Part One the night before, and peeked at Part Two, in which the story seemed to change drastically. He'd put it off until later—not too much later; not like abandoning it. But later enough that he could remember what he'd read the night before more distantly, now that the story was shifting ahead by a number of years.

He didn't know if he was expected to read the book that way, but it seemed like the right way to do it. And, hey: it wasn't like Steve was going to catch him at it and go *You what? That's not what I meant at all, you stupid kid*; which was something that he—Calvin Hamlet—wasn't entirely certain he'd have been able to keep to himself, were he to happen across a reader of one of *his* stories who was reading it the wrong way.

00010001

He was sitting there. His palmtop was closed. His copy of *Hearts in Atlantis* was out, but lay closed atop the table. His cigarette was gone. His coffee was cooling. He was staring off into space and his mind was wandering along, lost, without a tour guide.

It was a dangerous place for his mind to go, he supposed. Never know if it might get *really* lost—so lost that he wouldn't get it back. Wouldn't find *his* way back. He never knew how to look at it. *When your mind wandered, did it take you with it? Did it show you the things that it saw on its journey?* And did anyone else, anywhere in the history of the planet, ever ramble on with this sort of internal dialogue; more specifically, were those who had thought these things ever allowed to walk the streets again, or were they stashed away in the Quiet Rooms of psychiatric clinics the world over. And did most fourteen-year-olds ever think that far ahead, or just him. *Mysteries abound*. He grabbed the book and opened it to the Business Reply Card which could get him a subscription to *Wizard* were he to fill it out and drop it off in a mailbox.

The story picked up again in 1966. Calvin punched out and took a break from reality for the next hour. Or two.

00010010

One hundred fifty pages later, Calvin reached the end of Part Two of *Hearts in Atlantis*. He grabbed the Business Reply Card [which had soaked up a bit of the water condensing from the glass he hadn't touched since he'd sat down] and flung it into the book, right where it was likely to start up next time in 1983. He sat back and looked for a cigarette in the pocket of his Tommy Hilfiger oxford; he found nothing carcinogenic there. Grimacing, he glanced up at the restaurant, and found Lisa standing before him.

She grinned, tossing him another Marlboro Light. He caught it, manoeuvring its filtre deftly into his lips and quick-drawing his Zippo to light it. 'Thanks,' he said.

'I didn't give you *that* one, either,' she told him.

'Right.'

'You need anything else before I go?' she asked, 'I'm clocking out here in a sec.'

He thought about it briefly, and shook his head. 'Nope. Don't think so.'

She grabbed his coffeepot and shook it. 'You're a little low. I'll fill it up real quick.'

'Oh. Okay. Thanks.'

She stopped. 'You need a ride anywhere?'

'Me?' he asked, blinking.

'Yeah: you.'

'Um...I guess...maybe. I mean: I haven't got one; I walked here.'

'Getting cold out there now,' she added.

'Tell me about it. Sure. If you're okay with it: sure.'

She grinned. 'You're probably not going to, like, kill me and take my car, right?'

'Not in that order, anyway.'

She laughed. 'Le'me grab my coat.'

00010011

Even in the car, they could see their breath.

'It takes a few minutes for the heater to show up,' she apologised, grinding the stick into first and sneering at it. 'Short year,' she added.

'Hmmm?' Calvin prompted.

'Ninety-nine. One minute they're playing Prince ten times an hour, and the next, it's October.'

'Yeah. Time doubles.'

'Doubles?'

'Sure. It speeds up as you get older. Think about it. One day, you're five; then, you're ten. And you notice that the second half didn't take as long as the first half did. I'm fourteen now, but seven doesn't feel much like half my life ago. Maybe ten percent.'

'Never thought about it that way,' Lisa told him.

'Me neither. On the other hand, I don't even remember anything before three. It's like I didn't even become self-aware until I was three. Still, the four years between three and seven seem a lot longer than the seven years between seven and fourteen.'

Lisa pondered that for a moment. 'Okay, so when I was—what, nine and a half? Yeah, you're right. That wasn't all that long ago, I guess.'

'I suppose the next fourteen years will fly by,' Calvin lamented, 'I'll be twenty-eight all of a sudden, and wonder how it happened that fast.'

'Ick. I'll be *thirty-eight* in twice my life. That's old, huh.'

'Chronologically, maybe,' he said, 'I don't really follow chronology. It doesn't quite fit me. I go by mental age.'

'What's the difference,' she asked.

'The difference is that, while I'm literally fourteen, I'm mentally a lot older. I took an IQ test in school. My mental age is almost forty already.'

'Like your *brain* is forty?'

'Almost. I know the amount of useless information that the average forty-year-old knows.'

'Wow. So you're, like, a genius or something?'

'Yeah. I'm a genius or something. But I dress better than most of them.'

She laughed again. 'So have you got a name, or what?'

'Calvin.'

'Calvin? Like Calvin and Hobbes?'

'Yeah. Exactly like Calvin and Hobbes. Except that's not the idea behind the name.'

'Oh?'

'My middle name is Klein.'

'You're joking.'

'No, but I think maybe Mom was.'

'So you don't go by Calvin Klein.'

'Nope.'

'Calvin? Cal?'

'Kilroy.'

'Kilroy?'

'As in "Kilroy was here".'

'Kilroy was *where*.'

'Everywhere. It's an old thing from decades ago. He did the graffiti with the guy poking his nose and fingers over the wall?'

'Oh! Yeah. That was Kilroy? I always thought it was, like, some fucked up Fraggles, or something.'

He smirked sympathetically at her.

'Anyway,' she asked, 'Where do you live?'

'Down this road. I'll let you know.'

She shrugged. 'Okay.'

'Big plans tonight?' he asked.

'No,' she said instantly, 'Why?'

'You look like you're waiting for something.'

She thought about it. 'No, not really,' she said, more hesitantly.

'Oh. Okay.'

'Were you waiting for something?'

'Nope.'

'Okay.'

'Okay.'

They drove.

'Left at the next light,' he said.

She nodded and thumped the indicator, riding the line as it snaked over into a middle lane and slowing at the red light. 'Woulda been a long walk,' she said.

'Yeah. They've got some problem with fourteen-year-olds driving themselves. No one knows why.'

'Can you drive?'

'Sure. It's easy. Ironically, I'm better at it

than eighty-five percent of the licensed drivers out there.'

'Eighty-five percent? Exactly?'

'Yup. The speed limits are set up so that the lower eighty-five percent can handle them without wrecking; I can go a lot faster than thirty-five or forty on these roads. But which of us has a licence. The laws of this country stagger me.'

The light went green. She pulled out and moved on down the sidestreet.

'Hey?' she prompted.

'Yeah.'

'What do you suppose *my* mental age is?'

'I dunno. Twentysomething?'

'I don't know; I'm asking what you think.'

'Twentysomething. Twenty-three to twenty-five. You manage to keep your mouth closed if you're not talking, and things register with you pretty quick. You're at least above average.'

'Is that good?'

'It's not bad. Half of America have IQs below a hundred. Yours might be in the one twenties.'

'Huh.'

'Why.'

'I don't want you to think I'm dumb.'

'I don't think you're dumb.'

'Good.'

He regarded her oddly for a moment before glancing out the window. 'Ah shit; stop!'

She hit the brakes instinctively, screeching to a halt. She gaped at him, nervous.

'Sorry. That's my house.' He pointed to a small one-bedroom off to the right.

'Oh. God. I thought you saw a deer or something.'

'In Chicago?'

'Or something.'

'Nope. Just...that's where I live.'

'Oh.' Lisa seemed oddly preoccupied to him; sad, maybe.

'Well...,' he began, reaching into the back of her Celica to grab his backpack and pull it through between the seats, 'Um...'

She nodded, still looking sad. He set the backpack between his feet and waited for a moment. 'You okay?'

She nodded slowly, pushing her hair back out of her face. Then she turned quickly toward him. 'Hey.'

'Yeah?'

She dropped her eyes to his backpack, her lower lip quivering once. 'Nothing. Sorry.'

'Okay,' he said, reaching for his backpack again. He fumbled for the door handle—wherever the hell Toyota had hidden it.

'You all coffeed out?' she spat.

'What?'

'Are...are you in a hurry?'

'What are you talking about.'

She grinned worriedly. 'Do you want to go somewhere else and get some more coffee? And maybe talk to me for a while?'

He abandoned the search for the door handle and let go of his backpack again. Nodding: 'Okay.'

00010100

Lisa's Celica pulled into the carpark of a competing restaurant and found a parking spot. She flicked the lights off and jammed the stick into reverse, letting the engine die. She pondered again.

'Is anyone watching?' she asked.

'I dunno,' Calvin said, glancing out the windows, 'No one I can see.'

She nodded and pulled a sweatshirt out of a bag in the backseat. 'I can't go in there wearing this,' she said, lifting the polo shirt over her head quickly and replacing it with the grey Chicago University crewneck. Calvin noticed that she'd sucked in her stomach intentionally as she'd changed.

'I was probably supposed to look away just then, wasn't I,' he said, 'Sorry; forgot.'

'Huh? No: I don't care. I just don't want a bunch of *strangers* watching me, is all.'

'I'm not a stranger?'

'Um, no. I guess not.'

'So what am I?'

She shrugged. You're Ca—Kilroy. You like Kilroy over Calvin?'

'Sometimes. But it's sort of a stranger's name. I use it on the 'net.'

'Oh. So which do you like?'

'Either. Both. I guess it doesn't matter much.'

She looked at the polo in her lap and lifted it up, showing him her nametag. 'I'm Lisa, by the way.'

'I know.'

'Saw that, huh?'

'I'm just that observant.'

'Right.'

She opened her door and got out, reaching back in for her purse. With the domelight on, Calvin was able to find the door handle and he and his backpack followed her and her purse into the lobby of the restaurant.

00010101

'Hey Lisa,' the hostess greeted as they met at the podium, 'Little brother?'

'A friend,' she returned, 'Calvin.'

'Oh. Hi, Calvin,' the hostess said in the way adults talk to kids—slowly and a little more loudly, overenunciating and stooping a bit.

He regarded her dryly, obviously used to being misidentified as an idiot. 'Good evening,' he said, 'We desire a hutch in the carcinogenic zone with the utmost impetuosity.'

The hostess recoiled. 'Um: oh...kay....' She looked back to Lisa. 'Two for, what, smoking? I guess?'

'Yeah,' Lisa said, trying to remain stolid, 'Please.'

The hostess grabbed a pair of menus, glanced at Calvin oddly, and led them wordlessly back to a booth.

'There you go,' she mentioned, laying out the menus as they sat down, 'Coffee?' she asked Lisa—and, without waiting for confirmation, she asked Calvin: 'Coke? Chocolate milk?'

'Coffee, please,' Calvin told her, explaining, 'My proclivities toward carbonates and lactates exceed those regarding apriorism and obloquy.'

The hostess opened her mouth in illiterate horror, then forced a meagre smile. 'I'll get your server for you,' she promised, hurrying away.

Calvin turned to Lisa and smirked.

'Fuck me,' she exhaled.

He raised his eyebrows questioningly. She grinned self-consciously and averted her eyes.

00010110

The coffee came, interrupting them; they thanked the waiter, assured him that they didn't need anything else just yet, and waited for him to go on his way.

'Okay, now *what's* up with the bug?' Lisa asked.

'It's a hoax,' Calvin said, 'Mostly. There was a problem, but that was fixed, like, twenty years ago. No modern computer is going to care when the clocks roll over to two thousand.'

'So they're not going to crash? Then why is everyone saying they are?'

'Have you got a MasterCard or something?'

'Um, yeah?'

'What's the expiration date?'

'I dunno.' She pulled her purse into her lap and located her Visa. 'Eight doublezero.'

'August two thousand. Okay. Does it work?'

'Yeah. It's about maxed, but it works.'

'How could it work, if the computers think it expired in nineteen hundred?'

'Um...hey! Yeah!'

'So: the computers aren't the problem.'

'So what's the problem....'

'People. Only four percent of the electronic money is represented by physical cash. So: people are already beginning to withdraw their physical cash from the ATMs. It won't take long for the ATMs to run out of money, so the American government will have to make more physical cash. If you make more physical cash, physical cash becomes worth less. So now no one has enough cash to buy what they need.'

'Okay. So, *then* what, raise minimum wage?'

'Okay, let's do that. You make about three bucks an hour without tips, right?'

'Yeah. Two something. Just enough to cover taxes.'

'Okay. Bad example. Say minimum wage is raised so everyone has more money. We'll raise it to, say,

ten bucks an hour. Good idea?’

‘Fine with me.’

‘Okay. Now: you’ve got X number of people working for you, all expecting eighty bucks a day. You have to raise your prices to make enough profit to pay them. Now, even though they’re making ten bucks an hour, like they thought they wanted, that ten bucks will buy a twelvepack of Coke. So now what: raise minimum wage again? Raise it to *twenty* an hour. And pretty soon a case of Coke will be *twenty* bucks; raise it again, and prices go up to cover the new salaries; and again. Until one day, a case of Coke is a hundred bucks.’

‘Oh.’

‘Meanwhile, if everyone’s making at least a hundred an hour, you’re burning through all the new money you printed, so you have to print even more, which is worth even less. Now a case of Coke is two hundred bucks. Raise minimum wage again; four hundred bucks; raise it again...pretty soon, the American dollar is about the same as pesos are now. Except that the rest of the world take the American dollar seriously. So the rest of the world begins to follow the trend, and pretty soon everyone has lots of money everywhere, but no one can afford anything.’

‘So *then* what happens?’

‘Then, people get mean. Then they start burning banks, thinking it’s all the banks’ fault. Then you’re probably looking at anarchy—at martial law.’

‘That’s what’s gonna happen?’

‘Maybe. Maybe not. It’s a possibility.’

‘It’s scary.’

‘Yeah.’

‘I don’t think I’d wanna live in a world like that.’

‘I don’t think *anyone* would. But it might be the only world we *have* pretty soon.’

‘So why not just tell everyone not to take out all their money?’

‘I *do*. But there are six billion of you out there. That’s a lot of coffee.’

She laughed heartlessly. ‘I probably won’t live to be twenty-one.’

‘*Carpe diem*.’

‘I know that one! “Seize the day”.’

‘Yup.’

‘See? I *knew* something!’ She beamed.

‘I told you: you’re not dumb.’

Her smile died. ‘I *feel* dumb. Most of the

time.'

'Usually a sign of intelligence. It's the *dumb* ones who think they're all *smarter* than each other.'

She regarded the pack of cigarettes on the table and took two of them out, lighting them and handing one to Calvin.

'Thanks.'

'Hey: you're old enough to know better, I guess.'

'I guess.'

She stared at him, thinking.

'What.'

'What else are you old enough for...,' she asked.

'I dunno,' he said, shrugging, 'Try me.'

00010111

'Here it is,' she announced, reaching in and flicking the lightswitch, illuminating the small flat as she hurried in ahead of him, 'I'm kinda between roommates right now, so there's no one to whisper for. You sure you don't have to be home yet?'

'Mom doesn't care,' he said, pushing the door shut and analysing the locks before turning them, 'I doubt her life changes much whether I'm there or not.'

'That's really sad,' Lisa said, pulling her coat off.

'It's to be expected. She's only—'

'Don't tell me. I don't want to find out I'm closer to her age than yours.'

His eyes flashed up left, up right, up left. 'You're not. We're practically twins.'

'She's that *old*?'

'No. But she's older than you are. Older enough.'

Lisa groaned and sat heavily on her sofa. 'This is crazy.'

'Probably.'

'Maybe I should just take you home. Your place home'.

'If you want to.'

'What do you want to do?'

'Either.'

'Okay,' she said, getting up again and reaching for her coat, 'I don't know what the hell I was thinking. I could get arrested just for having you up here.'

'Only if I told. And I'm not going to.'

She stopped and put her coat back down. 'What do you want to do.'

'We can just sit here and talk for a while. Nothing's really that important yet.'

'Okay.' She moved back over to the davenport and sat down.

After a moment, he joined her.

'So talk,' she said.

'About what.'

'I dunno. Stuff like before?'

'Computer bugs? Latin? Your self-image?'

'My *what*?'

'Nothing. Bad joke.'

'What about my self-image?'

He took a deep breath. 'You don't like yourself much.'

'How do you know.'

'Little things. Not telling me that you usually feel dumb; that's what you *want* me to know. Other stuff. Little signs that you aren't very happy most of the time. Which doesn't make a lot of sense. There's nothing wrong with you.'

'What sort of self-image do you think I have?'

'Okay: you think you're getting fat; you're not.'

'I know that. I mean: I know I'm not *fat*. What makes you think I *think* so?'

'Stuff you do. Or maybe not. Stuff *I* would do if I thought *I* were fat.'

'Oh. Okay. Maybe. You don't think I'm getting *fat* though?'

'I didn't really notice any fat.'

'I'm wearing a sweatshirt.'

'You weren't, for a moment.'

She blushed. 'Oh yeah. That.'

'Yeah. Also: you cover your mouth when you laugh, or even begin to smile. Your teeth are white enough, but you don't want people seeing them.'

'I've got an overbite. It looks really dumb, too. I look like a rabbit.'

'You don't look like a rabbit.'

'I look a *little* like a rabbit.'

'Show me.'

'No!'

'C'mon...show me....'

'Why do you—oh all right: see?' She grinned furiously at him, teeth locked together.

'You don't look like a rabbit. Maybe a wood-chuck, but not a—'

'Hey!' She slapped his knee and pouted.

'I was kidding. You don't look like any sort of lagomorph.'

She sniffled and looked at the wall.

'Lisa.'

'What.'

'Smile.'

'No.' She covered her mouth with the back of her hand.

'Smile....'

'Cut it out; no.'

'Don't smile.'

'I'm not.'

'No matter what.'

'You're trying to make me smile,' she said, her mouth twisting into a confused grimace.

'No smiling!'

She laughed, instantly clasping both hands over her mouth. 'Dobbit.'

'Hmmm?'

'I bed *dob*. Dob ryinoo bake be mile.'

'You've stopped making sense.'

She huffed and threw her hands up. 'Stop trying to make me—' She was smiling; she slammed her hands back over her mouth.

'Lisa.'

'Wuh.'

'Move your hands for a minute.'

'Oh.'

'It's worth it.'

'Wuh.'

'You'll see.'

She dropped her hands into her lap. 'What.'

He took her hands and pulled. She leaned toward him, then fell back and slid toward him on the sofa. 'What,' she said again—more impatiently.

He kissed her. She kissed him back. 'That,' he said.

She regarded him in fear for a moment. Then she kissed him again.

Things progressed from there.

00011000

They sat in the Celica in front of Calvin's house for a moment.

'Listen,' she said, writing her number in a matchbook and handing it to him, 'I can't really call here for you, in case your mother answers the phone; but call me, okay?'

'Sure. And I'll see you again anyway. I mean: I'm a regular.'

'A regular?' she asked, momentarily indignant, 'Oh: at work. Yeah. Okay.'

'But I'll call. Maybe we can do something tomorrow.'

'Maybe,' she said, sadly.

'What's wrong now.'

'The same thing as before,' she said, 'I'm five years older than you. We can't let people know about this.'

'I know. But we can look like friends, can't we?'

She sniffled and nodded. 'I guess so. If that's all it looks like.'

'We can make it look good,' he promised, 'No one has to know anything.'

She nodded again. 'Go. I have to think about this.'

'Okay.' He grabbed his backpack and opened the door. 'I'll see you tomorrow, okay?'

'Okay.'

He began to get out, then leaned in toward her again.

'Don't,' she said, 'People will see.'

'It's two in the morning.'

'I know, but....'

'Okay. I'll just see you tomorrow, then, okay?'

'Okay,' she said, smiling again.

'So long, Woodchuck.'

'So long, Kilroy.'

He nodded and backed out of the Toyota, swinging the door shut firmly but quietly.

She waved through the window; he waved back;

the Celica started off down the street.

Hoisting his backpack onto his shoulder, he stood and watched her go. When she reached the four-way stop at the end of his street, he began to walk up the path to his front door. He heard the Toyota start off again at the stop sign; then he heard its brakes chip and he looked back just in time to see an old Cutlass Supreme run the stop, slamming into the Toyota at fifty miles per hour.

The sound of the impact came half a second after the sight, adding a surrealism to it all.

The Toyota gave easily to the Oldsmobile, pivoting on its rear wheels before connecting with the curb, the frame collapsing under the pressure, the bonnet rising like mountains at the edges of colliding tectonic plates; the Cutlass scooped the front of the Toyota off the ground and slid beneath it, flipping the smaller car to starboard aft.

Finally, the Celica lurched into the telephone pole beyond the curb, stopping again; it collapsed back onto the Cutlass, teetering across the Oldsmobile's disintegrating dashboard and creaking clockwise, nose dropping and tail lifting. With a final scream of wrenching metal, both cars came to a lazy stop.

Calvin blinked, beginning to walk dreamily toward the cars at the end of the block. He was vaguely aware of lights coming on in the houses along the street. He heard a screendoor squeak open nearby. He walked.

The Celica's fuel tank was ruptured, petrol streaming out onto the Oldsmobile's engine block. Both cars were stalled dead by the crash.

He circled the wreck, glancing into the Cutlass at the driver; the driver's face was invisible to him—forehead against the steering wheel, and right arm twisted over his neck in a way Calvin could only identify as *wrong*. He didn't see the passenger at first: neither had been wearing seatbelts, and the car was too old to have had airbags; the passenger was compacted into the footwell of the Olds.

Neither of them moved at all.

He walked on, reaching the driver's side of the Celica. It was difficult to see into the Toyota, since the driver's side was higher up than the passenger's, balanced atop the Oldsmobile's frame. He began to move on around to the front of the car to look in through the windscreen; then Lisa's hand slapped the glass, leaving a bloody smear which re-

minded him, oddly, of the poster for the film *Psycho*. He moved back to the driver's door and tried to see into the car.

Lisa moved again, climbing up to look down out the window at him. She was gyrating in there, panicking. After a second, he realised that she was trying to get her door open; he could see from the shape of it that the door would never open again.

The windows, he knew, were electric. Assuming that there was no power to them, something else would have to be done.

He pulled his phone out instinctively: its battery was dead from spending too long online; he jammed it back into his pocket and looked at Lisa again.

Car wreck or not, it seemed weird to scream into the night. He pantomimed to her that he was going to go back and call for help. She nodded that she understood, desperation in her eyes. He backed away, still watching her, but glancing toward his house to keep on course.

Something in the wreck squeaked again, and the Celica shifted. Lisa shrieked in surprise and anticipation before hyperventilating back into silence. Calvin held his hands out, letting her know that it was okay; he'd be right back with some help.

Along the street, more doors were opening; Chicagoans in terrycloth robes and old jogging suits were beginning to emerge.

Somewhere, something popped.

It was a small, benign noise. But its result was amazing.

At first, Calvin thought it was a kamikaze firefly blitzkreiging his foot, but the spark danced on the pavement before dying; then two more followed it in. Glancing up to the source, he watched silently as the wire fell slowly away from the pole in a cascade of lightning.

Embers fell here and there, at his feet, behind his back, onto the Toyota's windscreen. He caught the firestorm in the greasy reflexion of the pooling fuel beneath the Oldsmobile, and looked up at Lisa's paling face just as—

00011001

'Jesus...Calvin!'

It was his mother. Somewhere up there. Up ahead, behind the blue. Green. Blue. Turquoise. Cyan. Drifting and folding. And fading. The bluish greenish wisp faded out as the light faded in. And Jenny Hamlet was standing over him. He was laying on the ground, he thought. Sunburned.

'What,' he said.

'Are you okay? Jesus Christ are you okay? Calvin? Can you hear me? Are you okay?'

'Mom: Zip it. What happened.'

'Can you move? No—don't move; don't try to move; oh Christ....'

'I can move—ow. What—' Then it all came back. Oldsmobile; firestorm reflected in the pooling fuel; Celica; Lisa—

Lisa.

'Lisa?'

'What?' his mother asked.

'Is Lisa here?'

'I dunno. I don't know Lisa. Are you okay? Really okay?'

'Where *is* she? Where did she *go*?'

'Calvin: I don't know who you're *talking* about. Can you *see* me? Over *here*.' She waved her hand frantically in front of his face. He caught her arm by the wrist and pulled himself painfully up with it.

He looked at his mother's arm for a moment. Studied it. Let it go. And he looked at the flaming mass ahead.

At first, he could only watch it happen. Fire. Sizzling, popping fire. Meaningless fire. Flames billowing up from...from....

From Lisa.

He got to his feet, swayed a bit, stepped toward Lisa.

'Calvin: No!'

He pulled away from his mother and walked on. Now his neighbours were there, flashing in and out at the edges of his vision, talking, chattering, yelling

screaming buzzing chirping flashing in a sea of background hues. Lisa was in the fire. He had to...to....

But there was no answer to that. Lisa couldn't have survived this. She *must* have made it out of the car; *she must be here somewhere; she must.*

'Calvin: stop.'

He stopped. 'Where.'

'Over here. C'mon. I want to get you looked at.'

'Okay,' he said, distantly; then: 'No. No: have them look at Lisa first.'

'Who's Lisa!'

'She's my...I dunno.' He thought about it carefully, still looking for her. 'We're friends, I think. We're not strangers.'

'Look at me.'

He didn't. He looked for Lisa.

His mother spun him round, and he was eye to eye with her; seeing, but not seeing; looking for Lisa in his mind; Lisa wasn't in there, that he could tell. 'I don't know who Lisa is,' his mother told him, 'I want to take you over there to the ambulance and make sure you're not hurt.'

'Okay Mom.'

'Are you hurt? Is anything numb?'

'I'm okay. I'm just concerned about Lisa.'

'Okay. Me too. I'm sure she's fine, wherever she is. But let's make sure you're okay before we go find her; c'mon.'

'All right.'

00011010

He floated toward the red and blue lights on feet he could no longer feel, or even remember clearly. The rest flew by, buzzing like schizophrenic flies, refusing to land. Someone asked how he felt; cold wet glass and the smell of soap; hands on his throat—one side, and the other; told to breathe; asked if he felt okay. Juice.

He drank orange juice.

The night grew dark and cold. The fire was gone.

Still people ran past him. A blanket was on his shoulders. A cart rattled by. Something misty and grey floated just above it. And another. And a third. And his juice was gone. And people were crying and talking and whispering and postulating and it was all over now and there was nothing more to see.

Something lashed out at him, grabbing him and trying to pull him back down—

'Calvin? Let's go back inside now, okay?'

'Okay Mom.'

Voices out there in Fleeting Colour Land.

'Did anyone—'

'—whole thing.'

'—the initial wreck, but I saw—'

'—miracle he's alive; did you see—'

'—know whose *fault*—'

'—real tragedy—'

'—know how *old* she was?'

'—probably *drunk*, if you ask—'

'—damn' kids just never learn.'

And the door shut behind him, and he was back home. Back to normal.

00011011

'—*soup* sound.'

....

'What?'

'I *said*: how does a nice, hot bowl of tomato *soup* sound,' his mother said, 'Can you eat something, do you think?'

'Oh. Okay. Why not.'

'Okay. Jesus you scared the hell outta me. Are you okay now?'

'Sure.'

'Yes or no. Stop playing games here. Okay? Yes? No? Calvin?'

'Yes I'm fucking okay goddamnit!'

Jenny Hamlet jumped back from him, her face twisted into a relieved, surprised, terrified, amused, hurt, angered mess for an instant. Then she exhaled pointedly and stepped forward to him again, taking his arm and leading him to the dated sofa and

coaxing him to lie down. 'Here,' she said, grabbing the remote and hitting the Power Button. She handed it off to him as she turned to go. 'Find something. I'll have your soup ready in a few minutes.'

More fleeting colours.

Channel up

Hawkeye whining about something on M*A*S*H.

Channel up.

Some revolutionary new formula on an infomercial.

Channel up.

Pat Robertson postulating that everyone was the spawn of Satan.

Channel up.

'—other car has been identified as Lisa Kennedy, nineteen, also of Chicago. More up-to-the-minute coverage as it comes in.'

Lisa.

Nineteen.

Other car.

Lisa.

Identified.

Identified?

Identified: dead.

How much wood could a woodchuck burn.

Calvin Hamlet was fourteen years old when he became an adult.

00011100

Diatribes on the wall down there.

HOW MUCH WOOD COULD A RABBIT BURN?

KILROY WAS THERE.

00011101

Kilroy had been fourteen years old when he'd become an adult.

Eighteen years. Eighteen fleeting years.

He'd been right about that: the second fourteen years of his life *had* flashed by. It hadn't been an *easy* life, by any means; but it had happened, and it had happened *quickly*. 2013 had arrived without braking, and slammed into him like a Cutlass Supreme into a Celica. That had been four years ago; that had been yesterday.

Kilroy was thirty-two years old. Kilroy was timeless.

He lit a Dunhill and looked out the window again. Jolly old.

00011110

He'd outgrown America before he'd outgrown the Adidas he'd been wearing that night. There was nothing left for him there. Nothing but memories of fire.

Memories.

Recorded live.

He turned away from the streets of London and returned to his laptop.

He pondered the blank screen. Wordless. He began to type, just to get used to typing, maybe.

It was a dark and stormy

He deleted the line instantly. It was neither dark nor stormy. It was old and sad. It was over.

It was over.

It was over before it had even begun. A dumb, American kid in a dumb, American town.

He deleted that too.

It had all become hopeless. His licence to kill had been revoked.

His licence to kill

Deleted.

His licence to create

Deleted.

His licence to write

Deleted. Fuck.

His licence to write. His licence to record. His licence to communicate.

His licence.

00011111

It had come as no surprise, he supposed. It had begun even before he'd been born. They'd been working on it for decades. Centuries, maybe. Ever since they'd written the amendment in the first place.

Hays had censored Betty Boop. The Motion Picture Association of America had created the Rating System—GA, NR, G, PG, R, X, PG13, NC17. Beavis had been prohibited from acknowledging the existence of fire; South Park and Saturday Night Live had been decalawed; Dalton Trumbo had been banned, and Mark Twain had been criminalised.

The attack had come in laughable, seemingly be-

nigh waves. The churches had argued against the products of Marilyn Manson and Kevin Smith. The FCC had regulated George Carlin and Howard Stern and Eric 'ManCow' Muller. The PTA had counterattacked KISS and SlipKnot in the schools. CNN had shown the American people, and indeed the world, exactly what they'd wanted to see.

As the iron hand of censorship had begun to constrict, technology had come to the rescue with desktop publishing. The archaic practise of submitting a manuscript for consideration by a regulatable corporation had crumbled beneath the awesome power of the vanity press. Anyone could be a writer, spending a few thousand dollars on a short run through sites like BookCrafters.com, or even outsourcing his content free of upfront investment to Print on Demand sites; realworld booksellers were dying, and online services like amazon.com were rising from the ashes like the protohuman shrews had risen from the carcasses of the dinosaurs.

An idea, a computer, a modem: a novelist, a producer, a distributor.

Most of the micropublishers failed: lacking the knowledge of marketing strategy, these housewives and accountants could write the books, but had no idea how to sell them; others had the backgrounds in sales, and were able to peddle their novels as they peddled their vacuums and used cars, but had no talent for conveying their stories; yet some excelled, stooping to innovation and even deceit.

And they were all untouchable.

There were regulations, of course: defamation was met with lawsuits from the damaged. But, for the most part, the new breed of writer was unopposed by the powers that be. There was no such thing as bad publicity, after all. And nothing about writing, printing, and marketing a novel was technically illegal. Initially.

At the same time, the internet was evolving into a capacious mass of disinformation and copyright infringement. Fact and fiction looked alike in hypertext, spawning a new order of intelligence in the American people: experts in the untrue. Third layer mpegs compressed over half a gigabyte of music to a mere fifty megs, allowing digital recordings to download in a matter of minutes, and then seconds. EBooks—sellable hypertext and extensible versions of printed novels—cut the expense of publishing to zilch.

The information society had grown and flourished at the turn of the millennium.

00100000

Fears of internet regulation had begun to surface. Paranoid theories regarding FCC regulation of website content and spammed hoaxes regarding EMail postage rates had choked the ISDN lines. Icons claiming *This Site Supports Free Speech on the Internet* had surfaced and spread.

Never in the history of civilisation had censorship seemed so terrifying, yet so impossible.

After all, the 'net was worldwide. And it was largely anonymous. People used pseudonyms to remain enigmatic in regard to age, and even gender. Netizens were regarded as he/she/its. Anyone could upload anything, anywhere, anytime.

What wasn't understood by the majority was exactly how traceable they really were.

They left routing signatures wherever they went: Internet Protocol Addresses; 207.168.60.113. It was merely a matter of recording the IP Address of a given user, tracing him/her/it back to his/her/its Internet Service Provider, and possibly determining which of that ISP's dynamic customers had visited a particular website at a specific time. It was a fail-safe, designed to allow the proper authorities to trump 'anonymous' threats and conspirators.

The 'net was under observation—passive regulation. Censorship was a possibility after all.

Later, it was a reality.

00100001

That's where it had begun. Disinformers had been denied renewal or even banned by their ISPs, leaving those otherwise benign surfers to start up accounts elsewhere; but, by that time, they'd been flagged—their names logged, and their creditcard and social security numbers prohibited. Some of them had moved to the mall-based terminals, only to find that their

cards had no longer worked in those machines, either. The coin-operated browsers had begun to follow cigarette vending machines into historical lore.

Registered webmasters had been even easier to control: NetworkSolutions were regulated by design, giving the FCC free reign over the renewal of domains within the United States. The universally-advertised blowme.com had disappeared; other infamous free-thinker sites had followed it into oblivion.

Hypertext had been scanned for disinformation by spiders, the URLs catalogued for action; MPEGs of both audio and video had been hunted, analysed, and often deleted by sysops.

The regulation of the 'net had quickly been compared to the Third Reich of Nazi Germany: websites sympathising with those radical few still supporting free internet speech had become known colloquially as *Schindlers*. The free, web-based EMail banks had been dissolved.

The 'net had become as regulated as PBS.

Some aspiring writers had gone back to being housewives and accountants. Others had turned once again to the preprinted vanity press market. A few thousand dollars; a few thousand novels; a few thousand readers. Communication had survived. For a little while.

Printers had become less and less common as the presses had been seized under the provisions of eminent domain. Established publishers had been controlled for content, or dissolved in tax evasion charges and drug trafficking scandals. Hardcopy publishing had quickly joined the internet in forced compliance to the FCC.

The opposition had weakened, but remained. America was the land of the free; its first constitutional amendment prohibited the congress from passing any law abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press. A totalitarian state was legally impossible in the United States of America.

Legally.

00100010

In the year 2011, Amendment XXVIII had been ratified into the Constitution of America.

Section 1. The Federal Communications Commission may, with regard to due process, restrain the freedom of speech, in respect to any individual, or establishment, of America, provided that such individual, or establishment, is found guilty in a court of law of Conspiracy to Disinform.

Section 2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Which had precluded the freedom of speech, and of the press, and of the people.

00100011

Two years later, in 2013, the Federal Licensing Programme had come into effect.

Writers, artists, musicians, filmmakers, webmasters, et cetera, had been, for the sake of simplicity regarding the new amendment, encouraged to apply for a Federal Creative Licence. The application was some thirty pages in length.

The basics: liquid assets in excess of ten million American dollars were required by all licensed creators, as well as malpractise insurance to guarantee payment of libel suits, as well as logues submitted regarding hours spent creating—a minimum of two hours per week, and a maximum of forty, as well as divulged expenditures relative to creating, and so on. Truly established household names had been able to remain in business; the majority of novelists, poets, actors, and such had been forced to find new forms of employment.

Some had gone quietly, viewing their inability

to gather the necessary liquid assets as personal failure in their industries. Others went into hiding. Kilroy had gone into hiding.

00100100

It

Deleted.

Blank. And wordless.

And pointless.

Kilroy sat back and glared at the laptop ignominiously from the sides of his eyes.

He'd never been a housewife or an accountant. He had, at the time, been an established household name. Not quite the *most* famous writer on the planet—he hadn't quite surpassed Stephen King and Michael Crichton and Tom Clancy—but he was doing well for himself, by any estimation. A dozen best-sellers; an estimated annual salary in excess of eight million dollars, American. He'd had the liquid assets and the malpractice insurance. He'd done nearly everything correctly.

Nearly.

Until he'd slipped an innocuous passage into a novel: *Every night, before I sleep, I write a book I cannot keep.*

00100101

It hadn't been any sort of a code, or even a direct reproach of the newly implemented laws. It had, in fact, been largely autobiographical. Calvin had been speaking through an insomniac character who would lay awake for hours before sleep finally came. In those hours, his thoughts would wander. The thoughts would arrange into plotlines, stories, and even entire novels. Then, sleep would take him, and the idea would be lost to the implacable weirdness of his dreams.

The point: the character had wanted to be a writer, but couldn't write when he'd had the time to. His ideas had been like flies—buzzing about and mad-

dening him—until he'd actually get to the necessary materials to process them into something more stable, by which time they'd have flown off into nothingness again.

The point, simple though it had been, had been missed entirely by the idiots who had accused him of resistance to the laws of the land.

When he'd ultimately managed to get the FCC to understand the autobiographical and personal nature of the concept, they'd been very accommodating indeed: accusing him of falsifying his worklogues and reporting to have spent less time writing than he really had. That the 'work' performed was wasted and lost in the night was irrelevant to them; it didn't matter whether he profited from the extra hours, only that he used them without admitting it.

He'd been heavily fined, and his licence had been revoked. Otherwise, he'd been free to go, and to write no more.

Calvin Hamlet had left the United Republic of America the following Monday.

00100110

That he'd fled to England to secure amnesty against the FCC had been the ultimate irony: less than 250 years after the United States America had been established to prohibit the censorship of speech and religion and—by some accounts—*thought*, Greater London had emerged as a sanctuary for writers and other artists. In London, he'd been able to write again. No one had given a damn.

Except for him.

His books were banned in America. He could sell them in the UK, and have them translated over to a dozen other languages for purchase and assimilation by other Eurasian countries; but he couldn't so much as place a classified advert in an American newspaper. He took that oddly personally.

That was why Kilroy had returned after all these years.

By day, he was Calvin Hamlet, Britainised Novelist Extraordinaire, and author of nearly a score of books; by night—every night—Kilroy was here.

Diatribes on the walls down there. Everywhere.

00100111

He'd been an accomplished hacker back in 1999. The 'net hadn't changed so much.

A 'clean' laptop here, a 'borrowed' SatPhone there, and Kilroy wrote for the world, uploading his subversive tales and postulates to established and regulated websites throughout the Land of the Fee and the Home of the Slave. Their efforts to trace his residual IP Address led them in circles, literally around the globe, from satellite to satellite. There were thousands of the things up there, running everything from Unix to WindowsNT to QNX, confusing the signal at every junction. And triangulating his temporary SatPhones was flatly impossible. He was online for a matter of minutes, his custom-scripted software spamming his ASCII to thousands of popular websites simultaneously; a moment later, offline again, he would dismantle the phones and discard their remains throughout the megalopolis of London.

00101000

He regarded the Laptop for a moment. Then:

Kilroy Was Here

Calvin Hamlet

Kilroy Was Here.....Calvin Hamlet

Indicia

Written and Designed and Edited by Calvin Hamlet

Kilroy Was Here

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everynight

darrenjames

Kilroy Was Here.....Calvin Hamlet

for

everynight

darrenjames

Kilroy Was Here.....Calvin Hamlet

[blank]

Kilroy Was Here.....Calvin Hamlet

Preface

1.

Every night, before I sleep, I write a book I cannot keep.
Everynight: Kilroy is here.

Kilroy was rather above the indignity of regulation.

00101001

Calvin Hamlet was fifteen years old when he dropped out of school.

He'd put up with it as long as he'd felt able to. The coursework was easy enough—*too* easy. It wasn't that at all. It was simply an inability to empathise—even sympathise—with...*them*. The others. The world.

Lisa remained in his mind. Not an obsession, but a focus. Life, he'd discovered, was short. Life was fragile. Life could be far better spent than by sitting in a classroom with the alpha group who were able to *find* their ways to school that day.

The school, and perhaps the world, were too dumb to survive. And that was something for which he was unwilling to accept any responsibility. Darwin had come up with a pretty good theory; Calvin had no interest in disproving it by tainting the samples with his participation.

The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle: that which one observes, one also changes. Granted, that was largely true only at the subatomic level, but Calvin wasn't taking any chances.

After Lisa's death, and before his resignation from high school, his grades had begun to drop. He tested well, but he didn't bother with his homework. Word had spread to the guidance counsellor. Acting on a hunch, she'd referred him to a neurologist who worked on a sliding scale. The simple fact of the matter: there was something unusual about his brain.

The syndrome was known as Asperger Disorder. Generally regarded as an offshoot of autism, it led to superior—often immeasurable intelligence in the capacity of memorisation and comprehension; meanwhile, it disallowed the individual from understanding various social graces and routines.

According to the experts, Calvin was likely one of the ten most intelligent people alive.

Calvin regarded things literally. Mental pictures developed over metaphors and similes; his linear logic relied on sentence structure. Simple collo-

qualisms arrested his mind. His mother had told him *hurry up or you'll be late*, which had given him the impression that he'd be hurrying upward, ascending quickly, hurtling skyward, lest he might arrive past schedule. Or, in secondary analysis, *late* might have been a euphemism for *dead*.

Hurry up or you'll be late: Ameliorate or end up deceased.

He never thought about it much, of course. To him, it was just word games and possibilities; meanwhile, the very admonition had, secondarily, caused him to end up, not dead, but behind schedule. *Irony abounds.*

Possible responses to stimuli read like shopping lists. Nevertheless, his thought process worked quickly enough that he could pick one from a field of dozens in less time than anyone else took thinking up his first reply. The disorder went unnoticed for years, due simply to that inadvertent camouflage.

The diagnosis hadn't helped him at all. In fact, it had encouraged him to bail out of ninth grade. He had a mental disorder [which didn't sound right to him; he'd never equated *genius* to *disability*] which couldn't be cured—if a cure were something to be hoped for in a case of superior intellect—and which merely explained why everyone he talked to seemed so damned fucking *dumb* all the time. It wasn't a matter of narcissism, either; it was literally hard—even dangerous—to be humble when as good as he.

The most painless course of action: evacuate.
So, he had.

Initially, the free time was painful to him. Heavy and slow. Progressively, he began to fill it with more productive activities. He began to write.

It wasn't easy at first. The words refused to combine into sentences; the sentences resisted becoming paragraphs; the paragraphs were reluctant to become chapters; the chapters in no way wanted to compile into novels.

It was a dark and stormy night for months.
When he tried.

When he wasn't trying, the stories flowed easily, and quickly, and without bounds. Every night, before he slept, he wrote a book. But he couldn't hang onto it at all. It would metamorphose into a dream, and float away into other dreams, and be irrevocably erased from his mind by the time he awoke.

Eventually, it began to come together. The

short, largely pointless stories sequelised, and became chapters in novel-lengthed tales. Still, the first page was always the hardest to write. The first line.

He would read real, published books. But those didn't tell him much, except that most of them started with articles or pronouns. And, while there were books and articles written describing how to publish and market a book, none of them seemed to mention much about writing novels in the first place.

Every other vocation seemed to have a proverbial user manual to it. He could learn to fix a car, or make a salad, or sell a house. Writing, it seemed, was not only unteachable, but diametric to the simplified second law of thermodynamics. Order from chaos. Like a volcanic eruption creating an island; it could happen, but there was no way to explain the procedure to a student.

Fly or die; sink or swim; write or suck. He wrote.

He still wasn't sure whether he was any *good* at it. People read his stuff, and told him it was good; but that didn't mean much to him. It seemed more like *sympathy* than praise: he'd show a story to someone who would read the first three or five pages before stating *That's really good; I'll have to read it when I have some free time*. Which told him nothing more than he already knew: ninety-eight percent of America were functionally illiterate—incapable of reading at a twelfth-grade level, and often trapped beneath the sixth. He could have drawn a picture, or sung a song, or made a film, and people would have assimilated the whole thing in less than two hours...assuming their attentionspans held out for that long. But a novel: he seemed to take less time *writing* them than his audience took to *read* them.

Cynical, perhaps. Sanctimonious? If they only knew how accommodating he'd been thus far....

It showed in his writings, too. He'd once replaced the blank screen with an opening line:

You won't understand a word of this, but keep moving
your eyes back and forth as if you did, so you'll appear
a little less dumb than we both know you are.

Which he'd ended up deleting within seconds. No need to alienate the two percent who could handle big words like *understand*.

If a cure were something to be hoped for in a

case of superior intellect. Maybe so. Maybe he'd have been happier if he'd been as dumb as the others. *They* seemed happy enough, after all.

They didn't have to regard the world as an atavistic disgrace. *They* didn't have to watch each other wage those ostentatious little contentions day in and day out—among idiots, it hardly seemed important which of them was the least dumb. Idiots condemning idiots for being idiots; trip the light bombastic.

The hell with them. Two percent was better than zero.

00101010

He sat in the smoking section, shiny new laptop [purchased with the proceeds from such items as illbegotten Pokémon cards] plugged into the electrical outlet he'd found next to his booth.

The cursor blinked expectantly at him. Waiting for input. The screen was blank. So was his mind.

The

Deleted.

It

Deleted.

He

Deleted.

She

Deleted.

Damn.

Considered.

Deleted.

Blink...blink...blink...blink...blink....

His life began the night hers had ended.

Heh.

His life had begun the night hers had ended.

Maybe....

Maybe not.

Deleted.

It wasn't something he could write about. Not yet, anyway. Besides: who else would care, besides him; and he already knew the story well enough. There was no need to write it all down anyway. He'd remember.

He'd remember her.

Lisa.

Not an obsession. A focus. Just a focus. Something to remind him that time could be wasted.

Time could be wasted.

For all the technological advances since the construction of the pyramids, the number of hours available in a day had never exceeded twenty-four.

Choppy. Disassociated. Less than graceful. But a good start.

He could fix it later, if he had to. Still, it served its purpose for the moment: it gave him a position from which to begin. He could work with that.

He sat back and considered where he was going with the idea.

Time was static. Even as the technology curve escalated, nothing took any less time per day than it always had. And that was boring.

More interesting might be a story regarding the curve itself. Or, more likely, a character who was trying to keep up with....

For all the technological advances since the construction of the pyramids, the number of hours available in a day had never exceeded twenty-four.

Highlighted and replaced:

blah

And again:

CHR was a

Stop. He needed a name, not just *character*: CHR.
Chris.

Chris was a

A...?

Chris couldn't keep up anymore.

Better.

Chris couldn't keep up any longer.

Better still.

But....

Chris couldn't keep up with the world around him.

Or:

Chris couldn't keep up with the world around her.

Which was also an option.
And an interesting angle.

Chris couldn't keep up with the world.

Chris could remain a nicely androgynous character; a sort of genderless everyman. An *everyperson*. It would complicate things, since the pronouns would have to agree with either possibility. But it wasn't impossible. And it might be interesting. *Maybe.*

Or, thinking about it, it might not. It might sacrifice the story itself to do it that way. And the point of the story wasn't precisely Chris as a character; the point was the rush of technological advances as seen by the public. That's where the story was.

Chris couldn't keep up with the world. It perplexed him.
It outran him.

Him. So: there it was.

Chris Surname couldn't keep up with the world. It perplexed him. It outran him.

Details, details.

Chris Fuckit couldn't keep up with the world. It perplexed him. It outran him.

Bet the Reading Is Fundamental people love to see that....

Chris McFuckit couldn't keep up with the world. It perplexed him. It outran him.

Much better.

Chris McPherson couldn't keep up with the world. It perplexed him. It outran him.

Good enough.

He sat back and lit a cigarette, staring out into the rest of the smoking section for the first time in an hour.

No technological advances out there. People trying to catch on to the latest annoyances in child-proofed lighters. That was about it. The year 2000: not flying cars and robotic maids, but Bic and Scripto lighters containing IQ tests. *Science marches on.*

Chris McPherson couldn't keep up with the world. It perplexed him. It outran him.
It overlooked him.

Ooh. The plot thickens....

The question: *so the hell what.* So the world was moving too quickly for this one poor guy. *How excruciatingly interesting.* There had to be more of a point to this....

Calvin sat back and thought about that for a moment.

He wasn't sure about the rest of the world, but he tended to watch the very first page of a given book for something worth reading about. Either there was an obvious point in those few opening paragraphs, or there wasn't. He didn't rely on the meretricious little blurbs [Chris McPherson is a technophobe living in a technophiliac world, who must learn to adapt, or fall behind into blah and blah and blah and so on], or the rave reviews [Calvin Hamlet at his very best...an invigorating read] from the sorts of critics who wanted *everything* to be better than Cats.

If something interesting didn't appear on the

first page—the first four hundred words or so—there probably wasn't going to be much point to it at all. And if he didn't see a point, he doubted if anyone else would find one for him.

He read his first two paragraphs yet again. And began to create something of interest, he hoped.

Chris McPherson couldn't keep up with the world. It perplexed him. It outran him.

It overlooked him.

At thirty-five years of age, he was a solid victim of Future Shock—that modern miracle of psychological unrest in which the subject found even day-to-day surprises to be more than his mind could bear. He was not alone: the syndrome displayed in a massive percentage of society. Still, he felt abandoned by the rest of his species; the world was speeding away from him like the last crosstown bus on a cold winter night.

Colloquially: he couldn't deal.

That, Calvin thought, might be of interest to anyone picking up the novel at random and flipping through it down at Barnes&Noble some afternoon. At least, he *hoped* so.

He saved what he'd done, spellchecked it, FindReplaced the doubles between the ends of previous sentences and the beginnings of the next [he'd read somewhere that the habit of hitting the spacebar twice after a period was unnecessary in printed books, and that typesetters didn't bother with them—this *after* he'd taught himself to double-space after reading the opposite somewhere else] and ran the hyphenator [ALT-T, and H in Microsoft Works] to clean up the gaps in the justified text. Then he saved it again and read it over.

He liked it well enough. It could have been better, and it could have been worse; and it could have been written by someone else, in someone else's style. His book: his rules. And it wasn't like anyone else would ever actually see it. No one knew who he was. And the publishing industry was hardly known for printing and shipping novels written by fifteen-year-olds, after all.

Still: no need to abandon it, or write it badly. Better to make it too good for a personal project than limit his writing in the expectation of pinkslips.

He skipped back up to the top of the page, and tossed together a working title.

Technophobe

Calvin Hamlet

And a page break. And:

Indicia

Written by Calvin Hamlet

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Technophobe

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ISBN: To Be Determined

Which, as far as he knew, was good enough for the moment.

Page three:

For

For. That was a very good question.

Lisa popped into his mind. *But...no.* It wasn't for her. He didn't know who it was for, but it wasn't for her. It wasn't *important* enough to be for her.

Maybe, one day, something would be. Until then, he didn't want to waste it on something this....

...*pointless.* It was pointless. He looked it over again, beginning at the title, through the *indicia*, the unfinished dedication, the first page—which should have been the *fifth* page, but was sitting on the fourth.

He added a page break just beneath the unfinished dedication, creating a blank portside page between the actual Page Three and the opening of the story on Page Five.

Then:

[blank]

Which was one way to do it, he supposed.

He read it through again. And, again, it occurred to him how pointless it suddenly seemed. It might have been a good story, and worth writing, but it didn't seem quite important enough to him. Not

right at that moment, anyway. *Later? Maybe. Now? Pointless.*

He didn't delete it. He just stared at it in something like disappointment.

Drank some coffee.

Smoked a cigarette.

Stared at the screen.

Waited for something to happen. An idea to come, a meteor to fall on him, someone to ask whether his new laptop was a computer. He waited impatiently for nothing in particular.

Pointless.

The whole Lisa thing was pointless. It shouldn't have mattered.

But it *did*. It *did* matter. To *him*.

It was only one night. It might have only been one night, even if it hadn't been her *last* night.

It might have ended anyway. It might have developed into something more. He'd have liked to have found out either way.

He'd have liked for her to have lived.

If wishes were horses, though. If wishes were horses, beggars would....

He *had* ridden. That's why she'd been there in the *first* place. But for dropping him back off at home, she'd have lived. Not for ever, maybe, but for longer than she had.

It wasn't really *his* fault. But, in a very undeniable way, it *had* been. In a way, it still was.

The cursor blinked at him. Almost accusingly.

He saved *Technophobe* again and shut down Micro-Soft Works for a while.

More coffee, more cigarettes; maybe later he'd be in more of a writing mood. For now, time passed.

Come ideas or meteors, time passed.

00101011

The moving rider rides, and having rid—

Calvin awoke abruptly. He'd been dreaming of Lisa again. *Little Lisa, all burned up. All gone. All she wrote.*

Or rode. Or drove. Or something.

The dream began to dissipate away from him. Clouds of smoke clearing magically before an opening door. Or, maybe, a closing one.

Or, maybe, he wasn't awake enough for metaphors. At least, not *good* ones. Not ones worth writing down. They were pointless, like everything else about writing was.

He wondered whether it was too late to go back to school. And, of course, it was. Diploma or not, he'd be working a McJob for McNothing McSoon. And for all his deplorable little McLife.

And all that happy McShit.

McFuckit. He crawled out of bed, feeling a hell of a lot older than fifteen.

He lumbered over to the mirror and looked into it with fatigue. He'd taken a bath the night before, washed his hair, and gone to sleep. Now his hair was anarchic, but generally clean. He combed through it without much thought. He wasn't late for much, but he wasn't really very interested in taking another bath.

He wasn't very interested in much at all.

He looked at his eyes in the mirror. Aesthetically, he was fifteen, he thought. His eyes looked old and tired. It hadn't always been this way. He'd had a chance once. But time was slipping away from him now. He was getting old. He couldn't legally drive a car yet, but he was getting old.

He casually tossed the brush back onto the desk and shuffled away from the mirror.

00101100

Breakfast: uncooked PopTarts, a can of Doctor Pepper, and thou. *Thou* being whatever passed for Mtv at the end of the twentieth century. Commercials with commercial breaks. Infomercials were less annoying.

Time passed. The sun rose. The channels changed. The day progressed toward nothing at all.

He felt unemployed. Dangerously static. Over.

Done.

Pointless, in a word.

His mind wandered back to *Technophobe*. Was the title taken already? Was there a *technophobe.com*? Did

it really matter, or could he still publish a book if the title had already been used elsewhere? Could he publish a book at *all*? Could a book be pointless? Was *Technophobe* truly *that* pointless, or did it have a modicum of potential to it? *Questions abound.*

If his life were a novel, that novel would be pointless. He wasn't giving the reader anything to see.

He shut off the television and went off to find his shoes.

00101101

Calvin wandered mindlessly through the mall.

He felt a bit like a secret shopper, or a corporate spy, or something. He glanced about at the modern conveniences he already took for granted, and tried to imagine them from the perspective of a thirty-five-year-old. Digital phones for a penny at Radio Shack and in the kiosks set up for AirTouch and SprintPCS. Furby knockoffs at KayBee Toys and Spencer Gifts. Gumball machines with Central Processing Units running the little spheres through obstacle courses before dropping them off to the consumer. He tried to imagine what a DreamCast or a PlayStationII would seem like to someone twice his age.

To Calvin, none of it was very impressive at all. It simply *existed*. But to those who had actually *been* there when Space Invaders and Asteroids had been a Big Deal, Sega and Sony might be perplexing creatures indeed.

He still couldn't empathise. Realistically, the technology curve was steep enough in the year 2000 that more had happened during his lifetime than had ever happened prior to 1985. His first real computer had been a Dell desktop model, screaming along with its 80486 CPU and 14,400bps modem; his laptop was a Pentium Three running DSL at half a megabit per second. Still, he wasn't shocked by the advances; on the contrary, he was a little disappointed. It wasn't happening quickly *enough*.

There was so much more that could be done. He'd read about the closing of the patent office. It had been shut down because, according to *them*, there was nothing left to invent; everything that could ever

exist had, in some form or other, already been created. Years later, such things as televisions and computers had been invented, and patented after all.

To believe for an instant that there was nothing more to exist under the sun was the act of a fool. Calvin alone, even at fifteen, could imagine hundreds of nonexistent wonders. Genetically engineered housepets were an option, and repulsorlifts, and terraforming, and....

But he wasn't shopping for *future* advancements; he was looking for commonplace items which would blow the mind of a BabyBoomer. Or even an older example of GenerationX. *Thirty-five...presuming the book was set in the year 2000* [and he hadn't ruled that out] *then a thirty-five-year-old could be either, depending which generation his parents had belonged to. Or, still did.* Thirty-five-year-olds weren't often orphaned, even if they seemed incalculably old to a fifteen-year-old. *Something to bear in mind for the book, if he was indeed planning to write it.*

He slowed his stride and thought about that a bit. One day—in about twenty years—his mother was going to be fifty. *Fifty.* And *he'd* be thirty-five. What would the fifteen-year-olds of the future make of *him*, he wondered.

Terraforming was one thing to imagine; being thirty-five was something entirely else.

But, maybe, it wasn't such a bad thing to consider. There could be advantages to it, after all. If, that was, he wasn't moving into McManagement right about then.

He pondered that. By the age of thirty-five, he could very well be a real writer. A *novelist*. An author. He could actually be one of those guys who takes a blank page and a blinking cursor, or even a blank notebook and a new pen, and transmogrifies them into a complete book. Printed, bound, shipped, and lining the shelves and the cardboard display cases [in case they were still making them out of cardboard, two decades or so into the twenty-first century] alongside icons like Stephen King and Michael Crichton and Tom Clancy and—

But, probably not. 1947, 1942...it was possible that the major authors of the late twentieth century would have retired by the time he was in his thirties. Instead, there would be a new generation of novelists out there. A few of them would already have been publishing as the new millennium began; others would appear later, out of the blue.

He, Calvin hoped, might be one of them.

That in mind, he began to move quickly along again, watching for things which might scare the living hell out of Chris McPherson.

The mall itself might be a good example. A SmokeFree Environment; disquieting to Calvin, to wake up one day and discover that such a place had gone nonsmoking overnight might well send someone like McPherson over the brink. And the price of cigarettes, rising desperately more quickly than the general six percent annual increase common to inflation. In Calvin's lifetime, the things had gone from a buck a pack to nearly five; a can of soda had doubled from about fifty cents to a full dollar.

For that matter, Coca-Cola had disappeared just about fifteen years ago now, replaced by New Coke, and later renamed CokeII. Coca-Cola Classic had risen like a remodelled phoenix from the ashes of the mistake, and had since become commonplace. Still, to someone who had spent half his life drinking Classic Coke before it had returned as an apology for Coke's pepsification endeavour, it might be a little awkward. That probably wasn't Future Shock in its purest form, but it might be worth considering for a paragraph or two.

Then there was coffee to consider. What had once been a simple, invariable beverage had suddenly become an industry. Cappuccino, Frappuccino, Mocha HalfCaffs...if it was reasonably warm and contained methylated xanthenes, someone probably thought it up and labelled it as coffee. *Strike that*; coffee no longer had to be particularly warm. *That* could drive Chris McPherson utterly bugshit.

And MicroBrews. And airbags and side-impact measures and ABS. And body piercing. And....

And there were lots of things for a technophobe to shrink away from in society. Lots of things to hide from in the corner and wish it could all be like it used to be. *The good old days.*

And these were ideas. And they were buzzing about his head like rabid, mutated flies.

He darted for a table near an electrical outlet, started up his laptop, and prepared to speak out against technology on Chris McPherson's behalf....

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One

Chris McPherson couldn't keep up with the world. It perplexed him. It outran him.

It overlooked him.

At thirty-five years of age, he was a solid victim of Future Shock—that modern miracle of psychological unrest in which the subject found even day-to-day surprises to be more than his mind could bear. He was not alone; the syndrome occurred to a massive percentage of society; still, he felt abandoned by the rest. The world was speeding away from him like the last crosstown bus on a cold winter night.

Colloquially: he couldn't deal.

Today was a perfect example. He walked along through the mall, desperately aware of the newly-implemented nonsmoking policy throughout the structure, grimacing at the latest in technological achievements. Unnecessary, brainless advances for a world without ends.

Why fix it, he wondered to himself, if it ain't broken.

Broken or not, society was ringing up a hell of a repair bill. It was all around him.

Cellular phones—no, *digital* phones; you could get them for a penny if you signed up for the service. He couldn't imagine anyone being important enough to need such a thing. Payphones still existed for emergencies, even if they *had* suddenly mutated from the standard metal black and chrome monoliths into whatever the hell the cardscanning yellow digital-readout gizmos were. He couldn't figure them out at all. They wanted him to dial the number *before* he dropped in the money—and they didn't *require* money; he had the option of charging the call to his MasterCard. For a *phone call*. A matter of spare change. Who in hell would ever charge a local call to a credit card? Probably an effort to produce the cashless society he'd heard so much about.

Worse: internet terminals. Slide your MasterCard through *their* readers, and you could surf the 'net while standing there as easily as you could use the new payphones—unless you had a digital mobile phone, in

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which case you could just connect your laptop to your StarTac and surf from the backseat of your car.

He walked on, wanting a cigarette and incapable of smoking one. Gumball machines taunted him to buy their gum, and watch it do tricks on its way to his hand. He didn't *want* to watch a gumball do tricks; he didn't even want any *gum*. He wanted a damned *cigarette*, that's what he wanted.

He wanted it to be yesterday. Again. Still.

Calvin stopped typing and looked it over. He spell-checked it. His laptop hadn't wanted to believe in words like non-smoking and *cardscanning* and StarTac and *payphone* and *gumball*, but it had learned quickly enough.

Whether he wanted to believe in the text was another matter. He wasn't sure that he liked it much. It seemed rushed, and choppy. And bad. It could be better. He wasn't sure *how* it could be better, and he knew it could be worse; but it didn't seem quite like what he'd been hoping he'd wind up writing.

He read it over again. Maybe it wasn't that bad. Maybe that wasn't the problem. Maybe the problem was the everpresent *Now What*.

He had a technophobic protagonist. *Great*. And *so what*. He could introduce the character—*had*, in fact, introduced him. *Hi there; I'm Chris McPherson; howyadoin*. And then: *Now What*. He had to do something, or it wouldn't be a story. And Calvin couldn't think of a damned thing to have him do.

The *Now What*. It got him every damned time.

00101110

Now What:

ally important how it had gotten that far, or even why. What mattered, to Chris, was finding a way to stop it. And that meant that he needed Cain after all.

He returned to the payphone, glancing skyward before picking up the handset, as if to ask forgiveness from whatever deity might rule in lowtech heaven. Then he dialed Cain's number, and waited as a computer told him how much change he needed to insert to connect the call.

He gave the ugly yellow monster a pair of quarters. He didn't happen to have exact change with him, but he preferred spending an extra fifteen cents over actually feeding the thing his MasterCard.

'Cain,' he said dryly, answering his phone.

Chris hesitated for a moment. Then: 'Hello, Cain.'

Cain paused briefly. Chris could imagine the 'cracker forming a sardonic grin, though he couldn't see it; he could almost *hear* the grin. Cain was enjoying this. A lot.

Finally, Cain responded. 'Mac. What a, ah...surprise.'

'Yeah,' Chris agreed, not heartily, 'Listen: I gave your offer a bit more thought.'

'Thought you might.'

'Oh?'

'Man, you lowtechs are all the same, you know that? Every damned wanna ya. Terrified of what the world is becoming, and powerless to change it without becoming exactly what you fear.'

'It's not a matter of fear—'

'Oh, but it *is*. It *scares* you. *I* scare you. But, without me, that's all you are, is scared. *With* me...you might just get what you're after.'

'I still don't get it,' Chris said, 'I need *you* to get this to *happen*. What's *your* incentive to *help*? I mean: isn't it a bit like suicide? To help defeat—'

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'Mac. Open line. Always an open line. Always more than two listening to the conversation.' Cain sounded overly cautious, even paranoid; but Chris was beginning to believe that, just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean they're not after you.

'Okay. Where can we talk?'

'Not here; that's for sure. Lincoln Park.'

'What? Why.'

'Big open area with lots of people. Even a *sniper* would be crazy to hit us there.'

'A *what?* A *sniper* would be crazy to hit us at *all*. We haven't broken any—'

'Conspiracy to conspire,' Cain said, 'Not a *real* crime, but they don't pay much attention to details like those.'

'Cain?'

'Yeah, Man?'

'Who are "they"?''

'They,' Cain told him, 'are Them; Them is They; We are Us and They are Them.'

'That didn't help much.'

'Lincoln Park. An hour.'

Chris wanted to respond—even to confirm. But the line went dead. There was no instant dialtone, like in the movies; it just ceased to make any noise.

He set the odd, grippy receiver into the weird, counterbalanced cradle and walked quickly away from the phone.

Calvin saved it, spellchecked and hyphenated it, and saved it again; he read it over and nodded to himself.

He'd left the mall. It was far too SmokeFree for really effective writing. That, he assumed, had been the problem earlier. Without nicotine, the brain went wild; smoke a cigarette, and things calmed down in there. Organisation. Rationality.

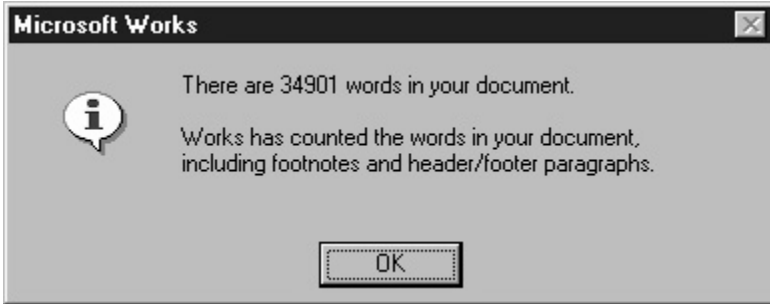
Novelisation.

He read it again. Now his story had a point, and a few characters, and a bit of potential after all.

He glanced at the lower right of the screen. It astounded him:

That, of course, included the title page, and the indicia, and so on; it also included the story he'd begun the night before. He was onto something here. Whether it would prove to be something useful, in the end, he didn't know yet; but it was something, either way.

He hit the Word Count in the Tools pulldown menu:



Nearly a hundred pages; nearly thirty-five thousand words.

He didn't know if that was good: writing thirty-five thousand words into a hundred pages in twenty-four hours. And it didn't really matter to him. Other writers might be faster; others still might be slower; in any case, he could have the book finished within a week at this rate. Whether the book turned out to be any *good* was another matter. He'd rather write a good book over the course of a month, or a year, or a decade, than a bad one in under a week.

Of course, writing a good one in only a week was fine, too.

The real question, of course: *good or bad, a week or a decade, would anyone ever actually see it.* Could he get the thing *published*. Could he get any books published. Ever.

More than anything else he could think of—even [and he felt oddly guilty about this one] having Lisa remain among the living—more than anything else, he wanted the answers to be *Yes*.

00101111

Jenny Hamlet was sixteen years old in 1985—too old for *My Little Pony*, and too young for *Rambo: First Blood Part Two*. If you remembered the sixties, you weren't there; she'd been there, for about a year; the ApolloXI had landed on the moon at nearly the same instant that she'd landed on Earth.

Some sixteen years after Neil Armstrong had taken a small step for a man and a giant leap for mankind, Jenny had taken a gargantuan hurdle for herself. She'd named him Calvin. Calvin Klein.

She knew who Daddy Klein had been; there hadn't really been *that* many contestants on *The Kid is Yours* nine months before. But Daddy Klein had been the good Mister Adult Klein—nearly twenty, by the time Calvin had made his grand entrance into the world. And if she'd narked Daddy Klein out, he'd likely have become Convict Klein. So: Daddy Klein had been 'one of the kids in school', if anyone had needed to know. Which one, in particular, had been neither important nor easily determined.

It hadn't been much of a defence. Even in those days before genetic testing had become globally available, there had been blood tests. Then again, blood tests were merely an alibi; they couldn't prove guilt, but only innocence. And, without a list of suspects from which to narrow it down, they'd still have been left with a number of possible culprits, just by statistical breakdown.

She could have named Daddy Klein, nailed him to the wall, sued for child support...wrecked his life and hers, and Calvin's. She hadn't. Daddy Klein was blissfully unaware of his progeny.

Jenny was excruciatingly informed.

Paula Hamlet had been remarkably supportive about it all. Her insurance covered most of the costs involving the pregnancy, and the rest had been covered by Social Services. It was all going to be okay, everyone had told Jenny with every breath.

Jenny was one of the founding members of GenerationX. She didn't know that in 1985, of course; the term was still half a

decade from being coined. But she was the product of a pair of Baby Boomers, designating her, by birthright, to be an inherent slacker and antichristian. The syndrome was no more her fault than that of any XMan.

Paula Hamlet had left—and subsequently divorced—Chuck Hamlet. Paula had joined the workforce, losing most of what would eventually be categorised as *Quality Time* by the marketing divisions. Jenny's life had been little more than school and television. The Boomer activities of churchgoing and baseball games and annual trips to Yellowstone were foregone, but not missed.

Paula had always asserted that there was a god up there somewhere, but had never done much to point the deity out to Jenny at all.

Jenny, like the majority of XMen, had used the term *god* exclusively in vain; there was no other way to pronounce it; the closest thing to divine intervention had been catching George Burns shuffling out of the courtroom and out of John Denver's *Earthly Life* on HBO in the afternoons of her childhood.

In Jenny's mind, there was no god. Or, if there was, it was not a friendly animal. Particularly during labour.

She'd mentioned that with vehemence during delivery. She'd never held Daddy Klein, or Calvin, responsible for any of it. Calvin was at least fifty percent her own fault, and she'd gained controlling interest over Daddy Klein without issue. She could have deleted Calvin months before it was too late; she could have handed him off to an established parenthood even afterward; she'd kept him, and done every damned bit as well to raise him as she could. If her shortcomings as a mother were her fault, they weren't intentional.

00110000

Jenny was somewhere between brainless and brilliant, like most people of her generation. Calvin was exceptional. A part of his brilliance, Jenny had always assumed, was environmental. He'd had the combined input of Jenny's and Paula's efforts in the formative

years. He'd absorbed everything they'd offered him.

It was unnerving, in a way. Calvin spotted patterns in impossible places. When he'd been four, she'd taken him to a greasy spoon of a place for a snack. On the wall had been a dated, aluminium advert for Hires Root Beer. Calvin had identified the brand [he'd been reading for two years—the previous six months at an adult level] as HiRes. She'd corrected him on the pronunciation, and he'd corrected her back, explaining that HiRes was short for High Resolution, and diametric to LoRes. It was a command in BASIC, which let the AppleIIPlus know whether it would be outputting the HLINEs and VLINEs [Horizontal and Vertical LINEs, respectively] when it compiled the code into a computer-generated illustration. She'd accepted his explanation with the *whatever* attitude of an overloaded twenty-year-old. Dissatisfied with her response, Calvin had burned it into his mental itinerary to prove to her how CG worked once and for all when they got back home to the ageing computer.

That had gotten her interested in his learning curve. She'd asked how he'd known about the programming language at all, and he'd handed her the book laying approximately where later models would require a mousepad to be, and he'd given her a look representing a phrase which would later dominate the internet: *RtFM: Read the Fucking Manual.*

She'd leafed through it, and it had scared her. Literally scared her. Not in the way a horror film would scare her, either. Five years later, Alice Cooper would vocalise the concept behind *The Last Temptation of Alice* with the idea that, *It's become more frightening, in modern times, to walk back to the car in the real world than to sit there watching the manufactured horror onscreen at the cinema.* Jenny had run her eyes over the example codes of BASIC, not understanding a bit of it, and realised for the first time that Calvin was already smarter, at four, than was she, at twenty.

She would realise that again and again as the years flew by.

00110001

1991 had begun with Desert Shield metamorphosing into Desert Storm. Calvin had been five.

On the news, Arthur Kent had babbled away about the operation, making sure that all the Americans watching CNN knew what was going on over there. Calvin had watched with sceptical interest from the kitchen table, eyes wavering from one side of the thirteen-inch screen to the other, to the trapdoor of the built-in VCR, to the Magnavox logo, back to the screen, left right up down over to the side—almost as if he were trying to duck to a better vantage, to see what lay behind the newscaster in the background. Jenny had caught that, but hadn't understood it. She also hadn't known whether it was a Good Thing or a Bad Thing, that her son was bobbing like an overcaffeinated raven at the television. She'd almost asked [if it had come out at all, it might have been more of a demand] what the hell he was up to and why he couldn't just sit still and watch like normal people might. But she'd never got the chance.

Calvin had hopped up so quickly that she'd barely seen him move, and he'd disappeared down the hall toward what might have been a study in another house. Jenny had absconded—without resistance from Paula—with a number of books for Calvin to read over the course of his childhood. Among those books had been an entire set of a nearly-recent edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Soon—*too* soon—Calvin had returned with one of its volumes opened to a specific page. Jenny had got the impression that he'd read it before, and remembered which page number, in which volume, he would find the entry upon.

He'd sat down again, eyes darting from the television to the book and back, resembling a clock built into a big plastic cat—except his eyes had moved back and forth far more quickly than once per second; if time were as fast as Calvin's eyes had been as he'd switched from television to book to television to book, summer vacation might have been a matter of hours away.

She'd observed him, almost scientifically. His breathing had been normal; his pulse and heart rate had probably been normal; he'd seemed completely relaxed, save for a tiny crease marking the symmetry of his eyebrows and the impossible stutter of his eyeballs. Whatever it had been, it hadn't been epileptic, as far as she'd been able to tell.

After a minute [or, according to CalvinTime, about a month and a half] she'd begun to become frightened—the same fear of reality she'd first discovered looking at the alphanumeric mindlessness of the computer manual—and taken a deep breath before asking what he was reading about. She'd missed that opportunity, too.

She'd never determine, or even ask, whether it had been coincidence, or if Calvin had divined her curiosity, when he'd suddenly stopped zipping his eyes back and forth and set them exactly into hers with the intelligent gaze of an adult. She'd seen that look before, though never in any five-year-old. Bill Bixby had always worn it on *The Incredible Hulk* just before mentioning something characteristically brainy in his husky voice. Calvin had been only five; the look he gave her, and the huskiness in his voice, had been far older.

'It's a rerun,' he'd told her. The look and the certainty had left no room for doubt: he was right, and he knew it.

'What?' Her voice had been less than steady, and her throat less than humid.

'This happened before,' he'd told her, 'in Viet Nam. They televised it back then, too.'

She'd blinked, understanding, but missing the point at the same time.

'They showed them what they wanted them to see.'

'Who,' she'd said, 'Who showed who.'

'They. Them. The people who film the news. They showed the audience what they wanted the audience to see.'

She hadn't fully understood that, either. 'Well, yeah: that's their job.'

'No it's not. Their job is to report the news.'

That had made even less sense to her. 'Right.'

'They're not reporting the news; they're reporting what they want the audience to *think* is the news.'

Either Jenny or Calvin misunderstood something very important. She hadn't been sure which of them she'd hoped it was, either.

Calvin had regarded her with taxed patience. 'They're making things up,' he'd told her—again right; again certain. 'They're saying that *one* thing's going on, when they should be talking about the *other* thing.'

'What *other* thing?' she'd heard herself ask, and instantly become frightened of the forthcoming answer.

It never came. Calvin had rolled his eyes. *Why do I put up with you*, the look had been. He'd snapped the book loudly shut and slammed it onto the tabletop.

The subject, it would appear, was closed.

It had occurred to her that she could have scolded him for *looking at her in that tone of voice* [a decidedly Paulaesque term] or for slamming the book down, but she'd abandoned both. Some issues were better left dead.

Sometimes Calvin simply scared the living hell out of her. There was no question that he was intelligent. The question, which Calvin would later ask himself time and time again, was whether that intelligence was a preeminence, a detriment, an opprobrium, or all three at once.

00110010

By 1994, Calvin's memories of his childhood had become irrevocably intertwined with Jenny's embellished third-party stories.

She'd retaliated against her fear of Calvin's intelligence by embracing it, and even bragging about it. Her remarks regarding Calvin had become a sort of nonlinear mantra.

Calvin was a genius, she thought.

He'd learned—taught himself—to read before he was two years old.

He had read the encyclopaedia when he was four.

You could ask him to multiply numbers, and he'd have the answer before you could punch it out on a calculator.

Give him a list of ten things, and he'll have it memorised backward, forward, and every which way.

You should see the things he can draw.

If it ends in saurus, he can tell you what it was, when it lived, and who found it when, and even what all those names mean in English.

He doesn't really like people too much.

That last was a disclaimer. A sort of apology. It usually came just after someone had taken her up on her offer to test her organic little calculator out or ask him what he knew about velociraptors. Calvin wasn't oversheltered, or fragile by any account; it wasn't precisely xenophobia: he just didn't like strangers much. And they were *all* strangers.

Jenny didn't understand it. Couldn't. *She* liked people well enough, and, short of admonishing that candy shouldn't come from strangers, had never suggested to Calvin that people were at all rancorous. Still, he avoided them. And not insultingly. He was just quiet, she supposed; he preferred to be alone; he wasn't the life of the party.

She had no way of knowing—no reason to *suspect*—that there was a physiological basis for his proclivities. She'd seen *RainMan* a few years before, but had never thought to compare Calvin to Dustin Hoffman. After all, Raymond in the film had been an autistic, *née* idiot savant. And Calvin was clearly a genius. He'd never once ranted and raved about things like KMart or toothpicks.

It would be later in the year when Asperger Syndrome would finally be accepted as a real disorder.

Meanwhile, Calvin's ninth birthday loomed on the horizon, and he was fluent, through self-instruction, in English, Latin, and Greek, as well as BASIC, C++, and hypertext.

The latter was of extreme interest to Calvin. He'd beleaguered Jenny about computers, showing her the advantages to having one. In the end, she'd accidentally relented, telling him that, if he could figure out a way for her to pay for a modern computer and still cover the escalating bills, she'd get him one for his birthday.

He'd solved the riddle in under an hour.

Her credit was still a bit risky, but not tarnished. She could get a useable model on terms—it worked out to an extra hundred a month in addition to her existing bills, which wasn't what she wanted to hear. Then, since the computer could be used to work out exactly such things as finances, it would be deductible, in part, from her taxes—even as the head of a single-parent family, the IRS still

wanted a piece of her. The thing wouldn't really end up costing her that much up front. A few bucks a month, maybe.

Then, the real work began. The internet, which had come into being in the sixties when NORAD had begun transmitting binary code across the phonelines instead of snailmailing the hardcopies to and fro, was becoming a graphical and public medium. Already, businesses were placing information 'online' on the 'web' and beginning to accept 'ECash' as well as plastic. He lost her with the buzzwords at first, until he was able to define the benefits to her, specifically.

Benefit One: information. The 'net was a sort of virtual encyclopaedia. Not entirely unlike the ageing edition of the *Britannica* in the 'study', but updated daily, and 'searchable', which meant that he could tell the computer precisely what he wanted to know about, and the computer would show him all the places in which it could be found. When that went a bit over her head, he coined an analogy: it was like subscribing to a newspaper, except it was made of light, and not pulp, and it would give them exactly the news they needed; also, it wasn't just the daily news, but news from past decades. When he'd decided that her nodding had gone from her confused *whatever* impatience to her comprehensive *okay I get it* grokking, he moved on.

Benefit Two: communication. Transfer of information. He could learn from them, and *they* could learn from *him*. It was like a telephone call in written form. He could trade information with any number of people from all over the world, and without ever dialling one plus the area code; there were no long distance charges involved. Building from the first point, she caught onto Benefit Two almost instantly.

Benefit Three: profit. Hypertext was easy for Calvin, but was probably pretty intimidating to most people. If he knew how to get all the boring and lifeless ASCII [simply typed words, he'd had to explain] to look particularly sensational...companies had better things to do than spend hours and hours learning how to upgrade text into hypertext, and were willing to pay those who already understood it astronomical amounts of money for the service. How astronomical? Six figures.

Benefit Three had closed the sale, though his mental prospectus was less than halfway leafed through. There were more benefits, but he could show her those by example, once the system was set up and running and online.

00110011

For 1994, the Dell was top of the line. Its 80486 processor screamed along at dozens of megahertz, and its modem downloaded at up to fourteen thousand, four hundred bits per second.

He'd had to explain that one, as well.

The way computers thought was a little different than how *people* thought. People didn't really consider how things went together in words. The word *cat* was a very simple idea—three letters in length. People could spell it, and identify what it meant. Computers didn't work that way.

Computers were more like words in Japanese, he'd explained, in that a word was the product of a number of little variables—components—parts. To a computer, the word *cat* wasn't three letters in length, but twenty-four.

The language used by computers was made up of two letters. There was Zero, and there was One. Depending how the zeros and ones were spelled out, to the computer, determined what they meant.

Each letter in English was determined in Computerese by its value. In other words, the number which the computer got from adding up the ones and zeroes equalled a certain character. But the numbers weren't zero through eight, or zero through eleven million, one hundred eleven thousand, one hundred eleven; though it might have looked that way on paper. The codes were geometric. The first number in the series of eight was good for one hundred twenty-eight, and was either true or false—either one or zero. If the first number out of the eight was zero, then the number was under one hundred twenty-eight. Because: the second number was either zero or sixty-four—zero if zero, sixty-four if one. If that number was also zero, then the number was less than sixty-four. Because also: the highest number, in which all eight 'letters' were ones, was two hundred fifty-five. There was a total of two hundred fifty-six, because the lowest number was zero. Zero was the total of eight ze-

roes. Meanwhile, the third number was either zero or thirty-two, the fourth was either zero or sixteen, the fifth was either zero or eight, the sixth was zero or four, the seventh was zero or two, and the eighth—the final number—was zero or one. That got the confused look to return to Jenny's face, of course.

Twenty-six letters in the English alphabet. But that's not counting commas, periods, semicolons, numbers, and other characters. Also, to a computer, a capital A is a different character than a lowercase a. The computer knows two hundred fifty-six different characters, and each has a different number from zero through two hundred fifty-five. If the eight-digit code—the *binary* code—is, for the sake of example, zero, zero, zero, one, zero, zero, one, one, then the result is thirty-five. Because: one twenty-eight is off, sixty-four is off, thirty-two is *on*, sixteen is off, eight is off, four is off, two and one are *on*. Thirty-two plus two, plus one, is thirty-five. So now the computer knows that the character represented by *00010011* is equal to thirty-five.

The eight numbers are each one bit; all eight bits together are a byte.

Bytes are used to measure storage on the system itself. One byte is one byte; ten bytes are a dekabyte; a hundred are a hectobyte; a thousand are a kilobyte; a million are a megabyte; a billion are a gigabyte; a trillion are a terabyte. And that's moving into impossible figures. In 1994, harddrives over a single gigabyte were very rare indeed.

Bits—the solitary zeros and ones within the byte—were used to transmit data. One number literally followed another along the phonelines. Like a number of platoons marching along, eight soldiers to a platoon. One goes, another goes, a third goes, until eight have moved out; then the next platoon follows, first the one, then the second, the third, the fourth, until all eight of *those* are away. The computers sent over fourteen *thousand* of the little buggers out per *second*. And that was pretty fast.

In more applicable terms, eighteen hundred *bytes* were moving through per *second*, which meant that eighteen hundred *characters* were moving. Though they weren't necessarily characters in the strictest sense; they could also represent colour codes. Colour codes were hexadecimal, which meant that, out of six characters, each made up of sixteen bits, totalling sixteen million, seven hundred seventy-seven thousand, two hundred sixteen colours—the

shorthand: if the first two of the six are sixteen, and the latter four are zero, the colour is red. And that's the sort of thing that the corporations didn't have the time or the inclination to go learn about, which was why they outsourced website design to the people who understood hypertext.

That was why, also, website designers made a hundred bucks an hour.

And that was the first thing out of Calvin's mouth that Jenny really understood. A hundred per hour was a lot easier to picture than eight bits per byte and eighteen hundred bytes per second.

Calvin understood her understanding, and switched over to a visual explanation.

Hi Mom

'See?' he asked, 'That's hypertext.'

'Okay,' she said, leaning over his shoulder, and wondering what was special enough about that to earn a hundred bucks an hour. He detected that, and showed her the coding behind it.

```
<HTML>
<BODY BGCOLOR="#FFFFFF" TEXT="#000000">
<CENTER>
Hi Mom
</CENTER>
</BODY>
</HTML>
```

'That's how you get it to happen,' he told her.

'Looks difficult,' she said.

'It's not. Now watch this,' he suggested, typing in a couple of new lines:

```
<FONT FACE="Arial" SIZE="4"><B><I>
Hi Mom
</I></B></FONT>
```

'And....'

Hi Mom

'See?'

She thought, maybe, she did. 'You added something to make the lettering change, and made it italic and bold?'

'And a little bigger, yeah.'

'And that's worth a hundred an hour?'

'Not on its own, but there are a lot more codes. And they're making more all the time. So I'll have more to learn soon.'

She stood up straight again and regarded him from above. It was another scary moment for her. He'd just turned nine. When *she'd* been nine...she couldn't remember anymore, but it sure as hell hadn't been writing in some weird, alien language with two hundred fifty-six different letters and making a Franklin per hour to do it.

That was, like, eight hundred bucks a day. Four grand a week. Sixteen a *month*. As much in a month as she made in a *year*. Then again, *she* didn't *speak* Computerese.

Sixteen a month was one eighty a year. Six figures. Six fucking figures. Nine years old.

Scary fucking kid.

It occurred to her, for a fleeting instant, to wonder what Benefit Four might have turned out to be. In the next instant, she decided she might be happier never knowing. Daddy Klein never knew about Calvin's existence, after all.

There was such a thing as too much information.

00110100

The exact date was never especially important, but, for the record, it was on Saturday 28th January 1995 that Jenny first realised the obvious.

Calvin was in third grade. He'd been going to the same school since they'd moved to Chicago four years earlier. Still, he'd never once mentioned anything at all regarding any of the other kids.

If Billy had said anything really funny in class one day, Calvin had never, ever told her about it. If Bobby had tripped him in the hallway and laughed at him, he had never, ever told her about it. If

Tina had giggled as seductively as a third-grader could and made him blush, he had never, ever told her about it.

He'd never, ever mentioned anything about the other kids at all.

She didn't even know whether any of the other kids were *named* Billy or Bobby or Tina. For all she knew, the kids at school were the Skipper, the Professor, and Mrs Howell.

That made her smile slightly to consider: the Skipper launching some hysterical oneliner as the Professor tripped Calvin in the hallway, as Mrs Howell giggled in his direction. Too much television when *she'd* been Calvin's age, she supposed.

Just then, Calvin was closing the rear cover of yet *another* novel and setting the book aside. The title on the spine was upside-down, but she was able to read it easily enough: *Nineteen Eighty-four*, by George Orwell. She blinked uneasily at that. She didn't even know where the book had come from; she'd never read it, or even seen the film. She had, however, encountered it somewhere in her lengthening history, and subconsciously flagged it as a Bad Thing.

Following the text on the spine was the silhouetted figure of a man running. Not running for exercise, she thought, but for his life.

Calvin glanced at her, guiltless and undisturbed. He always looked eerily guiltless and undisturbed. As if nothing in the world could ever surprise him, or shock him, or stump him. As if....

As if he were more of an observer than a member.

And he never spoke at all of the other kids.

He was sitting at the kitchen table, exactly in the spot where he'd been four years before. Bush had been fired, Clinton had taken his place, Kurt Cobain had come into the scene and left it just as quickly; and somehow four years had gone by. *Gone away*. Become lost.

That had been four years ago; that had been yesterday.

Calvin was looking at her. His unblinking, unsurprised, unshocked, unstumped, undisturbed eyes watching—*monitoring*—her above his slowly convexing nose and emotionless mouth. Unblinking. Like a damned alligator.

She noticed in that moment that his eyebrows were darkening. His hair—a just-under-bright red—was beginning to fade to black. If the chemistry of it worked out just the right way, he'd

wind up with that burgundy mane which had helped Daddy Klein talk her into what had led to Calvin in the first place. In the right light it would look black, or purple, or silver. That, combined with the odd, greyish-green eyes—the *unblinking eyes*...if he could somehow dodge Daddy Klein's nose, it was entirely too easy to imagine a future filled with many, many illegitimate Daddy Klein Mark Threes.

Calvin blinked, startling her out of her musings. She sat down at the table and studied him for a moment. He studied her right back—probably pondering what might make her look so damned severe. She shook her head, both to clear it, and to let him know that he wasn't in any sort of trouble. That only led to an intensified scrutiny in his gaze.

'Hey,' she said.

'Hey,' he agreed; his eyes remained dead; only his mouth moved, and only slightly.

She didn't know exactly what she wanted from him, or how to go about getting it. So: 'Who's your best friend?'

Calvin blinked. Twice. With the second blink, his eyebrows knitted downward. His head tilted questioningly to the side.

'Out of all of them at school,' she qualified, 'which of them is, like, the coolest one.'

His eyes darted instantly toward nothing, which seemed to lay down and to his left. After a short pause, he shrugged. 'No idea.'

Generally, he spoke in complete sentences. Roughly. He tended to abandon the unnecessary *you* prefacing predicates like *ask me later* and *look on the table*. Otherwise, he was usually more likely to overexplain a lack of knowledge with *I don't know* or *I have no idea*. When he failed to stick to the absolute Queen's English, Jenny always got the impression that he was hiding something.

Also, she'd learned, the best way to get him to show his cards was to wait him out. She waited.

Finally, after thinking it through from a number of angles [something else she'd noticed that he did a lot] he shrugged again. 'I've never really thought about that.'

'Top three or so, then,' she instantly suggested. And that caused the nothingness that he was keeping so close an eye on shoot over to his lower right.

She waited again. Finally, he just shook his head. His eyes remained fixed on the nothingness.

'Top *two*, maybe?'

He shook his head again. He seemed to be realising that he didn't actually *know* anyone out there. She leaned in on her elbows with a sort of curious horror.

'I guess I forgot that part,' he told her—or, really, he told whatever wasn't there to his lower right; he still wasn't looking at her at all. Nevertheless, she was certain that he was *seeing* her. Peripheral vision allowed for that. And it felt wrong in the right way. He was watching her without watching her. He didn't entirely trust her, she thought.

She didn't know what she'd done to him to cause him to be wary of her—wary enough that he tried to hide his concern by watching without watching. She also didn't want to ask him.

In a very big way, she didn't want to be in the same room as him. Possibly not in the same country. Something about him was truly scary. Almost, though she hesitated using the word to describe him, evil.

She waited him out again. If there was more to it, he'd get to it more quickly if she didn't bug him about it.

'I probably *should* know people,' he said—telling himself, she thought, more than he was telling her. 'I should probably have friends of some sort.'

'Do they call you names?' she asked without really meaning to, 'The kids at school?'

He began to shake his head, then his eyes rolled in that odd, processing way she'd become almost used to, and he told her 'Not to my knowledge; no.'

'What names do they use these days?' she asked, 'Is it still "geek" and—'

'Not really. The moniker "geek" has evolved into a sort of vocation now. It's reserved for the more prolific programmers. Personally, I still prefer "hacker", though that's not entirely accurate, either. A hacker is anyone more skilled than a user—one who can actually get the computer to perform a specific function internally, like writing a website. A user then views the website, and can handle the brainless tasks of clicking on hyperlinks and typing in URLs. Someone who actually breaks into other computers to steal information, or writes viruses, is more correctly termed as a "cracker". Like a *safecracker*, I suppose.' His eyes remained locked on the nothingness to his lower right. 'While I'm capable of scripting a virus or breaking into NORAD's files, I generally don't bother; I'm

really more of a hacker, in the correct definition of the word.'

The monologue stunned her. She abandoned the subject. 'So what's the book about.'

Still staring to the lower right: 'It's about a....' His eyes shot up to hers for an instant, and then to the book on the table. 'At the time it was *written*, it was about a future; at this point, it's eleven years in the past. In any case, it details a circumstance in which the government has totalitarian control over the people. Free speech—and even radical thought—have been outlawed. The story follows a central character who dares to fight back against the system. It begins with a journal, which he's legally forbidden to keep, and progresses to unauthorised—there are transceiving televisions, of sorts—not only do you watch them—which is largely mandatory, but *they*, or, more accurately, the people *onscreen*, are watching *you*. Sort of like the 'net, I guess. Interactive television. They—the people *onscreen*—are *They*. Them. The government. If you do anything disallowed, They come in and *get* you. A sort of embellished version of the NSA, maybe. It's a little hard to explain, short of reading the book to you out loud.'

She felt no less stunned than she had a moment before. More so, perhaps. 'Good book?'

He nodded to—he was *facing* her, but his eyes were on the book. He nodded, anyway. *Affirmative; yup; absolutely*. But not an enthusiastic *yup*. Not a desperately important Two Thumbs Up *yup*. Merely the opposite of *nope* and just to the north of *maybe*. *Yup: good book. No further information is available; please try back later; Calvin Hamlet now leaves the air*.

She didn't scream in fear and frustration; instead, she nodded *yup* back to him.

And then he *did* look at her. Possibly just to confirm that she was nodding. Then he went back to the mesmerising nothingness to his lower right.

But *that* wasn't quite right, either. He wasn't mesmerised; he wasn't *concentrating* on anything. His eyes had simply rolled to that position, and clocked out. It was like...it was like the screensaver on the Dell: give the thing enough time without typing or moving the mouse, and everything would go away, and little marbles would begin to drop from above to pile up senselessly until you started typing or moving the mouse again.

A computer. That's exactly what he reminded her of. A com-

puter. A walking, talking calculator, complete with a damned screen-saver. She entertained the idea, for a moment, that if Calvin were knocked out, he would run a systems check before he woke up again, just to make sure that the drive hadn't been corrupted somehow. She wondered whether the contents of Orwell's novel remained temporarily in RAM, or if he'd gone ahead and saved it to the drive. She could even envision the operation which would have taken place inside his head, behind his eyes: Save As ORWELL84.NOV. She repressed the shudder before it could surface. Not to keep him at all calm, she knew, but to keep his eyes from hopping creepily back from the dropping marbles and drilling the hell into her soul again.

She nodded decidedly, and, locking her eyes on something other than her son, walked purposefully out of the room toward a destination to be determined later.

00110101

Diatribes on the wall down there.

FUCK THE CUBS THEY SUK

Calvin read the graffiti from his desk, listening to the teacher without looking at her.

'...if Calvin were paying attention, maybe he could tell us.'

Calvin looked over at her. 'Maybe,' he agreed.

'You're back?' the teacher asked.

'I never left. Did you want me to answer the question?'

'Which question is that, Calvin?'

'The rhetorical one you just asked. Generally, rhetorical questions require no answer, and are used merely to stimulate thought, but, in this context, it could be directly addressed.'

The teacher regarded him oddly. *Everyone* regarded him oddly. 'Okay: so what's the answer?'

'That probably depends on how much information you already have,' Calvin told her. It wasn't an insult; it was something he was learning to presume. Most adults, he'd found, really didn't know much more than the kids they hoped to teach. 'While you're probably expecting the correct answer to reflect the inexistence of the colloquialism "ain't", the word is, in fact, viable.'

'Huh?' the teacher asked.

'The word "ain't" is a contraction for "am I not", which was later replaced by the equally incorrect "aren't I". That is: the subject "I" is singular, and can't be represented by the plural verb "are". Factoring that, the term "am I not" is more correct. But, while the original contraction was "amn't", it was difficult to pronounce and easily confused, so the term was recontracted to "ain't" by dropping the M as well. "ain't" is, literally, "am" minus the M, plus "I", plus the contracted N-apostrophe-T. "ain't": "am I not". In that context, the word is viable; however, the terms "we ain't" and even "I

ain't" are incorrect—the first, because the singular "ain't" conflicts with the plural "we", and the latter because the full, uncontracted sentence would read as "I am I not", which fails to make any sense. So: the only real way the word could be used would be in a case like "ain't here", or "am I not here", which would be rare enough to allow the vernacular understanding of the word "ain't" to be that of a nonexistent word.'

As always, Calvin was right, and he knew it. There was no room left in his assurance for argument or doubt.

Still: 'That's a nice, lengthy explanation, Calvin; but, if you'd been paying attention—'

'I was paying attention,' he told her.

'No you weren't; you were staring out the window.'

'I was doing both.'

'You can't do both; you can't pay attention to me and watch the kids at recess at the same time.'

'I wasn't watching the kids at recess. I was reading.'

The teacher inflated stiffly. 'How can you be reading while you're looking out the window.' And that was a rhetorical question.

But Calvin answered it anyway: 'There's graffiti on the wall down there. It reads "fuck the cubs they suck", except "suck" is misspelled as S, U, K.'

The teacher's face went red. 'Out. Go to the principal's office. Right now.'

'Why.'

'Why? Because I told you to. Go. Now.'

Calvin regarded her in the way in which everyone always regarded him, shrugged, and left.

00110110

The principal regarded him oddly, too. But only because he had no idea who the kid was. He looked through a file cabinet until he found one for Hamlet, Calvin. He tossed the file on the desk and sat down again, looking it through and glancing up at Calvin.

'You've never been in here before,' he said.

'Yes, I know.'

The principal blinked. Calvin had never been in any sort of trouble, and had never even attracted his attention before. Now, he was sitting here, and seemed far too calm. The principal wondered, briefly, if third graders were too young for heroin; no one was ever this calm in his presence. 'So what brings you here today, ah, Calvin?'

Instantly: 'My language teacher has an inferiority complex. She was incorrect about the validity of the word "ain't", and I corrected her. She's lashed out against the correction by sending me here.'

The principal closed the file and sat bolt upright. 'Come again?'

Calvin blinked. 'Does that mean I'm dismissed?'

'Huh?'

'Ordinarily, the term "come again" is an invitation to return at a later time; but I haven't left yet, so I'm not sure if that's what you meant. Is there another definition of which I'm not yet aware?'

The principal squinted at him. 'Are you for real?'

'To my knowledge.'

'All I meant was...um...you know: "come again". Um...explain what you mean.'

'Which part.'

'All of it. Inferiority complex, and all that.'

'That might be my doing, to a degree. I was reading some graffiti as she asked a rhetorical question regarding the word "ain't", and then mentioned that, had I been listening, I'd have been able to answer it. Assuming that she'd actually *wanted* me to answer it, I did. But I answered it more correctly than she'd wanted me to, I think. That is, I knew the real answer, which conflicted with her perception of the answer. And that created a problem for her, because she's supposed to be the expert, not me. So: here I am.'

'What was the bit about the graffiti?'

'Someone wrote "Fuck the Cubs they suck", misspelled, on the wall outside my window.'

The principal nodded. 'And you read it aloud?'

'I told her what I'd been reading while listening to her. She seemed to want me to tell her, to prove that I was doing both at once. She'd underestimated my abilities, and assumed that, like most of the kids in this school, I couldn't read one thing and listen to another simultaneously.'

'So you know what you did wrong?'

'Yes.'

'What did you do wrong.'

'I overestimated the intelligence of my teacher.'

The principal nodded again, and jammed Calvin's file into the main drawer of his desk. 'Not quite the answer I was looking for.'

'Is there a more correct one?'

The principal opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it and shook his head. 'Calvin, listen: you may be right about overestimating and underestimating and "ain't" and all. But there are things you'll encounter in life that...you're going to have to learn to adapt to the...you can't just go around correcting people like that; you've got to try to fit in.'

'Why.'

'Because.'

'Yes?'

'Because...because that's what's expected of you.'

'By whom.'

'By everyone.'

'Everyone?'

'Yeah. You've got to try and get along with people, even if you know you're right and they're wrong.'

'Why.'

'Because that's how the world works.'

'Works? A world which defies logic can be accused of working?'

'It's always been that way.'

'I see.'

'Do you?'

'I think so. What you seem to be telling me is that the world is composed of largely brainless twits who can't understand the first thing about logic, and prefer it that way; so, people like me are considered the outcasts because we know more than they do.'

The principal didn't agree right away. Then: 'It certainly seems that way, doesn't it.'

'Unless I'm overlooking something.'

The principal shook his head. 'Hey Calvin.'

'Yes?'

He grinned. 'Come again.'

Calvin nodded, got up, and returned to class.

00110111

By the spring of 1996, the relationship between Calvin and the principal had evolved to a first-name basis.

'Calvin,' the principal sang as the kid wandered, unsurprised, into his office again.

'Hello, Murray,' Calvin returned.

'Dare I ask?'

'Don't bother. You want the long version or the short one....'

'Let's try the short one first.'

'Okay: I'm surrounded by idiots.'

'Again?'

'Still.'

'Same ones?'

'Mostly.'

'Ah.'

They sat in silence. Finally, Murray nodded to himself. 'Okay: hit me with the long version.'

Calvin exhaled. 'It's not your fault; I know that much.'

'Okay. Glad to hear that much.'

'I also realise that the average ten-year-old isn't qualified to determine his future.'

'Ah. Le'me guess: "reluctance to conform" again.'

'Something like that. I'm a writer. I write. I have a working knowledge of differential calculus, and no need for it in life; even still, this inexorable assloaf refuses to accept that my time could be spent more wisely than regurgitating multiplication tables day in and day out. So: here I am. Again.'

'You know the multiplication tables, then.'

'We've met. One through twelve; two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen, sixteen, eighteen, twenty, twenty-two, twenty-four; three, six, nine....'

Murray sat back, letting Calvin finish. He was actually somewhat fascinated by it all.

'...one twenty; eleven, twenty-two, thirty-three, forty-four, fifty-five, sixty-six, seventy

-seven, eighty-eight; ninety-nine, one eleven, one twenty-two; twelve, twenty-four, thirty-six, forty-eight, sixty, seventy-two, eighty-four, ninety-six, one hundred eight, one twenty. Their chart stops at twelve by twelve, but I can handle charts up to a thousand squared.'

'What's a thousand squared?'

'A million.'

'Right. And, say, nine hundred forty-one by three hundred sixty-eight?'

'Three forty-six, two eighty-eight,' Calvin produced, eyes lazily surveying something off to his right.

'So you're *capable* of the work.'

'Who isn't,' Calvin asked, dryly.

'What was that number again?'

'Three hundred forty six thousand, two hundred eighty-eight.'

Murray grabbed a small calculator from his desk and punched in 941, X, 368. The screen told him what Calvin had: 346288. He shook his head in wonder and set the calculator down. 'You said you could *handle* charts up to a thousand. What's that mean? Like, you can calculate—'

'No. I memorised the chart.'

'That's amazing.'

'Thanks. I think.'

'No, really: that's extraordinary. You know how rare that is? To be able to memorise a spreadsheet like that?'

'I've got an idea how rare it is. There might be a thousand of us who can do it.'

'Are you proud of that? To be so, like, *elite*?'

Calvin looked at him for the first time since he'd come in. 'No. Not at all. It makes me...weird. Like a freak, maybe.'

'Listen.'

'Always.'

'You're not a freak, okay? Believe me. I was a smart kid, too. Not as smart as you are, and that's weird to admit, but smart enough that I can empathise with your...situation.'

'Plight.'

'Exactly: plight. I wasn't sure you knew the word.'

'I know most of them now. There are a few chemical and botanical terms I don't use often enough to remember them exactly, but the more common—if not truly vernacular words are pretty easy to remember.'

'Anyway: I've been in a similar position to yours. I know what you're going through, I think. You see what I'm saying?'

'Yeah. You're saying that you're fully aware how dumb the average idiot really is, but without saying so directly, since that would be bad for your career.'

Murray grinned. 'I didn't say that.'

'I know.'

'I wasn't necessarily *thinking* that, either.'

'Not necessarily, no.'

'But...it's possible I was thinking along those general lines.'

'Yup.'

'Still: there *will* come a point where you'll have to adapt to the lesser mortals out there, Calvin. Otherwise, you're looking at a very lonely life.'

'I'd rather be lonely.'

'Oh?'

'Who needs friends when they're all retarded.'

'They're not all retarded.'

'Not clinically; but they're close enough that it's immaterial. Hell, they *aspire* to suck; they *want* to be dumb; stupidity is in style. Stupid and contagious.'

Murray laughed, and began to croon Nirvana...sort of: 'A tomayto; a tomahto; a potayto; a patahto.'

Calvin laughed. 'Something like that, yeah.'

'We're not *all* that dumb, Man. And those who are...; well...I'll tell you how *I* always looked at the world: but for the dumb half, the smart half would be average.'

'Which doesn't mean I have to like them.'

'No. It doesn't mean you have to like them. What it *does* mean is that you have to prove yourself to them.'

'Why.'

'Otherwise, they're going to think that *you're* the one with the problem. And, for all you might think that their opinions are irrelevant, they're not. They run the world, Calvin; not us. We may keep the components in good repair, but it's the lesser intellects who actually decide how the components are to be used. Get me?'

'I think so, yeah. Meet the new boss; same as the old boss. We're the Morlocks in the equation.'

'Something like that. And if you want to get

everynight

darrenjames

ahead of them, you're going to have to start at their level, before you can supersede them. Okay?'

'Okay. I'll bear that in mind.'

'Do. Really do. Unless *I'm* overlooking something, it's really your only option.'

Calvin nodded, and arbitrarily dismissed himself back to class.

00111000

Calvin stormed into Murray's office unannounced, slamming a sheet of paper marked by a massive, circled *B-* with his right hand, and a paperback copy of the *Oxford English Dictionary* with his left, onto the desk in front of the principal. He said nothing.

'Hey, Calvin—hey,' Murray stuttered, standing, 'You can't just come running in here like—what's wrong, anyway?'

'This. That plebeian misgraded my spelling test. Here: look.' He pointed out the ticked 'colour' on the test, and flipped open his dictionary to the same word therein. 'Right? And here.' He pointed to 'reflexion', counted as incorrect on the test, and flipped through to it in the dictionary. 'Every one of these "misspelled" words is spelled correctly, according to the people who invented the damned language. Right?'

Murray sat down and, closing his eyes, nodded. 'It goes back to playing by their rules before you can—'

'When! When can I supersede them! *How* can I supersede them if they're being intentionally obtuse! Anyone truly *qualified* to teach English is going to know that I'm *right* about this! I'm being persecuted for my *intelligence*! Is *that* the world you want me to join? Do you want me to "fit in" by becoming as dumb as *they* are?'

'No.'

'Then what in *hell* am I supposed to *do* here.'

'I don't know.'

'You're joking.'

'No. I'm not. Calvin: you're superior to these people; we know that. *They* know that. And they're going to take that personally. And there's not a lot you can do about that.'

'So, *why* am I trying to fit in with them?'

'Because helping them to excommunicate you is worse.'

'Is it?'

'Look. I never said it was fair. I'd like it to

be fair, but that's not up to me. My job is to keep the school running as well as it can; that's a far cry from getting the world to accept that some of its members are smarter than others. Believe me: if I could get the world to cater to the geniuses, I would. But I can't. The world—and please don't quote me on this—the world is designed to accommodate the idiots. Because the geniuses can take care of themselves. Something else I'd rather you didn't quote me on, but I'll tell you, just in case you haven't figured it out already: because the world caters to the uninformed, it honestly doesn't matter whether you ace or flunk a spelling test in fifth grade. No one is ever going to care what your exact grades were back in elementary. That's not an excuse to quit, because they will notice that; but, really: it's never going to matter whether you aced this test or not.'

'It matters to me.'

'It matters to me too; but, to the masses, it's nothing.'

'So I'm stuck with a B minus?'

Murray took a deep breath. 'No. You're not. I'm going to talk to...who was this? Oh, of course; now it all makes sense. I'm going to talk to Fr—ah...Mister Conway, and I'll let him know that the British spelling is at least as correct as the American, okay? I know that as well as you do. But, really: in ten years, this test—' he rattled the paper demonstratively '—won't be the deciding factor in anything you're up to by then. Okay?'

'Okay.' Calvin sat down heavily. Then: 'Did you want me to go back to class?'

Murray looked at the clock on the wall. 'Nah. It's out in seven minutes anyway, minus three minutes, since you wouldn't be *running* in the hallways.'

Calvin grinned. Caught.

'So, there's not much point in catching the last four minutes. Catch me before you split today. I'll talk to F—Conway, sort this out, and find out if you've got any homework for the weekend, okay?'

'Deal. And thanks.'

'Yeah, yeah; beat it, kid.'

Calvin grinned, and left.

00111001

Murray had been the first, and last, scholastic liaison of Calvin's educational career. In June of 1996, he finished elementary school, and left it behind. That fall, he would move on to middle school, where, according to Murray, life would really begin.

Murray looked up [slightly surprised, but not very] as Calvin walked into his office thirty minutes after fifth grade had ended for him. He grinned as the kid sat down in front of his desk.

'All packed up?' he asked.

'Yeah. All packed up.'

'Ready for summer?'

'Sure. Actually, yeah, I am. I've got a few things I've been wanting to work on, but I haven't had enough time with all this normal-person stuff to do.'

Murray nodded. 'Still gonna be a novelist?'

'Hope so. No promises, but I hope so.'

'I hope so too. I think that's probably the perfect career for you. Writing.'

'Not much else I'm really qualified for. I'm not really geared for customer service.'

Murray laughed. 'No, probably not.'

'I'll get it. How hard can it be?'

'Oh...harder than you might think. But not impossible.'

'That which isn't impossible is merely improbable,' Calvin said, 'I can work with that.'

'I think you probably can,' Murray agreed. He meant it, too. 'So: what's the story?'

'The plotline? I'm not sure yet. I've got a few ideas, but they're all mutually exclusive; I'm trying not to meld them into one long idea.'

'Right. Keep the story simple. Expound on the obvious. But don't write down to their level; make them come to you.'

'They might not get it if I make them come to me.'

'Maybe not. But *some* will. Or, if they don't get it, they can find a dictionary. And for those who

refuse to cross-reference against Webster's...well, you got their money; what more can you ask for. Success, they say, is the best revenge. Success at the expense of the enemy would probably be even sweeter.'

'Have you ever written anything?'

'Maybe a little. Nothing serious. Nothing I ever published, anyway. But I wasn't that good at it. Probably because it wasn't the way I wanted to do things.'

'Hmmm?'

'I'm a teacher. And you can teach through novels, of course; but you never really see it *working* on people. For me, I've got to have the instant gratification. The interactive element, maybe. I want to see it on their faces when the concept clicks in their heads.'

'In *our* heads, you mean. In *mine*.'

'Yeah. In yours. Did it? Has it?'

'I think...maybe. Maybe so.'

'I hope so.'

'Yeah. I'm sure of it, actually. When I first came to this school, back in kindergarten, I already knew everything they could teach me out of a book. I think I can honestly say that the only thing I ever learned here was what *didn't* come from books.'

'What did you learn here.'

'That the world is primarily composed of dumb people, and that they're not going to automatically appreciate genius, regardless how unfair that may seem; so: if I want to get anything accomplished at all, ever, I've got to factor their expected responses into my doings. And I know how cynical and sanctimonious that sounds, but it's really not. Well, it's *cynical*, maybe—almost sardonic; but I'm not sure that cynicism is really an opprobrium. And I'm not really as pharisaic as I may sound; I'm just acutely aware of what might be perceived as shortcomings in my thinking.'

Murray grinned. 'Shit,' he said, reaching for his dictionary, 'Was that with an F or a P-H?'

'What.'

'Fari-whatsit.'

'Far...oh: pharisaic. PHARISAIC. Technically: of or having to do with the Pharisee. The pharaoh. Deceiving and unctuous. Self-righteous.'

Murray was nodding as he flipped through his dictionary. He found the word and read its definition silently to himself. Then he snapped the book shut and tossed it back onto the desk, stretching. 'You're

a very bright kid; you know that?’

‘Yeah, I get that a lot.’

‘Really?’

Calvin smirked. ‘No. Usually I’m implored to “talk English” by the lemmings.’

‘Lemmings?’

‘Not very accurate, is it; in fairness to the lemmings, they can *find* the fucking cliff.’

Murray laughed loudly, nodding frantically. ‘Officially, I didn’t just hear—ah what the hell: school’s out.’

Calvin nodded back. ‘School’s out.’

‘So long, Kiddo.’

‘So long, Teacher.’

Calvin stood, and turned away, walking casually out of the building, as much as, inside, he really didn’t want to leave.

00111010

Summer began slowly for Calvin.

He wasn’t really very limited. The summer before, there had been problems. Jenny didn’t really make enough to support recreational habits like films and sundaes. *Hadn’t* made enough. That had changed. Calvin had begun watching the stock market through wired.com, and noticed patterns in it. Stocks went up and stocks went down; on a larger scale, they went up a bit, down a bit, up a bit more, down a bit less, and so on; it was cyclic. If no one had ever noticed the patterns, then there was something very wrong with the world indeed.

He’d shown the patterns to his mother, who hadn’t understood them at all. So he’d picked a company, roughly at random, and plotted out the most probable course over the following month; he’d posted that on the fridge. A month later, he’d printed out the actual mapping of the corporation’s activity, and it had matched almost exactly. That had gotten Jenny’s attention, and she’d let him propose a couple of small investments. That had been in July of 1995.

Nearly a year later, Jenny had supplanted her income by over seventy percent. It was her money

which had been initially invested, and Calvin's patterns which had produced the surplus; they spilt the proceeds—Calvin's half was stored away in a separate account, which he couldn't technically access, though the money was essentially his to use. If he wanted something, he'd bounce it off Jenny, she'd consider it, and either buy it for him with his half, or deny the request. She rarely denied him anything—the only denial in recent memory had been a paintball rifle, simply because he wasn't old enough to play on a real range, and she hadn't wanted him sniping people walking down the front sidewalk. That hadn't been his intention, but he understood her logic and let it go, concentrating instead on the acquisition of a palmtop computer which he could take with him wherever he went. She allowed for that purchase, and he had the HP320LX in less than a week.

00111011

Armed with the palmtop, he'd ventured out into the world. It wasn't a massive step—he never got very far. The mall was nearby; restaurants were within a mile or two of home; standalone shops, convenience stores, booksellers, and such were within easy reach. And, with the palmtop, he was able to literally stop walking, open the thing up, stab the spacebar to turn it on, and type in whatever idea had arrived to buzz about his head. It was a hell of a lot more efficient than trying to remember enough of the idea to have it all return when he finally got to a solid surface on which to place his Spiral and UniBall the idea into immortality.

The palmtop wasn't quite a real computer. Or, it was, but it lacked some of the modern macros common to the Dell. It had no spellcheck; it couldn't be forced to justify the text to the left and right margins; it didn't have any sort of hyphenator or thesaurus. That latter wasn't a big concern; Calvin wasn't much for thesauri; he knew all the words he was likely to use, and seeing a list of loosely-related terms usually just erased the initial idea from his head. In any case, it didn't matter too much; he

could EMail whatever he wrote from the palmtop to the Dell, and clean it up with the larger word processor at his leisure.

00111100

He sat at the mall, absorbing the penultimate volume of *The Green Mile*. The clerk down at WaldenBooks had been resistant to letting him buy it at first—it was hardly a children's book, after all. Calvin had first given her his trademark *Oh I See You're an Idiot* look, secondly mentioned with authority that he was currently approaching eleven at top speed and wasn't really a child anymore *per se*, and, thirdly: 'As a writer myself, I'm excruciatingly aware of the Carlin List, if that's your concern, and could easily quote you all seven words; moreover, having read the first four serials of this work, I can estimate the sort of thing I'm likely to encounter; moreover still, your nametag is crooked, and your section labelled as "religious fiction" is a redundancy'.

He'd got the book after all.

He was reading it in the food court, feet up on the table, book resting on his knee. His number was called, and he doubled his speed to finish the paragraph before getting to his feet to go over and pick up the sub from Quizno's he'd ordered five minutes earlier.

'Good book?' the clerk asked as he got there.

'Yeah, actually,' he said, yanking on the knapkin dispenser's front plate to access them through the top, instead of having to pull them out individually through the front slot.

'I always wait for the movie,' the clerk said—almost proudly.

Calvin glanced up at him. He looked about seventeen, and less than thrilled to be working in food service; he also looked a little underqualified for the responsibility of putting meat and cheese together with lettuce and bread. Calvin smirked and nodded. 'Ah.'

'I mean: a movie's, like, two hours, tops. A book takes for ever to read.'

'Nah. Well, *this* one, maybe; it's only being released one section at a time—monthly, roughly. But at an average of a hundred pages or so...maybe an hour to read each part; six hours altogether.'

'No way, Dude; tha'd be, like...six hundred pages; tha'd take weeks to read.'

'Why.' Calvin jammed the straw into his Doctor Pepper and sipped at it.

'Well, you know: six hundred pages...I mean, *fuck*. That's a big book, Man.'

'Six hundred pages....' Calvin thought about the various books he'd read recently. 'Yeah, maybe. The average book's only three to five hundred, huh. But then, that's about four hours in reading time.'

'Five hundred pages in four hours? Bullshit. Try four weeks.'

'I read fast, I guess.'

'Damn. Okay; whatever, Dude.'

Calvin nodded, and returned to his seat, holding the book in his left hand, and switching from his soda to his sub with his right.

He finished the book at about the same time he finished his lunch.

00111101

Blink...blink...blink...blink...blink....

It wasn't precisely a lack of ideas; it was a lack of an audience. The kid who took four weeks to read four hundred pages had disturbed him. If it took less time to *write* the book than it took someone like that to *read* it...was there really a point to it at all? After all, there were film rights—he'd read all about those; but, before a film was proposed, the book had to do reasonably well, with rare exceptions. If the world in general were waiting on the damned *film*, then who was going to read the *novel*, to think that the story would translate well to celluloid, to greenlight the project, to make the film in the first place.

And what in hell was the advantage, really, of celluloid? Never, in the history of Hollywood, had a film been *better* than the novel from which it had

been adapted. The only times he'd read a book which was worse than the film had been those unfortunate instances in which he'd read the novelisation. Novelisations weren't books; they were expounded film-scripts. And let's not forget the little tangents that the hacks tossed in to hit the fabled three-hundred-page mark: *CharacterX left the scene you saw in the film and went off to do this, that, and the other distraction, thinking about stuff which you couldn't see the actor having done, had this piece of shit scene ever been filmed.* Novelisations were tired excuses for unknown writers to become published. Calvin would have rather worked at Quizno's, reading a novel over the course of a month, than ever novelising someone else's plotline. It wasn't writing; it was transcribing badly.

He wasn't transcribing badly; he also wasn't writing. He was watching the cursor blink and blink and blink and blink and blink....

He shut the palmtop off and set it atop his finished copy of *The Green Mile 5*. Slurping the very last nanolitres of soda from the cardboard glass, he grabbed the computer and the book and walked away from the table.

He just wasn't a writer that day, he supposed.

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Calvin struggled with it for years. It wasn't that he *couldn't* write, it was that he *didn't* write. He thought that, probably, he was able to write, but, for whatever reason, it just wasn't happening for him.

He wrote things; it wasn't a lack of trying. But the things he wrote...sucked. In his objective assessment: sucked. A lot. Which was oddly encouraging to him: if he was able to spot a story sucking, then he'd also [probably] notice when one failed to suck. Whether that ever happened was another matter; but he at least thought he might know the difference if it were to show up on his palmtop someday.

He was able to determine whether *other* people's stuff sucked. Novelisations of second-rate films

sucked without question; real novels, by real authors, failed to suck. He wanted to be a real author, with real novels. For whatever reason, he just wasn't able—yet—to produce anything which failed to suck. And he wasn't at all certain *why* he couldn't do it.

He knew what he wanted to have happen: he wanted a good story, written well—not too formally, but not so casually that it was hard to follow—and...the right *length* was a concern. The stuff he wrote seemed to either drag on and on and on without any discernible purpose [even to him, and he'd been there when it had been typed into the HewlettPackard] or rush along in an infantile *introduction of characters introduction of adversaries signs of trouble plottwist resolution the end* format which was lucky to cover ten thousand words. He knew what he wanted; he wanted a nice, four hundred page novel—about a hundred thousand words or so—with a beginning, a middle, and an end; what he got was either Tolstoy overdosing on smack, or Cliff's Notes by the Micro-Machines guy.

It had been one thing when he'd been ten years old. There weren't a lot of ten-year-old bestselling authors out there in TelevisionLand. But as he edged in on fourteen...the stakes began to raise a bit. Either he had it or he hadn't, and if not, he was probably doomed to food service.

Sure, he could analyse the stock market; but that was more of a hobby. To really do that sort of thing, you had to go to school for years. That was something he didn't have time for; and it was something he needed in order to convince the masses that he wasn't somehow dumber than they were. Ironic and sad, but it was the way the world worked. Murray had been right about that, he'd found.

And, it wasn't what he wanted to do. He wanted to write. How hard could it be?

Hard enough, he'd learned. All because he was too impatient, and too dedicated, and too....

Of course, if he knew the real answer, the question would dissolve. He could write; he was *sure* of it; at the same time, he somehow *couldn't*. And he had no idea why.

He was thirteen years old. Soon, he'd be fourteen. Then fifteen, sixteen, seventeen; then he'd be an adult, and time would *really* begin to move. And if he hadn't figured it out by then, he'd probably never get it. And that, he figured, was probably a little more stress than most kids his age dealt with on a

daily basis.

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To be or not to be; that was the question.

He didn't want to fail at it. He really didn't. He also wasn't sure what choice he had.

He began to notice the more dangerous things in life. And not with any fear; something more like avarice. He began to long for something accidental to happen. He'd walk down the street, noticing how few grand pianos were being hoisted up through the windows these days. That was his real problem: the world had become far too safe and user-friendly as of late. No piano was ever going to break loose, fall thirty storeys, and flatten him in D Minor. That wasn't a relief to him.

The summer went away more quickly than it had come—and more quickly than it had left the year before. It wasn't a climatic change; it was his perception of time. The longer he lived, the shorter it got. Days had once lasted for ever; now they lasted for hours. The sun rose; the sun set; the days disappeared. It was the first day of October in 1999. It would never, ever be that day again. Soon, he predicted dejectedly, it would be the second; then, that too would pass, and never rear its historical head again.

Time was speeding up for him. Time was running out.

He'd be fourteen in three weeks.

Three weeks.

Five hundred hours. Five hundred and four, to be precise.

He didn't really want to be precise anymore; he just wanted to write.

He dug his hands further into the pockets of his jacket and curled slightly forward into more of a sphere as a cold and cruel wind began to blow.

Part Two:

Before I Sleep