

16***ESP***

The workday is over, but the Cindy phone call and the Sugar incident play like tape-loops in Charlie's head – when one subsides the other starts back up, over and over again. He is desperate for a distraction and stops at the library on his way home. He takes out an armful of books on the subject of E.S.P. and arrives back home with three hours to kill before meeting Wayne at Miller's. He wants a drink badly, which is an unusual craving, for despite his plentitude of weaknesses, Charlie has never fallen for that particular demon. It isn't the hangover that deters him, but the aversion he has to euphoric feelings.

Charlie is surprised by the amount of material written on the subject of telepathy, but is frustrated by its largely unreliable scientific quality. The data gathered during the hundreds of studies conducted over the past forty years is inconclusive, littered with biases, and in several cases fraudulent construction and reporting. Charlie pours through a hundred pages all about the human brain, but gets no closer to understanding how the gun works. His theory of a "frequency of thought" remains the best guess on the table.

In fact, the human brain has two distinct hemispheres, the left and the right. Man has two hands, two eyes, two feet, two ears, and two brains. The left and right brains are marvelously well coordinated, the benefit of proximity and connective neural bandwidth. The left-brain is the storage center, the database, or the Mr. Spock. It remembers the past and projects the future. The left-brain processes language and numbers, and uses symbols to codify experience. It is the “*I am*” - the tangible being. The right-brain is the creative side, which Charlie found surprising. Intuitively the left seems like it should be the creative side (maybe because most people are right-handed). But the right side is in fact the stimulus magnet – the part of the brain that bows to Bacchus. Its job is to receive and channel experience into the rational funnel without prejudice, to operate without the slightest deterring inkling of consequence. If the left-brain is yin, then the right-brain is yang. The right-brain lives in the now. It gathers energy through our senses, creating a giant collage of stimulus for the left-brain to sort out. The right brain is the abstract collective, the out-of-the-box-thinking cognitive partner in the brain-to-brain relationship, whereas the left-brain is the concrete individual. The right-brain is the chance barometer, and the left-brain organizes and stores the readings.

Stanley Ganzfeld designed an experiment to test subjects for E.S.P. Despite its less than convincing findings, the Ganzfeld methodology provides the only quasi-scientific insight into the mechanics of supposed paranormal perception. Ganzfeld’s methodology requires two subjects: a “sender” and “receiver.” The sender is shown a video clip and/or picture and is told to project what he has seen to the receiver, who has been placed in a sensory-deprived environment and fed un-patterned stimulus to

neutralize left-brain activity. The receiver is then removed from the controlled environment (termed the Ganzfeld Field), and is asked to correctly identify the correct video or image that was projected by the sender from a lineup of four choices. Data from three thousand Ganzfeld sessions indicates that, on average, the receiver selects the target image slightly more often than would be expected by chance alone – hardly earth-shattering (telepathy should be a yes or no matter after all), but for those determined to find proof, these results might be considered directionally supportive.

Charlie's hypothesis - that the sonic gun enables telepathy over a frequency of thought is, at least, partially correct. But the frequency is only half of the reason. The missing half of the equation Charlie did not intuit is that the gun's signal has a paralyzing effect on the left-brain, i.e., it knocks it off line, thus creating the same state-of-mind that Ganzler's experiment crudely tries to create by feeding the receiver un-patterned stimulus. With the left-brain neutralized, the right-brain is able to transmit and receive energy across the frequency. A person's experience while using the gun is affected by their brain's right/left equilibrium. Cindy is a "left-brainer," thus the gun creates feelings of acute estrangement and vulnerability; and because her right-brain is not her strong half she does not project well in the other world. Wayne is a pure "right-brainer," and knocking out the left-brain opens the floodgates of his imagination and creativity. Charlie's left and right brains are balanced, or said less euphemistically, they are at war. The signal impedes his left-brain, but less so than his friends'. Charlie's operative left-brain gives him extraordinary control and power in the other world. Charlie's brain-balance is analogous to having a rare blood type. In this circumstance it provides immense advantage. And so goes the hierarchy of the mind reading world.

Charlie designs an experiment reasoning that if the gun emits a frequency of thought he can reduce its effect by simply blocking the signal. He finds three zip-lock bags in the kitchen cabinet, and fills a blue plastic bucket with water. He plans to seal the gun inside the bags, turn it on, and then submerge it in the water.

Charlie puts the gun in the bags, sealing each carefully to make sure no water can penetrate. Confident that the gun will not get wet, he maneuvers through the plastic and turns it on.

CLICK...ωEEEEEEEEEOOOOOOOOααααααααααEEEEEEEEEOOOOOOEEEEαααα
EEEEOOOOOEEEEEOOOOEEEEααααOOOEEEE...

With the frequency now active, the other world comes alive. He sees the singularity of his presence stretching in all directions to infinity, but unlike before he feels something pulling at him, gently at first, then more aggressively coaxing him to let go. The other world is beautiful; its energy surges through his mind. It erases his worries and offers tranquility. He is rapidly drifting from reality. The intensity of the gun's signal multiplies, and within six or seven seconds the pull has become a wind tunnel, as if the other world is a vacuum wanting to suck up his mind. But Charlie is strong in the other world and he holds on. He remembers he is conducting an experiment, and with some difficulty he submerges the gun in the bucket of water. The other world fades. Then, as he lifts the sealed device out of the water, the other world returns in full force. He repeats the experiment several times, each time yielding the same result. Charlie is satisfied with the outcome of his experiment. With cause and effect now observed he is able to reasonably conclude that the gun's frequency is the cause of the paranormal effect, and not some

inexplicable supernatural phenomenon. This reassures his faith in science, and in himself.

17

The Tavern

The tavern evolves more slowly than man. The beer brands on tap may change over time, but the fundamentals persevere. The tavern is as archetypal as penis-shaped monuments, nurturing mothers and domineering fathers. Ah the tavern: that timeless watering hole and wretched hive of scum and villainy. Miller's Tavern was the quintessential tavern, but alas, so is every other. Its very lack of uniqueness makes it special.

The trio goes to Miller's Tavern every Wednesday night with rare exception. Charlie has the highest score on *The Terminator* pinball machine ten years and counting. Wayne's phone number is etched on the bathroom wall (the women's bathroom). Cindy won the tavern's annual wet t-shirt contest when she was twenty-four. Don't get the wrong impression. Cindy is not the wet t-shirt contest type, but Wayne bet her a hundred dollars that she didn't have the "balls" to participate, and Cindy has never been one to back down from a dare. Knowing full well that she didn't stack up to the well-endowed competition, she was astonished when

she won. Cindy is certainly ample, but nothing remarkable in the size department. Let's just say that on that evening luck was transparent. Men, despite their plethora of issues, aren't all that hung up on size.

Wayne has been looking forward to the evening all day long. He is revved up and keeps asking Charlie if he has the sonic gun.

"Have you been drinking already?" Charlie asks.

"No. I never drink beforehand. I like my first drink to kick in on location. By the way, what happened at work today? Was Marla pissed?"

"Yes, I'd say that's an accurate characterization."

"But everything's okay?"

"Sort of, I guess."

Charlie is a light year from being okay, although it has nothing to do with Marla. Charlie's problem is jealousy, and he doesn't like it. He has fallen into the trap of asking himself questions he cannot answer. Why tonight of all nights? What if she really likes the guy? What if they hook up? Wayne interrupts on cue, as if he has been reading Charlie's mind.

"Did you tell Cindy we were meeting at eight? Is she coming?"

"No, she has plans."

"Plans? What plans? Wednesday night isn't optional."

"Wayne, can we just go in?"

"The first round is on me. You look like you could use a shot."

On this Wednesday night, like every Wednesday night, Miller's Tavern is a world unto itself. Cigarette smoke hovers beneath the lights, creating a womb-like haze. Classic rock booms from an old jukebox with a partially blown speaker. A massive square wooden bar built out of Brazilian mahogany in 1932 is literally and figuratively the establishment's centerpiece. The outer walls of the main room are lined with tables and

booths. A cove to the right of the entrance houses the Terminator pinball machine, a pool table and the jukebox. The kitchen, protected from eyesight by swinging wood doors, is in a small room off to the left. Miller's makes the best thin-crust pizza in town, and they carry more whiskey brands than any other bar in Bloomfield - seventy-two in fact. They offer one kind of wine (white) and it is not very good.

"All right, so whose mind do you want to read first?" says Wayne.

"How about that shot first," says Charlie?

"Tequila? Bourbon? Vodka? What's your pleasure?"

"Bourbon. And tell Freddie to fill it to the rim."

"Will do," Wayne says, and then he skips to the bar like an eight year-old.

"Hey Freddie. Two shots of Makers, and make them doubles."

"My pleasure. How you boys doing tonight? "

"We're good thanks. What's up on your end?"

"Nothing much - same old, same old. Warm weather we are having for April, huh?"

"Yea. I hope it doesn't mean we are going to have a hot summer."

"Here you go, two double-shots of Makers. Chaser?"

"Sure. Two Buds."

"That'll be eighteen dollars."

"Thanks Freddie. Keep the change."

Wayne returns to Charlie who is leaning against the bar, staring into space.

"Here you go, a little warmer upper to get the evening rolling. Bottoms up."

Charlie throws back the shot and winces it down. He wants to forget about Cindy; he wants to visit the other world and read minds. As the warmth of the Maker's Mark spreads through his veins his jealousy

melts and he has a comforting thought: “If Cindy feels the same way about me as I do about her I have nothing to worry about. If not, so be it. Why get all worked up over a harmless date? Cindy never stays out late, I’m worried about nothing.” The Maker’s Mark speaks the truth. Charlie has nothing to worry about.

Ten o’clock. Cindy, her cousin and their two male escorts are sitting four-abreast, eating popcorn and watching Shakespeare In Love. Cindy’s date’s name is Stan - Stanley. How boring. At one point he reaches out his hand gesturing to take hers. Instead of skin he gets Skittles.

18

Wayward Souls

It takes an odd person to choose bartending as a vocation. Freddie is the best in Bloomfield, with the tenure to prove it. He is inching toward his quarter century anniversary as the primary underwriter of liquidity at Miller's Tavern. He makes twice the wage of your average bartender because he sells more drinks than your average bartender. He earns eighty-five thousand dollars a year and reports thirty-five to the I.R.S. That puts his adjusted for tax-evasion salary in the neighborhood of a hundred grand a year. Patience is the single most important attribute of any good bartender, and Freddie has patience in parental quantity. He has seen it all. Drinkers do not like to get cut off from their booze (or their anger for that matter). Freddie's job is to draw the hard line without emotion. To calmly say, "This is the last one, okay?" The secret: to make a rhetorical question sound like a choice, when in fact the 'okay?' is not up for debate. When it comes to recommending the right drink for any occasion Freddie is the master. For a bachelor party, he pushes Jack Daniels; for a bachelorette party shots of tequila with a squeeze of lime and a hearty pinch of sugar. If a regular customer has a bad day he

prescribes scotch and soda. Any job that frequently requires you to smile when you want to strangle is liable to get on your nerves, and Freddie's are wearing thin enough to warrant retirement. But he hides the cracks well. It's the training. Years of maintaining a tip-yielding smile have embossed the appearance of stoic tranquility.

Freddie's generation of drinker, his clients during the golden years, have all but vanished from the drinking scene. A few died (as probability will dictate), some swore off the bottle, and the rest just moved on. Back in the day Freddie was known for his whiskey sour. He made them tart and dry, "so the morning after would come a little easier." He rarely makes them anymore. Most of his new customers prefer designer vodka. To appease the next generation he developed a vodka sour served up in a chilled martini glass. He calls it a Sour Freddie. In his mind it is the equivalent of colorizing *Casablanca*. Freddie longs for yesterday. He once read about a law to ban smoking in public places. "That law will kill us all," he tells anyone willing to listen. Freddie doesn't believe in secondary smoke.

"How about Freddie?" suggests Wayne.

"Do you think we should ask him first?"

"Do you want to ask him?"

"Not really," says Charlie.

"Then I say we just do it. He won't mind anyway."

"Okay, but try to keep your thoughts quiet Wayne. In other words listen and try not to think. That shouldn't be too hard."

"Thanks Charlie. I love you too."

"I believe I can create a condition where we can hear his thoughts but he won't be able to detect ours."

"You can do that?"

*IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A GLASS OF HOPE
COME TO ME, I'M THE DEALER.*

*IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A SHOT OF DOPE
COME TO ME, I'M THE DEALER.*

*IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR AN APHRODISIAC
COME TO ME, I'M THE DEALER.*

*IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR THE WHITE RABBIT
COME TO ME, I'M THE DEALER.*

OMG! Wayne blurts out.

WAYNE, SHHHH....., HE'LL HEAR US.

BUT HE'S CERTIFIABLE.

TAKE IT EASY. IT'S JUST WHAT HE'S THINKING. WHAT, YOU NEVER
THINK CRAZY STUFF?

OF COURSE I DO, BUT NEVER LIKE THAT.

JUST KEEP IT DOWN. WE'RE NOT EXACTLY INNOCENT IN WHAT WE'RE
DOING.

WHAT ABOUT HIM, Wayne thinks and points - THE GUY IN THE SLICK
SUIT OVER THERE. LET'S READ HIS MIND.

OKAY, JUST KEEP YOUR THOUGHTS DOWN.

Money can't buy happiness. Happiness is an inner sense of security and wellbeing; comfort with one's place in the world. It is harmony between self-perception and the perceptions of others. Happiness means never having to hide. It is truth and courage. It is never afforded to liars

or cheats, because liars and cheats cannot trust. Happiness is perseverance on the cliff of chance. It is the desire to explore new ideas and take risks. Happiness is freedom, even in the face of oppression and responsibility. It is self-actualization, earned, never bought.

Jack Cunningham is a creative director and copywriter in the advertising business. He graduated from a liberal arts college as an English major without a clue as to what he wanted to do with his degree or his life. Advertising seemed like a good hedge, a compromising blend of art and business. Jack bounced from agency to agency early in his career (an effective technique for advancing) until settling at a large firm named after its founders William Brass and Michael Steele. B&S (Brass and Steele) had been in business forty-three years, and Bill and Mike had been retired eight years. An international conglomerate bought the firm for one hundred and twenty million dollars in 1991. Jack will celebrate his tenth anniversary at the firm in six months. He cannot wait to get his B&S commemorative watch. It is made of brass and steel.

That morning, like every other, Jack pulled himself out of bed at 6:00, kissed his wife and three sons goodbye at 6:53, caught the 7:10 train at the Wilton, Connecticut station, arrived at Grand Central at 8:13, grabbed a cup of coffee along with a sesame bagel at 8:17, and arrived at his midtown office by 8:25. The company logo and slogan displayed above the reception desk greets him every morning.

B&S Advertising

Great Ideas. No BS.

The secret to great advertising is authenticity. The company's slogan rang true at the time it was written forty-three years ago, but the

B&S of 1998 had become anything but “No BS.” The strangle of holding company margin demands squeezed out any truth left to be truthfully told. Jack authored several well-known campaigns in his career, the most famous being an anti-smoking campaign that ran during the summer of 1996. Jack was a smoker (he’s since quit) and knew too well how hard it is to kick the habit. He had failed with the patch, acupuncture, and a half dozen other medications. He understood how a person could say I’ll do anything to quit, and still fail to do it; and he knew the feelings of frustration and failure that smokers feel as a result. While previous anti-smoking campaigns had done a good job pushing facts concocted to scare people, they had done little to motivate cessation. In fact, a study he had read delivered striking evidence that anti-smoking ads actually stimulate the desire to smoke, thus being completely counter-productive. Given the amount of money being spent behind traditional campaigns, this newfound evidence was alarming. “Statistics and macabre photographs are not ideas, and they are not working,” he told the client. “People understand the risks associated with smoking, but that is not enough.”

Jack’s idea was revolutionary in its simplicity: take a positive approach – optimistic and hopeful. Jack believed that the best way to get folks to quit was to create a sense of social movement, to utilize the “bandwagon effect” and celebrate a growing community of quitters. Jack had had success using aphorisms to motivate behavior. These are command statements that drive behaviors and positive outcomes, and they typically work best when there is tension in the mix. In this case, the tension between a person’s inability to quit and the general cultural trend toward more health conscious living created the perfect stormy backdrop for the type of campaign Jack had in mind. During the sales presentation he gave the client examples of aphorisms at work: *Just Do It; Be All You Can Be; Think Different*, and he painted the picture of a frustrated and

conflicted target audience desperately in need of a cause champion instead of a finger-waving parent. He spoke convincingly about the possibility and power of enlisting the support of non-smokers. When he finally presented his campaign tagline, **BE A QUITTER**, he received a standing ovation. Eighteen months later, the number crunchers at B&S calculated that Jack's campaign helped four hundred thousand smokers kick the habit.

These days, the assignments falling on Jack's desk are at best uninspiring. B&S Advertising's most profitable clients are a packaged goods company and a fast-food chain. For the first time since joining the firm, Jack is having difficulty stomaching the products they sell. As a father of three, he is repulsed by the thought of selling Mega Meals to families like his own, and he hates a job that demands he does just that.

Charlie and Wayne enter Jack's mind.

*SEE THIS TIE AROUND MY NECK
THE NOOSE I WEAR FOR A FAT PAYCHECK
SIXTY SEVENTY HOURS A WEEK
I GET HOME AND MY KIDS ARE ASLEEP
DUTY CALLS AND I CAN'T DISOBEY
AT LEAST THERE'S USUALLY MY SATURDAY*

*SEE MY HAIR RECEDING BACK
ON MY WAY TO A HEART ATTACK
BUSINESS TRIPS AND HOTEL ROOMS
SPEND MY NIGHTS WITH PAY-PER-VIEW
BUT IN A WORLD WHERE I HAD A CHOICE
I'D STAY HOME WITH MY THREE BOYS
I'D RATHER BE A STAY-AT-HOME DAD
WHO THE HELL NEEDS ALL THIS MONEY
I'D RATHER WIPE A NOSE THAT'S RUNNY
I RATHER BE A STAY AT HOME DAD*

Disliking what you do, but doing it well nonetheless, is more detrimental to one's health than smoking.

CHARLIE, HOW CAN A GUY WHO LOOKS LIKE A MILLION BUCKS BE FEELING LIKE A DOLLAR TWENTY-NINE. THIS IS GETTING WAY TOO DEPRESSING. I FEEL LIKE WE'RE LIVING THAT BILLY JOEL SONG.

HOW ABOUT THAT LADY BEHIND YOU? SHE LOOKS HAPPY ENOUGH.

THAT'S WHAT WORRIES ME.

COME ON. SHE REMINDS ME OF YOUR MOM.

GREAT.

Death is the enemy of survival, and as animals humans are hard-wired in extraordinary ways to avoid it. A person's senses deliver acute warnings when danger is near. Bitter foods signal poison. The smell of feces is repulsive because the bacteria it carries can kill. But the difference between humans and the rest of the animal world is that humans know something that the other animals do not: the grim reaper will come knocking. People can avoid eating shit and poison, but no matter how much they twist and turn, the big predator in the sky will eventually have his dinner. The death outcome is inescapable.

Maggie Peterman's husband Bart killed himself when he was fifty-four. His suicide note was a two-word question:

Why wait?

For two years Maggie obsessed over the note. She was considering suicide herself when an acquaintance suggested she attend a church social. Maggie and her deceased husband were not church going folk. They were undeclared spiritual independents, but given her state of mind she went to the social anyway. There she met the Reverend Jim Killigan. After a few minutes of small talk the good Reverend put his hand on Maggie's lap and popped the question, "So Maggie, how are you getting along?" Maggie poured her heart out and asked Father Killigan for his interpretation of the suicide note. His answer, in the absence of any other, was persuasive.

"Maggie," he offered with an all-knowing sigh. "We are living in the age of moderation – of reformation – an age where men and women alike have compromised the Lord's only original, and therefore truest word, substituting a modern interpretation neither right nor wrong; a Halloween costume roughly achieving its intended facsimile through illusion, although fooling no one in the day's light. Authenticity cannot be faked. We cannot choose conveniently to appease culture's mood by eliminating that which is not on trend with today's fashion, while at the same time laying claim to those elements that still provide benefit. This was not God's intent. Believe entirely or believe not at all. The in-between is hollow and festers with cowardice, offering little more than an excuse to indulge in a short-lived feast of hedonism. How falsely we proceed in thinking that if we modernize scripture we preserve its relevance. We say blasphemous things like, of course the world was not created in seven days; or, when you eat the Eucharist you are (of course) not actually eating Christ's body. Such ideas are dangerous indeed, for they fracture the foundation on which the House was built. Truth is truth, period. The earth was created in seven of God's days, and yes through God's deliverance there is a piece of Christ in every cracker (forgive me Lord for putting it in such colloquial terms). If the truth were any different, God

would let it be known, for it would not be in His best interest to have us proceed with the wrong facts. Faith must stop apologizing to those who accuse it of incorrectness on account of proof lacking. We must stop reducing faith like a container of detergent in perpetual discount at the supermarket. God gave us form and then He gave us order. Faith served as His herdsman, and His herd landed on the moon. God made man to rule the world in His image; and what is our tribute? We demand to see him. We question relentlessly instead of offering thanks. We argue over topics that our mortal microscopes cannot magnify into clear visage. We require proof that we cannot prove with our earthly tools and intellectual limitations. And then we blame Him like a spoiled child - we blame the Father - because he requires that we find our own answers. He asks that we see the light without Him having to shine it directly into our eyes. Scientific man fumes at God because He refuses to reveal that which he cannot figure out with his own acumen and devices. Man demands to know how the story ends in advance - we want the punch line without hearing the joke. But our impatience is not God's fault. He has asked us a thousand times to simply believe and trust. The Creator cannot be blamed for the cancerous mindset that evolved after his grand creation. We wonder why God is not always benevolent, yet does any reasonable person in his heart believe that life should be perfect? We argue that the existence of men like Hitler proves that God does not exist - after all, why would humankind's benefactor strike with such a wrathful hand, or allow such a terrible thing to happen? In what school of science did we accept such an obviously biased argument? Science has built its bunker on the principle that the burden of proof rests on the shoulders of those making extraordinary claims. So I ask you Maggie, and all men of reason for that matter, where is the proof that God does not exist? Show me. Prove it. In my mind - and in the majority of minds in this world - the contention of

Godlessness is the extraordinary claim requiring proof. We spit in the face of our Lord disrespectfully, clinging to the naïve belief that He should be held accountable for the bad without getting credit for the good. God does not ask for our servitude, still we offer it without force, because it is our very nature to live in bondage. We need rules and instruction with which to navigate our existence. Ironically, it is man's innate scientific inquisitiveness that has placed unrealistic demands on our Lord. We idealize that the success of our journey rests entirely on our ability to secure proof, yet a life requiring such proof is a fool's mission, for the best possible state of enlightenment in the absence of religion is I don't know. Faith is the only alternative to drifting without an anchor – to know for thyself. Humans are indeed careless beasts in matters of eternal spiritual consequence. We are intoxicated by our achievements, and in most recent times we have begun to seriously question the need for the church. Yet as every man gets older, to which house is he drawn? On what door does he knock after a lifetime of agnostic pursuits; and what door opens itself always in a most welcoming fashion? The door of the Lord.

“Maggie, consider the facts. If you carefully consider the perfect complexity of the universe – the natural order of things – proof of a greater being presents itself quite clearly. There is a beginning to everything, and with the light cast by this very fact, a Prime Creator appears on the stage. Oh how science twists the truth in its favor, offering earthly explanations for miracles beyond the boundaries of our atmosphere. The skeptics have condemned faith as an opiate of the weak-minded, and called us masses – herds of sheep. They speak of reason as if they truly had a grasp of its meaning, and in so doing pollute the world with cold facts instead of warm knowledge. In a world so compromised by ruthless misanthropes the average man is left spiritually rudderless – without the comforting embrace of mystery necessary to survive in mind

and body. The world today is an unhappy place because the rug has been pulled out from under us. A world of half-believers - filled to the brim with reformed moderates - is a desperate world, for it is a world where man's self-interest remains fixed in materialism, and thus offers no promise for continuation of the soul. Maggie, your husband was a victim of the cold-hearted reason running amuck in this world – our world. With such a gloomy outlook it is no wonder that your loving husband's last words were "why wait?" The burden of hopelessness was simply too heavy a load to carry. It was not his fault, and it most certainly was not yours. You need to believe this Maggie, because it is most certainly the truth."

Maggie cried. That Sunday she went to church for the first time in her life. The next week she joined the church choir. Three weeks later she was baptized. Three months later she was teaching Sunday school and working in the church soup kitchen. A year later she traveled to Indonesia on a mission. Maggie was saved. All it cost her was her soul.

Wayne and Charlie enter Maggie's mind.

*JESUS LOVES US
HISTORY SHOWS US
DIED FOR OUR SINS
THEN HE ROSE UP TO PROTECT US
I AM SAVED
THE JEWS ARE ALL WRONG
THE MUSLIMS THEY SHOULD JUST DIE
THE BUDDHISTS ARE ALL PAGANS
WHO ARE YOU? WHO AM I?
I AM MAGGIE
PROGRAMMED TO BELIEVE
THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION
IS ALL THAT WE NEED*

CENTRAL PROCESSOR

CENTRAL CONTROL

RECEIVING A MESSAGE

*OVERLOAD. OVERLOAD. OVERLOAD. OVERLOAD. OVERLOAD.
OVERLOAD...*

Maggie's thoughts escalate into an intense feedback loop, causing Wayne to yell out.

CHARLIE, IT HURTS! TURN OFF THE GUN! DO IT NOW!

Charlie complies quickly. Wayne is out of breath, but speaks.

"Charlie, that woman is whacked!"

"No kidding. Are you okay?"

"I think so."

"I guess she's not so happy after all."

"Well at least we've learned something so far, haven't we Charlie?"

"What's that Wayne?"

"People are totally and completely messed up – lunatics - I mean really messed up. They are not at all who they seem to be."

"Not in this bar anyway."

Hank Pardy, a human fixture at Miller's, approaches the boys. Charlie tries to conceal the gun. "Gentlemen what brings you here? Won't you buy a homeless guy a beer?" says Hank.

Hank is homeless by choice, happily living on the streets of Bloomfield. He makes one hundred dollars a week using an old tin can worth two cents. How's that for return on investment? Hank doesn't have a drinking problem and he doesn't take drugs. Every Wednesday evening he finds a shower, puts on his one decent outfit, and goes to Miller's. He is

a familiar face at the tavern, and is a master and getting people to buy him drinks.

Before making the choice to live on the streets, Hank was the Chief Innovation Officer at Stricker-Thompson, a top biotech firm. At the time of his departure Hank was in the final stages of developing digital fluid - “intelligent blood” – a major breakthrough that promised to revolutionize disease diagnosis and treatment monitoring. His company had submitted his work to the Nobel Prize selection committee, and his boss was lobbying aggressively for the award and the deluge of positive press that would come with it.

Coincidentally, Hank graduated from SPI fifteen years ahead of Charlie, and he was a member of BHRS, the same transhumanist society of which Charlie nearly became a member. Hank never became evangelical like the society’s founder, Richard Boyko, but at heart he believed in its doctrine. That was, until he learned that his work on “intelligent blood” had been sold for the purpose of destroying human life, not advancing it.

Hank was a scientist, not a businessman, and he nobly but naively believed that the purpose of science was to improve the human condition not perpetuate its misery. When Hank learned through a friend that the firm had sold his work, along with an exclusive license, to a CMD (cyber-military defense firm), the specter of future responsibility became too much to bear. Hank destroyed his work, and his future with the firm along with it. When he left the company he was making seven figures a year, and he had seven million dollars in the bank. Before voluntarily joining the ranks of the homeless, Hank bought himself a premium insurance policy guaranteeing healthcare coverage for life, and gave the rest of his life savings to charity. He’s lived happily-ever-after since.

“So, may I ask what you boys are up to tonight,” asks Hank?

“Not much. Throwing a few back,” says Wayne.

“Really? And what is that thing – that device – you are pointing around the bar?”

“It’s nothing really. Just something I invented,” says Charlie.

“Oh, I see. And what does it do dare I ask?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t work,” says Charlie.

“Come on boys. You call tell old Hank what’s going on.”

“Seriously, it’s nothing. Mind your own business,” replies Charlie.

“Go ahead Charlie, tell him. Hank is cool,” says Wayne.

“Yes, tell me. I’ll keep your secret.”

“It is a mindreading device. Okay? Are you happy?”

“How does it work?”

“So you believe me?”

“Of course I believe you. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because I just told you that this is a mind reading device. Doesn’t that sound a little farfetched to you?”

“Not at all. How does it work?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Try me.”

“You won’t understand Hank.”

“You don’t know how it works, do you?”

“Of course I do.”

“How then?”

“It sends out a frequency that connects human thought waves.”

“What frequency?”

“Well, that I haven’t figured out yet.”

“How did you come up with the design?”

“Look Hank. I appreciate the curiosity, but it’s really none of your business.”

“Is it safe?”

“Yes, It’s safe. Of course it’s safe,” says Charlie.

“You don’t really know do you?”

Charlie turns to Wayne to express his frustration with Hank’s persistent line of questioning. When he turns back to address Hank he is gone.

19

Another Friend

Confidence is a rare commodity, whereas arrogance grows in abundance. Confidence is a blessing; arrogance is a scourge. Charlie has never been particularly confident, but he has never been arrogant either. Recent events however, are starting to change him. Each time he uses the sonic gun he feels more powerful than before, and in turn his desire to return to the mind reading world grows stronger as well. It is happening quickly.

Evette is a go-with-the-flow girl. She doesn't fight the current. "Don't be a salmon" is her motto. She has been watching Charlie since the moment he walked through Miller's door. She is fascinated by the angle of his jaw and the faraway look in his eyes. He is intense and commanding. She thinks he must be an amazing lover. Evette hasn't had a steady boyfriend in years, and she isn't looking for one either. She loves to date new people, particularly the nocturnal creative type. She likes the detached and brooding confidence they possess.

Underneath the makeup Evette is attractive, and extremely sexy. She has dyed blond hair that contrasts with her aggressive dark brown

eyebrows. She probably looks best as a natural brunette, but as a blond she broadcasts a magnetic signal that makes up for the difference. She carries a picture of herself in her wallet, but she never shows it. The picture was taken when she was seventeen, standing in front of the Great Pyramids. The picture is rough on the edges from the wear and tear of the eight or nine purses in which it has been transported over the past decade. She purchased her current purse from a street vender in Manhattan. It cost five dollars, but would look at home on Rodeo Drive. Evette knows how to get by on a budget, and that is a primary source of her freedom. She never waits around because in her opinion there is seldom anything worth waiting for. She is tall and slender with muscular walking legs. She carries herself like she's been around the block a few times, but she doesn't look weathered.

Evette's date is an hour late. The fifteen-minute grace period she normally affords suitors has long since expired, but for some reason she is hung up on Charlie. Apparently, she mistakes his newfound arrogance for confidence.

Wayne gives Charlie a shot in the arm. "Dude. That girl over there has been looking at you all night."

"Which one?"

"The blond in the corner, the one wearing the blue top. See her?"

Charlie peers around Wayne's large head.

"Jesus Childs, don't be so obvious."

"You're sure she's been looking at me?"

"I'm positive. Go talk to her."

"Nah. I'm not feeling it Wayne."

"Come on man. She's hot. Live a little. Bring the gun."

Do it. Go for it.

"All right, but if I'm not back in ten minutes come get me."

“Sure, whatever. Go.”

The male of the species answers to a higher power. It's called sexual desire. The female of the species answers to the same power. This is a necessary, albeit occasionally inconvenient fact of life. Evolution benefits from promiscuous behavior on both sides of the gender fence. It increases the chances for adaptive mutation, and then expedites it through proliferation. When men invented religion and other cultural norms they twisted the truth of nature in their favor. They assigned nasty labels to women who like sex. They assigned words without a masculine equivalent: whore, nymphomaniac, slut etc... These are trophy words for men, but words of condemnation for women. There are, of course, significant differences between the sexes, but legislating prudishness and sexual repression is unequal, unnatural and therefore egregiously wrong. Evette never went to Sunday school, so she missed out on the socio-cultural brainwashing.

Charlie approaches Evette, but she speaks first which is lucky for him because he has no introduction rap whatsoever.

“Hi. I'm Evette.”

“Hi. I'm Charlie.”

“So, do you want to sit down?” she asks.

“Sure, I mean thanks,” says Charlie.

“I had an uncle named Charlie.”

“Really?”

“He died two years ago.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Thanks. I was pretty upset at the time, but I'm pretty much over it now.”

“Were you close?”

“Yes. My parents died when I was six. My aunt and uncle raised me.”

“Really? What a coincidence. My aunt and uncle raised me too.”

“What happened to your mom and dad?”

“They died in a plane crash.”

“How terrible. I hate flying.”

“Yea, not the best way to die. How did your parents die?”

“They worked in the Peace Corps. We were stationed in Uganda. They were civil engineers. They built bridges.”

“So what happened?”

“One of their bridges collapsed. It wasn’t their fault. A tremor caused a landslide.”

“I hate tremors and landslides.” Charlie cringes over the stupidity of his comment. *You idiot*. Not only that, it is a lie. He actually finds them both quite fascinating. Evette senses his discomfort and bails him out.

“So we both hate flying, tremors and landslides. Charlie, we have so much in common,” she says with a sexy low-pitched chuckle. “What else do you hate?”

“Not much else really. I’m pretty open-minded. Oh yea, beets. I hate beets. Hate ‘em with a passion.”

“Me too. What a disgusting vegetable. What’s your take on asparagus?”

“They’re a take it or leave it vegetable,” he says.

“I hate the way they make your piss smell, don’t you?” she says.

Did she just say piss? Charlie has ever heard a female say piss before. At least up until now it seemed strictly a male word. Pee is the feminine equivalent. Pissing implies standing up while peeing implies

sitting down. Charlie plays along as best he can. “Absolutely. It happens so quickly after you eat them too.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” she volleys back.

Evette wonders how their conversation went from death to vegetables to piss, but she likes it. She isn’t looking for any weighty philosophical exchange. Charlie is humble and soft spoken, with an awkward confidence about him. She likes him.

“Is that your friend over there, the guy in the red shirt who keeps looking at us?”

“Yes, that’s Wayne.”

“What was that thing you were pointing around the room?” she asks.

“It is something I made. I like to tinker in my spare time.”

“What does it do?”

Go ahead, tell her. Charlie thinks about his next move. To tell or not to tell, that is the question. He decides (against his better judgment) to tell her. In truth Charlie wants to give her a demonstration. After all, he is king in the other world.

“Okay, but you will think I’m crazy,” he says.

“No I won’t. I promise. Tell me.”

“It’s a mind reading device.”

“Come again.”

“It’s a mind reading device. Seriously.”

“You’re not putting me on are you? I mean, I’ll believe you if you promise you’re telling the truth.”

“It’s true. I swear. It was supposed to be an electric dog whistle, but instead it connects human thought waves.”

“Is that possible? I thought E.S.P. was nonsense. Show me.”

HI WAYNE.

HI EVETTE. YOU SMELL SOOOOOO... GOOD.

THANKS, I THINK.

Charlie turns off the gun. Wayne is a loose cannon, and Charlie is too focused on Evette to channel his energy into containing him.

“Hey, why did you do that?” Wayne complains.

“I wanted to make sure Evette was okay, this being her first time and all. So, what do you think?”

“I am speechless Charlie.”

“You my lady are in the presence of the Einstein of our generation,” Wayne says like a huckster trying to offload some inventory. “Unfortunately, however, my curfew approaches. If I’m not home when the clock strikes twelve on a weekday night I turn into a pumpkin.”

“Do you need a ride?” asks Charlie.

“Nah, I’ll walk. I could use some fresh air. Freddie, our beloved albeit psycho bartender poured some mighty hefty drinks this evening. You kids behave, okay?”

Wayne leaves the bar, and an outcome as certain as the dying of the sun hangs like a neon sign in Charlie’s mind. No turning back. Charlie has no choice but to see how the story plays out. *Ask her. You know you want to.* A question flies from his mouth before he has any chance of stopping it.

“Evette, do you want to go back to my place?”

“Yes,” she says without hesitation.

That’s my boy.

20***Two As One***

Cindy regrets not going to Miller's with Charlie and Wayne. Her evening with Stan had been completely uneventful, although the movie was great. She thought about Charlie the whole time. Stan the man did not have a chance, and at the end of the evening he gets nothing but a courteous peck on the cheek as Cindy hurriedly exits her cousin's car. As she walks up the steps to her condominium she looks at the sky. It is a spectacular night. To the residents of Bloomfield the stars are visible once, maybe twice a year with luck. The Big Apple, The NJ industrial belt, and the jet fuel exhaust from Newark International Airport ensure that the night sky is a murky-clay brown - a ceiling of trapped toxins glowing only from the man-made luminance below. For a young romantic in Bloomfield the stars are as rare as diamonds.

That evening there are millions of visible stars, more than Cindy has ever seen. The constellations are so prominent that she recognizes their shapes without knowing their stories. The Milky Way looks like milk. The sky is ordered and choreographed so magically that the existence of an

omnipotent designer seems inarguable. Cindy takes a deep breath, makes a wish upon a star, and runs inside her house.

Cindy calls the office answering machine and leaves a message saying she isn't feeling well and is going to sleep in. She does the same for a client with whom she had scheduled an early morning appointment. The universe is off balance and will continue to be so until she sees Charlie. She will see him first thing. She hopes to spend the rest of the morning in his bed.

Meanwhile, in a completely different universe less than a mile away, Charlie and Evette are nearing Charlie's house. He is infatuated. Her presence in the other world - her amorphous fog-like being - is the round hole for his square peg. She is unassuming. She wants no commitment. She wants to live and experience without fences, chains or interest payments - a throw back, or perhaps a throw forward. She is the ideal one-night woman; a rebellious mutant among the obedient - this lady would doth not protest. She is warm clay in the hands of a novice sculptor, and the novice is being given permission to create his wildest fantasy.

Evette likes Charlie's house. She finds it cozy in a cold way - messy but minimal. It looks lived in and not at the same time. It is the type of house where two people hide out while the world is being taken over by zombies.

"Would you like a drink?" he asks.

Good idea.

"No, not really."

"Do you want to watch a movie?"

"Not really."

"Do you want to see my basement?"

"You are not a serial killer are you?"

Sex reduces humanity to the level of evolution's ancestors, stripping away the gentrified veneer. Society tries to dress sex up, ritualize it, or worse sanitize it, but no matter how much one pays for the wedding sex remains a wonderfully dirty deed - wonderful in its importance, dirty in its pleasure, both physical and imaginative. Sex is as much an activity of the imagination as it is a biological one. Sex is a psychological expression radiating from the soul of the mind. The imaginative aspect of sex makes it truly human - more than an instinctual reflex with a happy ending. "Making love" as an expression for sex is sweet, but limiting - "making babies" is worse. "Getting off" begins to capture its breadth and magnitude.

Charlie and Evette have sex ripe with imagination. It is blue-hot. Charlie's power in the other world proves equal to his bottled up sexual imagination, and Evette willingly submits. They are runaway trains. Healthy, perverse thoughts come to mind and neither can harness them. They are as naked as Adam and Eve minus the fig leaf. Charlie puts up no walls. At one point Cindy pops into his mind, and Evette plays along by entertaining a ménage fantasy. As their rapture approaches rupture the pace and intensity of thought escalates like the rhythm of a tribal dance. Their minds and bodies move as one and they climax simultaneously. At that moment physical upheaval eclipses their thoughts, and their connection is severed. When their shivering subsides their minds rejoin, but Charlie has a strong urge to turn the gun off immediately. He is reveling in newfound prowess as a love-maker.

"Are you okay?" he asks hoping for a compliment.

"That was the best ever. I'd ask if it was good for you too, but I already know the answer."

“You were amazing Evette.”

“So were you. By the way, who is Cindy?”

“She’s a friend of mine.”

“Just a friend? Your feelings for her are so strong. Are you in love with her?”

“I’m not sure. I might, I mean, I don’t know, I think I am.”

“It’s okay Charlie. I’m not the jealous type. Have you told her?”

“Not in so many words.”

“Charlie, it’s three words. You should tell her. Trust me on this.”

“You know something Evette, you might be the coolest girl I’ve ever met.”

“At the moment I’m feeling hot, thirsty and I’m craving something sweet, other than you of course. Do you have any orange juice?”

“I think so. I’ll get it.”

Charlie and Evette talk about everything and nothing while they guzzle a half-gallon of O.J. They talk about people they know. They talk about the Retones (Evette has seen them a dozen times, including the show at the Bottom Line). They promise each other they’ll stay in touch. They know they won’t, but the promise serves its purpose in the moment. In another time and place Charlie might fall for Evette. They have so much in common.

At 3:30 they go upstairs and climb into Charlie’s bed. He kisses her on the forehead. She kisses him on the cheek. They both keep one foot on the floor.

“Goodnight Charlie.”

“Goodnight Evette.”

The perfect one-night stand has just ended.

As Charlie drifts off to sleep he is thinking about Cindy. *You can never tell her about tonight.* He wants a replay of the evening with Cindy as a stand-in for Evette. Tomorrow, he reassures himself. Unrest follows Charlie into his sleep world, and the same apparition from two nights ago appears and speaks.

*TIME TO WAKE MY FRIEND, BE WITNESS TO THE END
WARM-BLOODED CREATURES, OUTDATED IN A COLD-BLOODED WORLD
THE FREQUENCY YOU'VE REVEALED, YOUR UNKNOWING ZEAL
THE MISSING LINK
THE HUMAN LEASH FOR A CIRCUIT-SWITCHED SOCIETY
STITCH BY STITCH A NEW SEAM WILL BE SEWN
A NEW RELIGION PLAYING ON OUR INSECURITY
IMMACULATELY CONCEIVED
BEWARE THE TYRANNY
OF TECHNOLOGY*

*APPLES AND BLACKBERRIES, SO SEDUCTIVE AND SWEET
A SINGLE BYTE IS ALL IT TAKES, AND THE POISON IS RELEASED
DICTATION FOR THE MASS, LIFE INSIDE A GLASS
WORKER BEES IN MOTION MINDLESSLY WATCHING TIME PASS
ONE BY ONE THE WORLD WILL CLIMB ABOARD
AND THOSE THAT DON'T BELIEVE WILL BE DESTROYED
BEWARE THE TYRANNY
OF TECHNOLOGY*