

**11*****Random Encounters***

Scott Conner is schizophrenic. He is forty-six years old and has been in and out of mental institutions for fifteen years. There is a history of schizophrenia in his family, but during his early adult life he showed no signs of having inherited the disorder. Shortly after his twenty-ninth birthday, Scott sustained a head injury in a car accident. He was driving home from work on the New Jersey Turnpike late one night when he hit a piece of tire from an eighteen-wheeler. Scott's front right tire exploded, and his car spun out-of-control. He hit the concrete divider at fifty miles per hour and smashed his forehead against the steering wheel. Miraculously, a concussion was all he suffered. People said he was lucky to be alive, and some called it a miracle. A month after the accident the doctors told him he was fully recovered and could resume all normal activity. Shortly thereafter he began to hear voices. At first they were friendly – almost soothing – trying to win him over and gain his trust. But soon they began to make demands. They threatened to kill him if he told anyone about “their little secret;” they forced him to quit working so they could spend more time together without distraction; and they pressured

him to snort copious quantities of cocaine because they liked what it did for them. By the time Scott turned thirty his mind was at the mercy of his captors. A year later he was institutionalized.

Scott passes by Charlie and Wayne on his way to work (he washes dishes at the *IHOP*). Charlie reaches into Scott's mind he nearly falls to the ground from the intensity of Scott's mania. Charlie hears a cacophony of wicked laughter and Scott's desperate pleading. It is as if he has been dropped into the dark heart of a war zone.

LEAVE ME ALONE! I DIDN'T DO IT, Scott whimpers like an innocent but defeated man on his way to the gallows.

The laughter is nauseating. Charlie covers his ears, but the nefarious choir persists. He senses that the voices want to spread. Charlie positions his mind in front of Wayne's to protect his friend. Wayne is safe for the moment, but Charlie is vulnerable. The voices are determined to invade his mind - programmed to do so. He is not prepared, and for a few seconds they get the best of him.

*LATE TO WORK, LATE EVERYDAY  
NEVER GOING TO BE ANYBODY ANYWAY  
YOUR DEVICE, SILLY MISTAKE  
CHARLIE CHILDS, NOTHING BUT A FAKE*

Charlie swells with anger - more rage during that brief moment than he has experienced in total throughout his entire life. He lashes out at the voices with murderous volume.

WHO ARE YOU!? WHAT DO YOU WANT!?

WE WANT TO PROTECT YOUR INVENTION. THEY WILL TRY TO TAKE IT FROM YOU.

I DON'T NEED YOUR PROTECTION. GET OUT OF MY HEAD!

Charlie bears down with his mind like a woman giving birth.

YOU DO NOT EXIST! Charlie shouts. YOU ARE NOT REAL!

The walls of the other world bend and then shatter inward like glass into a vacuum. The voices scream as they are shredded in a shower of light shards. Scott crumbles to the ground shaking. Charlie kneels beside him and reaches out to him with his mind.

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

Scott opens his eyes slowly.

WHO ARE YOU?

MY NAME IS CHARLIE, CHARLIE CHILDS.

ARE YOU AN ANGEL?

NO.

THE VOICES ARE GONE. THANK YOU MR. CHILDS.

YES, THEY ARE GONE. YOUR MIND IS FREE.

Scott gets up and runs off wearing a parting expression somewhere between gratitude and trepidation. Charlie lost track of Wayne during the

encounter. He reaches out with his mind in search of his best friend. Wayne is physically standing beside him, but his mind is drifting quickly in the other world,

WAYNE, WHERE ARE YOU?

CHARLIE, CAN YOU HEAR ME?

I HEAR YOU WAYNE. CAN YOU HEAR ME?

VERY FAINTLY - CHARLIE YOU'RE BREAKING UP.

Charlie concentrates.

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

YES. COLORS EVERYWHERE - MUSIC. IT'S BEAUTIFUL.

WAYNE. WAYNE, CAN YOU HEAR ME?

Charlie can see Wayne drifting in his mind. He is un-tethered and accelerating towards the outer reaches of the other world.

WAYNE, I'M TURNING THE GUN OFF.

A second later they are back in this world. "Are you okay?" Charlie asks.

"I'm fine. Why did you turn it off?"

"Your thoughts were drifting away, like your mind was vanishing or something."

"I relaxed and let my thoughts go. You should try it."

Charlie does not know if Wayne was in real danger, or just indulging himself. “Wayne let me ask you something. When the gun is on, what is it like for you?”

“I’m not sure I know exactly what you mean.”

“Do you see anything; feel anything? What is the experience like?”

“I see colors and hear music, believe it or not. I feel different somehow - like I’m not myself – yet I’m me all the time. At first I feel nauseous, but it goes away.”

“And when you hear my thoughts what is that like?” continues Charlie.

“I hear your voice, but it’s melodic somehow. Not like you are singing, but like your voice is an instrument. So is Cindy’s, and both your voices are perfect. Even that crazy guy’s tone had a pleasant quality to it. You are not speaking in words at all; you are sending feelings, yet the feelings communicate meaning just the same. I know that sounds a bit crazy. I’m still trying to sort it out in my own mind. What about you Charlie? I’m guessing you don’t hear music.”

“No, no music. I’m in a huge room – actually, more like outer space. You have a presence in it; Cindy has a presence too. Your mind appears like an island; a small galaxy in a vast universe.”

“Well, which one is it, island or galaxy?” Wayne says with ample sarcasm.

“I’m serious.”

“And let me guess, you’re the sun. I hope you’re not getting a God complex Chuck,” Wayne continues.

“Far from it, but I think I can do things that are special. Like when I sensed that you were drifting away I could reach out and grab a hold of you. It’s as if my mind has physical properties or abilities. Now tell me that doesn’t sound crazy.”



her. “Your little girl is hungry.” The mom turns, gives Charlie a hostile look, and quickens her pace away from him.

Charlie and Wayne walk deeper into the park and spy a woman sitting on a blue park bench reading. As they near, Charlie can see she is engrossed in *The Fountainhead*. Charlie has not read the book, but he is familiar with the story and its philosophical bent. His twelfth grade English teacher was a big Ayn Rand fan, and raved about it with an off-putting overzealousness. Cindy also read it, and loved it, although she did confess that the book’s famous protagonist, Howard Roark, was too much “the perfect man” for her taste. Ironically, not reading *The Fountainhead* was the kind of small protest that suited Charlie’s need to buck the trend at the time. He was turned off by the “this is the next best thing to the Bible” hysteria that followed the book, and it seemed to him that Rand’s hardcore followers were either hypocrites or just plain ignorant given that her philosophy rejected the cult mentality.

The reading woman is concentrating intensely on the writer’s words, and her mind is seamlessly connected to them, reciting them as if her own:

...ROARK STOOD BEFORE THEM AS EACH MAN STANDS IN THE INNOCENCE OF HIS OWN MIND. BUT ROARK STOOD LIKE THAT BEFORE A HOSTILE CROWD – AND THEY KNEW SUDDENLY THAT NO HATRED WAS POSSIBLE TO HIM. FOR THE FLASH OF AN INSTANT, THEY GRASPED THE MANNER OF HIS CONSCIOUSNESS. EACH ASKED HIMSELF: DO I NEED ANYONE’S APPROVAL? – DOES IT MATTER? – AM I TIED? AND FOR THAT INSTANT, EACH MAN WAS FREE – FREE ENOUGH TO FEEL BENEVOLENCE FOR EVERY OTHER MAN IN THE ROOM.

IT WAS ONLY A MOMENT; THE MOMENT OF SILENCE WHEN ROARK WAS ABOUT TO SPEAK.

THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO, THE FIRST MAN DISCOVERED HOW TO MAKE FIRE. HE WAS PROBABLY BURNED AT THE STAKE HE HAD TAUGHT HIS BROTHERS TO LIGHT. HE WAS CONSIDERED AN EVILDOER WHO HAD DEALT WITH A DEMON MANKIND DREADED. BUT THEREAFTER MEN HAD FIRE TO KEEP THEM WARM, TO COOK THEIR FOOD, TO LIGHT THEIR CAVES. HE HAD LEFT THEM A GIFT THEY HAD NOT CONCEIVED AND HE HAD LIFTED DARKNESS OFF THE EARTH. CENTURIES LATER, THE FIRST MAN INVENTED THE WHEEL. HE WAS PROBABLY TORN ON THE RACK HE HAD TAUGHT HIS BROTHERS TO BUILD. HE WAS CONSIDERED A TRANSGRESSOR WHO VENTURED INTO FORBIDDEN TERRITORY. BUT THEREAFTER, MEN COULD TRAVEL PAST ANY HORIZON.

OH MY GOD THIS BOOK IS AMAZING, the woman thinks as she pounds her fist on the park bench. AND THE QUARRY SCENE! She returns to the book and finds that she has advanced a couple paragraphs ahead of the last thing she remembers reading.

MAN CANNOT SURVIVE EXCEPT THROUGH HIS MIND. HE COMES ON EARTH UNARMED. HIS BRAIN IS HIS ONLY WEAPON. ANIMALS OBTAIN FOOD BY FORCE. MAN HAS NO CLAWS, NO FANGS, NO HORNS, NO GREAT STRENGTH OF MUSCLE. HE MUST PLANT HIS FOOD OR HUNT IT. TO PLANT, HE NEEDS PROCESS OF THOUGHT. TO HUNT, HE NEEDS WEAPONS, AND TO MAKE WEAPONS – A PROCESS OF THOUGHT. FROM THIS SIMPLEST NECESSITY TO THE HIGHEST RELIGIOUS ABSTRACTION, FROM THE WHEEL TO THE SKYSCRAPER, EVERYTHING WE ARE AND EVERYTHING WE HAVE COMES FROM A SINGLE ATTRIBUTE OF MAN – THE FUNCTION OF HIS REASONING MIND.

Charlie turns the gun off abruptly. Wayne starts to complain, but decides it is best to keep quiet. The look in Charlie's eyes casts a dark

mood over the scene, and Wayne is concerned about his friend's state of mind. The author's words hit Charlie hard, and he is again swallowed by self-doubt. *Where is your reasoning mind? Your objective, your reason, was to build an electric dog whistle. Face it. You can't be a genius when it was a total accident.*

With great effort Charlie gathers himself and turns to Wayne. "I better get to work," he says.

"Hey, don't forget about Miller's tonight. We are going, right?"

"I didn't know it was optional," says Charlie.

"Good. I'll call you later. And cheer up for Christ's sake. It's all good."

**12*****Slacker***

All eyes fix on Charlie as he walks across the mailroom to his locker. He does not have an exemplary attendance record, but he does manage to skirt serious trouble, mainly because the residents of Bloomfield adore him. Charlie is an amazing handyman - he can fix anything. People ask him for favors all the time, and he gladly obliges, free of charge. Marla Berger is Charlie's boss - the senior ranking postman in Bloomfield, and in charge of the Bloomfield office. Before taking her desk job Marla walked the beat for thirteen years. People hated her, and she hated them right back. Children called her Marla the Grinch. High school kids called her Fat Berger. Parents called her The Old Bergermeister.

Charlie hears her voice bellowing from the back office.

"Mr. Childs. Is that you? Get in here, now!"

Charlie enters her office with some trepidation.

"You wanted to see me?" he asks.

"Mr. Childs, I see we're running late again. I'm concerned about your attitude."

"Look Marla, I'm sorry I'm late, but..."

She raises her right hand and cuts him off. “You called in sick yesterday Mr. Childs. How are you feeling today?”

“Much better, thank you. I had the stomach flu. I couldn’t hold down a thing.”

“Is that so Mr. Childs? Hum. It just so happens one of your co-workers saw you getting on a bus late yesterday morning. This eye-witness told me you didn’t look sick at all.”

“Impossible. I was home in bed.”

“Mr. Childs, you have called in sick four times this year, and it’s only April. Is there something seriously the matter with you?”

“No, just been sick that’s all.”

“I hear you fancy yourself an inventor. People say you tinker in your basement late at night. Creepy if you ask me.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“Well Mr. Childs, let me turn on a light for you. For twenty years I’ve put in my time. I’ve seen punks like you before. You are nothing but a dreamer. It’s your whole generation.”

Charlie’s cell phone rings.

“And turn off that cell phone!” she barks.

Charlie’s anger swells uncontrollably and it swallows him. His mind is racing. He reaches into his bag and pulls out the sonic gun.

“What is that?” Marla asks with a dismissive laugh dismissively, her snorts echoing like cannons firing in Charlie’s mind.

Charlie looks into her eyes. Without speaking a word he turns on the gun, and with every watt of mind power he can muster he projects his thoughts like a tsunami. He remembers a menacing chant he recently heard.

LATE TO WORK, LATE EVERYDAY  
NEVER GOING TO BE ANYBODY ANYWAY

Charlie repeats the words over and over, making them louder each time. Marla's eyes open wide and Charlie can see fear in their perfect circles.

"Please stop!' she begs. "Please!"

WHY SHOULD I, YOU CACKLING OLD WITCH? YOU TREAT ME LIKE DIRT. YOU MOCK ME. WHY? I'VE DONE NOTHING TO YOU. I DELIVER THE MAIL – RAIN OR SHINE; DESPITE MS. FILCHER'S CANINE. DO YOU SEE THIS DEVICE YOU JUST SCOFFED AT? LOOK AT IT! LAUGH IF YOU WANT TO, BUT A YEAR FROM NOW I'LL BE RICHER THAN BILL GATES.

I BET YOU'D LOVE A GULP OF THAT BOTTLE OF BOOZE IN YOUR DESK DRAWER. YES, I KNOW ABOUT IT, EVERYONE DOES. PATHETIC. AND, IF I'M NOT MISTAKEN, DRINKING ON THE JOB IS GROUNDS FOR DISMISSAL? AM I CORRECT MARLA? YOU TELL ME. YOU'RE THE EXPERT ON RULES AND REGULATIONS AROUND HERE. LET'S JUST SAY THAT I THINK IT WOULD BE IN YOUR BEST INTEREST TO CUT ME SOME SLACK FROM NOW ON. AND IF YOU DO – IF I FEEL LIKE YOU ARE BEING NICE TO ME - MAYBE I'LL KEEP QUIET ABOUT YOUR LITTLE DRINKING PROBLEM. WHAT DO YOU SAY BERGER? IS IT A DEAL?

Marla's angry voice breaks into Charlie's daydream.

"Wake up Childs! Are you deaf? I said turn off that cell phone!"

"Oh right, sorry."

Charlie fumbles with his phone and turns to exit her office.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To deliver the mail."

"Mr. Childs, this is your last warning. If you are late again you are fired. And no more sick days! Understand?"

Charlie leaves Marla's office draped in a familiar feeling. Why didn't he use the gun against her - or least give her a piece of his mind? *Wimp, you should have.* "What a total bitch," he mutters safely out of earshot.

**13*****SPI***

Charlie pushes open the glass doors of the post office with anger-filled force and stumbles out on the sidewalk. God I hate that woman, he thinks. He is still fuming as he starts in the direction of his route, but he begins to relax once a safe distance from Marla's brick mausoleum. Stay calm, she's not worth it. She doesn't understand a damn thing. She may be the boss now, but the title doesn't grant her the right to treat people like that. (His anger is beginning to swell again). How does someone like that get to be in charge anyway? *On the other hand, she does have a point Charlie. You have been missing work and putting extra burden on the other mailmen.* Yea, but when others miss work I am always the first to volunteer to cover their routes. I've done enough extra work to more than compensate for my days off. I've got to get out of this dead end job. *Yes, but you need the money.* I don't care. I'm so much better than this.

Without realizing it Charlie has stopped walking and is sitting on a fire hydrant, perched in anger and self-pity. His efforts to argue successfully the injustice of his circumstance are met in equal force by the inescapable fact that he always seems to let events get the best of him. A

wave of insecurity sends Charlie to an unwelcome place. The vivid memory of his traumatic college experience invades his mind with the irrepressible force of a war veteran's flashback.

Every year Stratford Poly-tech Institute admits five hundred of the best and brightest young scientists into its freshman class. The majority of these chosen few are the sons and daughters of global leaders in the fields of science and technology. Charlie applied to SPI without the slightest expectation of being accepted. Not that Charlie was without credentials – he had perfect SAT math scores (his verbal scores were a different story) and perfect A.P. math scores – but his GPA was a lackluster 3.12 and he had no fancy extracurricular activities. Charlie's guidance counselor, Ms. Jordan, pushed him to apply. She knew of Charlie's passion for invention and believed in her heart that Charlie was the type of person who might someday change the world. Every man, no matter how great his potential, needs a sponsor - a friend who believes and acts on that belief. Ms. Jordan helped Charlie with his application, and she insisted that he include a technical diagram of one of his inventions (noise-canceling headphones) in his admissions application. Charlie was accepted.

Academically speaking, Charlie excelled at SPI. For the first time in his life the quiet ache of boredom had subsided. In his second semester he decided to focus his studies on computer science. Charlie enjoyed the solitude of software design and programming, and his professors quickly recognized his aptitude. The burgeoning and controversial field of artificial intelligence fascinated Charlie, and he took it up as a sort of hobby. He digested every piece of literature he could find, and by the end of his freshman year he had developed a premise for his senior thesis to be written on the subject. The faculty approved his idea enthusiastically. Charlie held a part time job developing applications for the school's

intranet. He worked one day a week and received twelve dollars an hour plus course credits (a bargain for the school).

Socially speaking, Charlie found SPI far less enthralling. Enrollment in the university afforded him access to a world far above his socio-economic strata, but try as he might he knew that the chance of fitting in was slim. He came to this realization quickly and gave up all efforts to be an accepted member of the crowd, instead devoting his time and energy to his academic interests. Charlie attended more faculty get-togethers than student parties, and truth be told, he preferred intellectual conversations with cocktailing professors more than boisterous beer-guzzling sessions with his peers. Charlie was a determined young man living among a band of merrymakers who at times seemed more interested in fraternizing than learning. Charlie's roommate would often tell him to lighten up, but Charlie had no idea what he was talking about. Science was serious business, and Charlie knew of no other way to act or be.

The Better Human Race Society (BHRS) was SPI's most prestigious secret society. During the second semester of his sophomore year the society's co-chairmen, Chris Marks and Adam Weber invited Charlie to join. The BHRS pursued and promoted Transhumanism, a branch of science whose principle belief is that the merging of technology and biology will yield a superior human being in the future - a "post-human" species. Transhumanists believe in the compatibility of human minds and computers. Transhumanists also maintain that *technopathy* (technology enabled telepathy) is not only possible, but is the inevitable trajectory of human evolution. In 1971, Richard Boyko, at the time a student at SPI, founded the BHRS. Nineteen years later the organization had chapters on fifty campuses across the country, and published a bi-monthly newsletter called *On The Future Of Species*. Transhumanism was a hot topic among the thought leaders of the scientific community, and rumor had it that

Professor Boyko was getting paid seven figures a year consulting for the U.S. military. He returned to SPI once a year to speak to the student body, and afterwards attended the annual inauguration ceremony for new BHRS inductees. In nineteen years, one hundred and twenty SPI students had been invited to join the society, and one hundred and twenty students had accepted and been inducted. That was until Mr. Childs came along.

Charlie was flattered by the prestigious invitation to join the BHRS, and Transhumanism was indeed aligned with his interest in artificial intelligence, but the aura of inclusion was quickly overshadowed by what membership in the secret society entailed. *Isms* had always made Charlie nervous, and Transhumanism was no exception. It was not the content of the society's belief system that alarmed Charlie so, it was the self-righteous conviction with which its believers pursued it. During his initial exposure (indoctrination) to BHRS, Charlie realized that the society was cultish in nature. Its premise was more faith-based than scientific, and the society was as dogmatic as any he had seen or read about. Charlie was being asked to join a congregation of scientists who were more interested in advancing their pompous little society than science. To a young and idealistic mind like Charlie's this was a giant leap for mankind in the wrong direction. During the initiation period prospective members were required to digest a slew of books and movies on the subject. All school assignments had to be reviewed by society members to ensure that Transhumanist thinking was incorporated whenever possible. Charlie came to view the society as invasive and dangerous. The outcome of rejecting the BHRS proved this, although at great personal expense.

Instead of politely thanking the BHRS for the invitation and presenting a feasible and honest reason why he could not proceed and further, he let the charade go on. Caught in a whirlpool of procrastination he acted as a model pledge. He attended every meeting and succumbed to

the demands of the brotherhood. It was only at the ninth hour, during the induction ceremony, that he finally opened his mouth and blindsided the arrogant inquisition standing before him. Richard Boyko was in attendance. The elder brothers were humiliated, and shortly thereafter, venomous.

Charlie was standing naked down to his underwear, shining under a hot light cast in his face. The induction ceremony required each participant to strip down to almost nothing and pledge his devotion to the secret society. A tribunal fired questions at Charlie, each of which he answered like a true torch-bearing servant. His nervousness was palpable, not born from a fear of failing the test, but from the anticipation of an act soon to be committed that was tied to a deluge of unpleasant consequences. Courage was not Charlie's strong suit, and his reluctance to control the situation left each moment wide open to Chance. Professor Boyko eyeballed him and carried on the interrogation with alarming conviction.

"Do you commit your mind and energy as a scientist to the unswerving pursuit of a better human being? And when I use the word 'better' I specifically mean a human being with technological implants that will increase his acumen and lifespan?"

"Yes I do sir," Charlie muttered unconvincingly.

"And why do you believe yourself to be worthy of such a pursuit?" Boyko continued.

"I love science Sir. I always have. I study hard and will continue to do so."

"But is your scientific passion focused properly? There are millions of so-called scientists, but few exert their time and energy toward the end goal which this society pursues."

"I think so Sir. I mean yes, I think it is focused properly."

“You *think* so? I am not asking you to think Mr. Childs; I am asking you for commitment. I am asking you to decide now, in the company of your peers and brothers to join a cause; to pledge your devotion to an end-goal that may not be realized before you are worm dirt. Do you understand the gravity of your decision? I ASK YOU, DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE GRAVITY OF THIS DECISION?”

Charlie felt compressed in a black hole of confusion. He did not like this pompous man, nor did he like his line of interrogation. He was asking for blood – his blood. Mr. Boyko wanted a promise, and unlike the other drones in the room Charlie believed that a promise meant everything. The members of BHRS would undoubtedly go on to pursue other interests and careers outside the realm of Transhumanism, foregoing the hollow words they too spoke in their underwear, but Charlie was not akin to the hypocrisy that spins the privileged world. He answered Professor Boyko with a question.

“Sir, may I humbly ask you a question?” Charlie spoke calmly and confidently.

“Go ahead,” Boyko replied dismissively.

“How much is the Defense Department paying you to help them build a better soldier?”

“I do not see the relevance of your question Mr. Childs.”

“It is very relevant if you wish me to commit my belief to your cause.”

“A *fair* sum of money Mr. Childs.”

“Is that why you are you doing it - for the money?”

“No, I am doing it because I believe it is important.”

“What is so important about building a better soldier?” Charlie asked in a mockingly earnest tone.

“There is nothing important about building a better soldier, but the research and development the government is funding is important,” Boyko defended.

“So it is a case where the means justifies the end?”

“I think so, don’t you Mr. Childs?”

“No Sir I don’t, with all due respect. War is never an acceptable end.”

“Perhaps building a better soldier will put a stop to war and save lives,” Boyko asserted confidently. The discomfort that was mounting among the mob-like onlookers dissolved into restrained laughter and applause.

“Perhaps,” replied Charlie, “although if you examine every single piece of evidence since the beginning of time an intelligent man might draw the conclusion that superior weaponry does not quell war, but rather provokes it. Perhaps you are not as well-read as you would have us believe Mr. Boyko.”

“I’m more well-read than you, you insolent prick.”

“Insolent yes, prick no. Allow me to tell you what I think of your Transhumanist society. And please note that I spell transhumanist with a lower case t.

“Your brand of transhumanism is the same as every other mob-manipulating movement – a new and slightly different flavor, but still it demands conformity as the price of admission. Transhumanism promises to make mortals into Gods, but the tradeoff is a world without privacy - a world where the slogan *We’re All Connected* takes on apocalyptic meaning; a world where people are in fact not Gods, but rather slaves. Without privacy there is no individualism, true love, or creativity. It is no accident that people of faith, whether their faith is scientific or spiritual in nature, seek to restrain the private freedoms of others. The thoughts and

beliefs of free men are criminalized according to the whims of those who designed the system of control, whether a priest or pseudo-scientist like you Mr. Boyko.”

Adam Weber’s voice pulled Charlie back to reality. “Charlie, did you hear Professor Boyko’s question? Do you understand the gravity of the commitment you are making?”

“What? Huh?” asked the bewildered pledge.

Charlie was startled by the distance his daydream had taking him from the situation at hand. It was the kind of daydream where it is difficult to discern reality from fantasy. He was prone to these kinds of daydreams, and each left a scar of regret - regret that he could not find the courage to speak that which his private mind so clearly understood and articulated.

“Do you understand the gravity Charlie?” Adam asked again. “Charlie, what’s the matter with you?”

“I can’t do this Adam. I am sorry. I just cannot. I am really sorry. I’m sorry Mr. Boyko. I really am. Sorry everyone.”

Charlie retreated a beaten man. Still he had retreated finally, and there was at least a slight aftertaste of victory in that.

Boyko, Adam and Chris were furious. The society was not used to rejection, thus they had no manual for handling it. There were problems with which to be dealt. The most pressing was that Charlie had run the full cycle as pledge and he knew too much. A secret society will not remain secret if a disgruntled outcast blows the lid off of everything. Not to mention the reputation of the BHRS, which would undoubtedly fall a notch unless Childs fell first. With Boyko’s help Adam and Chris hatched a plan more nefarious than Watergate. All they needed was Charlie’s password to the school’s intranet.

Charlie kept his password to the college network in the safest place on the planet: his head. Charlie had a favorite terminal in the Milton Computer Science Center, the hub of all campus-wide systems. Charlie spent Sundays at the center. Chris and Adam knew this. Early the following Sunday morning they installed a small video camera to the ceiling above Charlie's keyboard. Charlie arrived at MCSC shortly after nine, sat down at his terminal, looked left and right, and typed in the code:

### **CiNdYs**

Chris and Adam belonged to a fraternity with a secret library of hidden camera videos of sorority girls engaging in carnal activities with some of the brothers. The girls were unaware that they had been filmed, and during the investigation that followed, the fraternity brothers claimed they didn't know either. Adam and Chris took the film to an underground studio and had still frames made from the videos. They added obnoxious captions to the stills. "Smile, you're on candid camera!" "You could afford to lose 20" etc... They downloaded the photos to the campus server the following Thursday night. When the student body turned on their computers Friday morning they were greeted with a display of Internet pornography offensive to even the most liberal sensibilities.

The outrage and outcry was monstrous. Parents filed lawsuits within twenty-four hours of the posting. The tragically humiliated girls left campus. The state police were brought in. Fingers that needed somewhere to point quickly chose the only plausible target they could find. Charlie had no alibi to justify his whereabouts. To avoid national exposure the school cut a behind closed doors deal offering compensation to the victims along with a guarantee that Charlie would be expelled immediately

(so much for due process). The guarantee saved the school thirty percent on the compensation settlement.

Charlie was crucified without a fight. He had no money or the wherewithal to engage in a battle to prove his innocence, and his reputation was destroyed. He wanted - he needed - to see Cindy. Her words he remembered so well "Don't worry, I'll catch you," were his only comfort. He was already with her in spirit as the bus pulled away from the campus station three hundred miles from Bloomfield. The last thing he saw was an angry mob of students holding protest signs aimed at him. One in particular stuck in his mind:

**PIG**

**14*****Voicemail***

Charlie comes to his senses and stands up. For a moment he's not sure where he is. "I must be losing my mind," he jokes morbidly. A bead of sweat trickles down his temple and he wipes it away with his shirtsleeve. The temperature is warm for April, but the sky is overcast - its gray color encourages Charlie's mood. But regardless of his disgust toward Marla, or frustration toward his job, the mail needs delivering. Duty is a reflex. Mrs. Garrison on Orange Ave. has been expecting a letter from her divorce attorney for days. Dave Sharp is late submitting his tax forms. Mrs. Filcher's Doberman requires exercise. Responsibility is a man's anchor in a turbulent sea. Charlie opens his cell phone. "Two messages" appears super-imposed on a screen saver photo of Wayne, Cindy and him riding a roller coaster at Great Adventure. He dials his mailbox and punches in the passcode:

**cindys**

***“You have two messages,”*** says the automated voice.

***Wednesday 11:24 AM:*** *Hey, I’ll be at Miller’s tonight at eight. Don’t be late, and bring the gun. I’ve got a really cool idea. Later.*

***Wednesday 11:36 AM:*** *Hey you, it’s me Cindy. I got your message, but unfortunately I can’t make it out with you guys. I’m so bummed. So call me, definitely call me. Bye.*

Cindy seldom misses a Wednesday night. Charlie dials her number.

“Hi Charlie.”

“Cind.”

“Did you get my message?”

“Yea, just now, but you’re not allowed to blow us off on a Wednesday night. You invented Wednesday night.”

Cindy chuckles affectionately and nervously (in equal proportion).

“What do I got to do, send out a couple of my boys to collect ya or somethin’?”

Cindy laughs again, and just as nervously.

“No really though, what’s up?” Charlie asks.

“I promised my cousin we’d go out tonight.”

“So, bring her to Miller’s.”

“Actually we are going on a double date.”

“With who?”

“A man.”

“Who? Do I know him?”

“No you don’t know him. My cousin’s boyfriend has a friend in from out of town, and they don’t want him to feel like a third wheel, so...”

“Sounds like fun,” says Charlie with crooked sincerity, and Cindy detects the skew of his tone.

“It’s really not that big of a deal Charlie.”

“Cindy, I have to get off the phone, but have a great time tonight. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, okay?”

Jealousy is the Mt. Everest of negative emotions. It is insecurity wrapped in anger - a formidable destructive force in any millennium. If love is blind, then jealousy is deaf, dumb and blind.

Charlie is jealous.

## 15

### *Sugar Revisited*

The possible (probable?) implication of Cindy's double date mocks Charlie relentlessly as he travels from house to house with the mail. He tries to reason away his concern, but his jealousy is an unrelenting soundtrack ringing in his ears, disabling any ability to think clearly. *Why didn't you tell her you fool? You should have told her just then. You should have said that you are in love with her, and then asked her not to go out with him because you can't stand the thought of her being with someone else. Too late now! Fool, there is no such thing as a "friendly date." Have you no experience in these matters? She will like him, she might. Late to work, late everyday, never gonna be anybody anyway.*

The sound of Sugar's barking interrupts the chastising "should have" voice in Charlie's head. Oh shit, as if this day isn't messed up enough without that damn dog, he thinks.

As Charlie approaches the Filcher residence he is relieved to see Sugar locked away in her pen. *I'm sorry Sugar, did mommy lock you up today?* Then Charlie has an idea. With Sugar safely behind bars he figures the conditions are ideal to test the gun on the dog, the target for

which it was originally intended. He approaches Sugar's cage cautiously and pulls the gun from his pack. Sugar is growling, and even though she can't get at him Charlie proceeds cautiously. Okay, are you ready for this, he asks her? *Say hello to our little friend.* He flips the switch.

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Charlie thought he had witnessed the dog at her worst before, but the gun transforms her into a beast beyond description. The shock of the gun sets her off instantaneously. Charlie sees the canine as an exploding ball of sun-fire in the other world. Then an image comes to him, harsh in its sterility. It is the dog's angry impulse, perhaps what she always envisions before attacking. Charlie is torn to shreds and hemorrhaging face down on the ground. Like the baby's projection of a breast earlier that day, the image is so focused and real that Charlie falls to the ground thinking he has actually been attacked. He shields his mind's eye and calls out to calm Sugar, but the canine cannot comprehend. She is foaming at the mouth and slamming her head against the cage bars. Another image arrives, and the screen in his mind displays the picture with perfect clarity. This time his entire body is waving in the air, and Sugar is attached to his leg, swinging him back and forth as her teeth tear through his calf muscle. The image of the dog's painful bite is unbearable, and Charlie lets out a deafening scream – *DIE DOG DIE!!!!*, and it reverberates across the other world. Sugar lets out a defeated whimper, wobbles, and collapses. Charlie turns off the gun, stands up, and brushes soil from his left elbow. He stares down at the dog. Saliva drips from the corner of her mouth. Her eyelids are wide open and her eyeballs roll back in her head. The dog quivers repulsively. Charlie gets the hell out of there.