

THEY – An 85% Accurate Vision of the Future

By Michael Molinelli copyright 2009

Note to the readers: I started outlining this story in the summer of 2007 with the bulk of it written in the winter of 2008. I set it aside for about a year as I worked on my paying job – architecture. I took it up in June of 2009 and realize that much of what I had written as outlandish futuristic fiction was now topically part of the current political panorama.

PART I

THEY finally got their way.

This is the THEY often referred to is such common phrases as “THEY say its going to rain.” or “THEY ought to pass a law.” Or “THEY keep raising the prices.” Or “THEY should do something about healthcare.” Or “THEY killed the President.”

THEY finally got their way. THEY control everything now. It happened slowly. It all seemed reasonable, each increment, each step was logical. If there was a problem, THEY should be authorized to do something. If it meant giving up an option, a freedom or a right, it was for a good reason and THEY knew better.

The good things, so they seemed, meant everyone got universal health care, universal food care, universal shelter care, universal clothing care and universal public transportation. The most important personal protection feature was the chip implanted in you in the hospital, seconds after your birth. It allowed you to be always identified, always have your medical records near, always have your debit account handy and when necessary upload or download information into your cerebral cortex.

THEY said it would make it easier to manage things and people would see an 80% improvement in their life. And they were right. At least 98% of the people agreed. Street crime went down 72% because THEY always knew where you were. If a crime occurred, THEY could get a list of suspects from the data in each scanner at each building entrance, each train door and each bus stop. THEY could just scan the suspects' files, get a report on where the suspects were and convict the perpetrator of the crime based on the street level cameras or the satellite photos or biometric data on the perpetrators chip. Trials were too cumbersome and costly. They could save 55% of costs of the criminal justice system this way.

THEY could determine if your usefulness to society had been fulfilled or it peaked and then THEY could find you and eliminate you. It was okay, THEY said, it made society better for everyone, especially the young innocents. It's for the children.

Gary woke up with the wall-sized screen blasting the day's news, weather and traffic with a little bit of music. The sound and brightness made it impossible to sleep. The wall itself had no device other than a thin self-luminous wallpaper THEY installed in his studio apartment. It worked two ways: information in and information out. Gary took a sonic shower, dressed in his work clothes, put on his helmet and airbag jacket and left his apartment.

Sometime earlier THEY had decided that life was simply too risky and so mandatory helmet laws were passed for everyone, everywhere, except inside their own home. Before the helmet law, 85% of people would have some kind of head injury that would go untreated. The airbag jackets were a new requirement, a way to create a new industry, but it took a long time to create enough fear to get people to agree to wear the things. But THEY were persistent. Once they showed that people wearing airbag jackets were 62% less likely to break a bone, the public began to respond.

Gary went to the parking lot to get his car. It was a small thing but it was shiny gray and prestigious. It was made mostly of wood and leather with very few plastic parts and only enough metal as was necessary. It was 85% sustainable which was a goal of the government when they took over the automobile companies. THEY realized that egalitarianism did not work, so certain productive people were allowed privileges like personal vehicles. The ability to earn some privileges improved production 35%. There was a long line for cars coming off the robot-line and they were shoddy as there was but one company making them. Still it was a perk for which people would work. With house and healthcare and food provide by the state, it was the last big incentive. THEY gave up on eliminating car culture. This way, THEY could control it. Besides, people with cars bought 42% more stuff and that was important for society.

This morning there was a woman standing over his car looking inside it. She was young, almost half his age, but definitely an adult. Her helmet was a dull gray, not one of the bright polychromatic ones that fashionable young women wore. Even a bulky airbag jacket could not hide the curve of her back to a slim waist and out again to a shapely hip. The Bovanian swish logo was the prominent crest on her jacket. Her black sweater was zipped to the top like a turtleneck. She saw him approach and looked at him. "Have you ever tried to initiate a conversation without asking a question?"

Gary was taken back. Perhaps it was the interest a young woman was paying him. Perhaps it was her dark but lively eyes. He responded with a mumble that he turned into a sentence. "What do you mean?"

"Most people start conversations with strangers with a question. Like 'What time is it?' or 'Where is the train station?' or even a 'Hello, how do you do?'"

"You didn't start our conversation with a question." Gary was pleased she was still talking to him.

“Yes I did. I asked ‘Have you ever tried to initiate a conversation without asking a question?’ That is a question. If I stated a fact, you would have thought me too weird to respond. Especially if I stated, “All conversations begin with questions.”

Gary was still off guard as they talked. She said her name was Sheila and she recently lost automobile privileges. She said she and a friend might need a ride later this week and were wondering if Gary would help. She implied that the friend was another woman. Gary declined. Her request seemed to be something THEY might not approve of or perhaps THEY were testing him. Every year 22% of intended criminals were caught through entrapment. Gary had been dutiful in doing what THEY wanted all his life and had accumulated some privileges because of it. He did not want to risk any of that.

As she left, she handed him something. He gave it only a cursory glance and placed it in his pocket as he was still transfixed by her eyes and expression. He got in the car and lit a cigarette. He did not particularly care for them. He never smoked them alone in his apartment but outside in the world it was one of the things he did to get along. THEY taught him, THEY taught everybody that getting along was more important than doing the right thing. That is why Gary got the good assignments at the firm and other privileges that THEY bestowed on good citizens.

He took the object out of his pocket. It was a small blue figurine, very light. Not wood. Maybe there was once white paint on it. It appeared to be a dog or, more accurately, a cartoonish dog with a big nose. Maybe, it had paws, but it stood and it wore a hat with goggles. He felt it and scratched at it. It was real plastic!

Real plastic! Not the cheap organic corn oil stuff, either. THEY had stopped petroleum production for some reason. Some say that with fusion power and genetic engineering making everything out of wood, leather and corn sugars, it was not needed or not economical. Some said it was leftover from a failed energy-environmental vision decades before. But once petroleum only represented 6% of the economy total production stopped and lots of everyday things derived from petroleum's by products became rare. Plastics, perfect for unique purposes, became very valuable. Soon people were hoarding plastic, vinyl, polystyrene, cellophane, etc. THEY took control and began to mine all the landfills from the previous century where the plastics were carelessly discarded, abundant and, of course, never decayed. Gary had a friend who worked in the plastic mines and those friends said security was so strict it was almost impossible to sneak a piece of plastic for yourself. The black market in plastics was responsible for 30% of all crimes.

Gary worked at a consulting firm where he was an expert in motivational statistics. These are culled statistics that get people to act in ways the people would not ordinarily act. The government noted there would be a shortage on the production of Game-Spuds® one year. They wanted to depress the demand, but they did not want to kill the industry. Gary developed the information that 65% of men with Game-Spuds® would develop fertility issues. When men heard that, most stopped buying them. But eventually the logic of the assertion caught up with the general population – men

inclined to play with Game-Spuds® all day were not interested in any form of parenting anyway. The market built up about six months later when production was ready. Gary knew that 65% was the right number. Too little and there would be no discouragement; too much and the market would never recover. There was no research supporting the premise or the statistic. Gary knew that the right number would have the right emotional impact.

In fact Gary coined the static's phrase "Emoti-stat©" in his thesis about the 100,000 cops. His thesis pointed out many years earlier the impact that certain numbers can have on a populus. So when a candidate promised 100,000 cops to stop crime the number was sufficient to motivate people to vote for him. There was no study done to determine that the nation needed 100,000 cops or 40,000 cops or 1,000,000 cops. But 100,000 sounded good. It was substantial but not unbelievable. Facts, such as the funding for the program was only 1/3 of the cops for the first three years, or most municipalities did not take advantage of this because it mean recurring future expense, or that in the end only about 40,000 cops were added through the program (and most would have been added anyway) or that crime was already going down before any of these cops saw the street – facts, did not matter. People and politicians (who are kind of like people) locked into the number "100,000 cops" which reflected its own reality. Politicians immediately claimed credit for the decline in crime the week the legislation passed and for decades afterwards. Emoti-stat©

Gary was an expert in finding those numbers – numbers that would hit a nerve in a target population and be easy to remember. Numbers that occur overnight in the news and get repeated in more news outlets because they appeared in other news sources. So when all the news sources are repeating the same number – it must be true.

Occasionally, when some disgruntled group challenges a number (and this would happen less and less) Gary's group could justify the numbers. In the beginning they would manipulate studies to preset the results they would like. For example if they actually did a survey and found that on a certain Presidential policy 40% thought things were getting worse, and 10% thought things were getting better and 50% thought things were about the same – Gary could report that **BASED ON SURVEYS** 60% thought the President's policy was making things better or about the same. They ignored the converse that 90% thought the President's policy was making things worse or about the same. Emoti-stat©.

But the very idea of getting the opinion of millions of mis-informed people was never challenged. The people's will would be paramount – as long as Gary's department could modify the people's opinion to his clients' wishes.

Today he did not go directly to work at the firm, though. Gary had another appointment at the hospital. He hadn't been feeling well. As he traveled the roads, the scanners dutifully noted his and his car's location, assessed tolls and cleared his travel as "approved." At the hospital entry doors scanned the chip imbedded into his chest confirmed his appointment and pull his electronic medical records. The central computer even communicated with his food storage locker at his apartment and established he

needed more Soysbury Steak® meat packs. The food would be delivered that day. (One of Gary's privileges was home delivery.) THEY really had this down to a science.

In the hospital lobby, a disembodied voice welcomed him by name and gave him directions to his appointment room. Once in his room the voice told him to disrobe, including his helmet, and put on the hospital gown. Gary knew the routine because this was his third time back for tests, albeit there were many months in between the exams. By increasing the time between visits by 120% THEY could cut medical costs by 45%. It was an important Emoti-stat© to sell the system.

Since Gary had been declared an emergency, he did not have to wait a year. Then the voice instructed him to take the cable on the reel near the sink and plug it into the usb port on his chest. A series of scans and tests began. A person came in to draw blood and get a urine sample. THEY had tried to automate this as well but the malfunctions proved embarrassing to the patient and to the authorities. Humans were still needed for 33% of all medical procedures.

Gary waited in the room of the hospital for another twenty minutes as music and information was piped in. The luminous wallpaper showed pictures from a dozen different television stations and gave the room a kinetic flicker. Eventually, the doctor came in and handed him a pack of cigarettes so he could smoke one as she gave him the news. Gary thought, this must be bad. The doctor told him, "THEY say you have lung cancer."

At first THEY banned smoking. Now that everyone pays for your healthcare, you have an obligation to follow our health rules THEY instructed. But THEY had ignored all the potential. The nicotine fix could help introduce other elements, vitamins, hormones, etc into the blood stream that THEY found useful. Now THEY encouraged smoking 68% of all people smoked enough to introduce the vital elements the government decided people needed in a manner more cost effective than food. Before that 72% of the population was deficient in nutritional supplements – although it was never clear in what supplements or how deficient or what other ways people could get those critical nutrients. It was an Emoti-stat© designed to get the population to agree.

The consequences of lung cancer would increase by 55% but the high cost of medical care for a long drawn out treatment were eliminated since the patient was eliminated when there was a diagnosis. Before this policy in the previous century, last-year-of-life expenses constituted 26 % of all medical expenses. By eliminating the last year, the government could save money. The medical term they phrase they used was "the person is totaled." It was necessary to eliminate the last year of life keep the system working. The final medical procedure that people would receive was called "Terminal Treatment" as if it were the last desperate attempt to keep them alive and healthy. Few people surmised that no one came back from "Terminal Treatment."

Once the last year of life was cut out, there was a new last year of life which had its own associated expenses. THEY were keeping an eye on that year now.

A transition Counselor came in to speak with Gary. She laid out Gary's options. Gary would have a week to make final arrangements before his time to return to the hospital for the Terminal Treatment. THEY would come and get him, if necessary. The implication was not to run because they could find him. The counselor explained the procedure and ended with the explanation that Gary, if his current condition would be allowed to progress without the Terminal Treatment, he would demand too many services from society. It would deny these services to young people who had their whole lives ahead of them. THEY said this was the best thing for the children.

Outside the hospital, Gary pulled out his Game-Spud®. It was smooth wood blob that fit snugly into his palm. He started to give it instructions to call someone. But he really didn't know anyone he really wanted to tell. He put the Game-Spud® back in its storage slot in his helmet.

Gary arrived at his office pushed aside some papers. He placed his Game-Spud® on the desk and it started with a hum to project a screen onto the worksurface. He poked at the image, typed on a virtual keyboard and spoke to the spud. He was doing research on the internet.

It was reported that the total sum knowledge of mankind was doubling every month and still accelerating. To Gary this was a great resource. To someone like that Sheila, whom he met earlier, it was obvious that most of that information was useless. Everyone could survive without it apparently. Was the blogging of misinformed shut-ins or the complete food purchases made by 18 to 34 year olds in quadrant 2 during the last month really a contribution to the sum knowledge of mankind? Was the proliferation of data really knowledge? Should the mass of data increase understanding before it contributed to human knowledge?

THEY issued Game-Spuds® to everyone as part of the universal gaming service and the rest was easy. (Upgrades would cost you.) A Game-Spud® was a phone, computer, camera, date book, and gaming system all in one. The only limit to how small it could be was how easy it was to lose it. Research showed that a blob slightly smaller than one's fist was ideal to keep the person aware of the spud. It could communicate with the chip inside the owner wirelessly by mental control, but 78% of all respondents declared occasionally hardware and buttons or some manual interaction was desirable.

Like sugared cereals all the stuff they wanted people to know was sweet and outwardly pleasing and rigidly controlled by central servers through the game spud. It was unnecessary to ban or burn books. 94% of males and 76% of females listed their Game-Spud® as their favorite: hobby, device, sport and friend. People had just lost interest in books, at least the ones with words. Why read when you had your Game-Spud®?

Besides, there was info everywhere on screens and in holograms. The older ones talked about the first holograms, you could not walk into. You had to imagine what was behind you! They recalled how their grandparents said in their day there were no holograms,

just flat screen and how their grandparents said their screens were black and white and you had to touch the screen box to control them. This progressed backwards through television, radio and books and scrolls to point where somebody's Dad must have said, "What is this reading nonsense! In my day we sat around the fire and told our stories. Couldn't you do something better there than just read, like go outside and hunt a deer or something?"

WWW did not tell him anything useful. THEY controlled it anyway. It kept coming back to his duty not to drain society of its resources. Gary had a real sense of betrayal. He knew inside his being that "Terminal Treatment" was a death sentence. And he felt he did not need it. He felt fine most of the time. He had done everything that society had wanted of him. Why did he feel he was getting a raw deal? A few minutes later the Counselor came into his office with two very large policemen. She said "We are from the government; we are here to help." and explained the computers coordinated his diagnosis with what he was searching for on the web. This team was dispatched to see if Gary needed any "special assistance." Gary understood the implication. 35% of people given his prognosis were likely to resist. But after he had spent his life giving to society all the things they asked him to, THEY were not showing him gratitude or compassion. THEY would impose their order. The team left and Gary put his head down on his desk and cried.

After work Gary drove to his old neighborhood. His boyhood house was gone. He had not known a father. It was just him, his Mom and his sister who were both gone. His house, decades ago, was replaced by the chair factory.

Long ago, it was determined that conventional manufacture was cumbersome and wasteful. To build a wood chair meant growing and cutting down trees, using sharp materials to cut and carve wood and metals and adhesives to assemble the parts. It would consume 67% more energy than necessary produce 15% unrecyclable waste and sharp spinning tools were responsible for 12% of all industrial accidents.

And then there were the endless varieties of chairs the public wanted. THEY thought that much choice was confusing. 45% of the manufacture of the varieties of chairs were a waste of time and money. So THEY took over chair manufacturing.

Fortunately genetic engineering allowed the process to be expedited. Chairs were simply grown on a hydroponic farm. The tree's genes had been altered for it to merely grow into a chair. It was harvested each season. No need to cut, sand or paint. Pick and ship.

From the hill above Gary could see through the roofs of the immense green house. Various chairs were already blossoming. The late shift was there and the greenhouse glowed like a festive holiday bulb. The work was done almost entirely by human labor. For a while most of the work had been done by robots. But robots were 25% harder to reprogram, resistant to change, and forced people into higher level thinking occupations.

Higher-level thinking was not what THEY wanted men or women to do whenever it could be avoided. Of the 35% of people who resist the prognosis when a fatal disease was diagnosed, 90% of them had the higher level thinking occupations. Gary was flagged by the system and being watched.

That evening, Gary parked his car in the public garage and began to walk back to his apartment. Sheila approached him and asked how his day was. Another question. She did not seem like she worked for the administration. He decided that a fling or some defiant act might be the best thing for him this last week. Real sex, not just virtual sex with his Game-Spud®, might be just the thing for him. He invited her up to his place. She was hesitant but agreed.

In the delivery box by his door were a dozen boxes of Soysbury Steak® packs (actually 75% processed Kalesoy®.) All of it portioned and precooked. Sheila offered to carry them in as he unlocked his apartment. It suddenly looked messy to him, so to distract Sheila, he asked her, “Do you want to eat?”

“Not this stuff” she replied.

In the apartment the robot vacuum was still cleaning the floor. It hummed and buzzed on the open floor space. A small arm on top picked up the loose clothes on the floor and created a pile on the bed. Other loose objects it placed on the coffee table. Sheila comment, “Is that the new model Vacu-bot®?”

Gary retorted, “Yes, it works pretty well, but one day I came home early it was humping the digital video recorder.” Sheila laughed. Gary pushed the dirty clothes on his sofa to one end so there was a place to sit.

Sheila took off her helmet, shut off the Vacu-bot® and placed by the luminous wall paper a small box, that looked like a pack of cigarettes complete the name Bovanian Brand Cigarettes and the Bovanian© swish logo across the front. She pressed a button the cigarette box and the luminous wall flashed and went dark.

“We’ve got about two minutes to talk before I have to remove the box. Otherwise a service report will be generated and THEY will investigate.” Sheila told Gary.

“Talk about what?” Gary was hoping for sex. Two minutes seemed way too rushed.

Sheila asked Gary if he liked the plastic object she gave him. He did not commit. She said that she could get more plastic to him if he can help us. He could not be bribed. First because it was what he once considered wrong, but now black market wealth was not useful when he had only a week to live. He turned her down. “Why me?” he asked her.

“We found that most people facing the Terminal Treatment are willing to make their life meaningful. What you found out today, we downloaded weeks ago from the hospital’s computers from the first round of tests.”

“What are you, some sort of hacker?” Gary asked.

“I’m a doula.” She responded quickly. Sheila’s cigarette box buzzed three times. She shut it off and put it in her pocket. She put an unmanicured index finger to her unlipsticked lips to indicate silence. “Let’s go eat,” she said.

Gary imagined Sheila’s technology was illegal and much too elaborate for someone who just wanted to have sex. There was something more nefarious going on. Was it an insurgency in the making? Fear of insurgency was on the rise. Gary developed the Emoti-stat© that said uncheck, the few disgruntled insurgents could bring society to total collapse within 30 years. And while the insurgents were based “off shore” their abilities were cunning and resources endless, or so THEY said.

THEY often would create crisis to produce fear so everyone would wildly accept their solution. It was important that each crisis have an apocalypse that predicted doom 30 years into the future. Whether it was a growing insurgent anarchy movement, nuclear war, a viral plague, global warming, depletion of petroleum reserve, or the population hitting a catastrophic number, the apocalypse must be 30 years into the future. 68% of the population responded to this kind of information. Gary coined this the Apocal-stat©. Thirty years in the future, if one could not imagine living through it, once could certainly imagine their young ones living through it and changes must be made for the children.

Pending insurgencies meant THEY could investigate everything everywhere. Even though the enemy as depicted and described in news and stories could be identified easily, profiling would be inequitable. To be fair, THEY investigated everyone.

THEY even manufactured fear about the earth itself that the natural cycles and changes known to occur for eons were somehow in control of despicable human forces. Of course, THEY could correct any global crises. No crisis should go to waste.

When the gas CO₂ was declared toxic, THEY considered everything to manipulate behavior and change things to their liking. THEY considered banning automobiles. They considered mandating carbonated drinks and asking everyone to hold it in – politely - would help save the planet. (THEY got rid of the one who suggested that.) But THEY came up with a solution that put limits on things THEY wanted to put limits on and unleashed things THEY wanted unleashed. In a rare clever moment, THEY developed plants genetically that could suck in carbon and fix it at an astounding rate. It was the primary food crop, called Kalesoy®, and even though it tasted awful, THEY said it would make the planet better.

Gary and Sheila put on their helmets and went to a restaurant via mass transit on the other side of the city. It was her choice. She said THEY ran the restaurant but the food was

more real than most of the stuff out there. Gary ordered a steak. Sheila ordered a plate of sautéed Kalesoy with other vegetables but without any of the sauces. The conversation was mundane because Gary knew he could not ask what a *doula* was with the potential eavesdropping. (Sheila did not want to use the cigarette box too soon, as it would create a pattern of ethernet voids that might be traced.) Gary suggested Sheila go see a screen with him. Sheila hesitated but agreed. The two entered the theater. Gary told the scanner he would pay, so his account was debited.

It was an older theater with the really wide doors designed to allow those who were bedridden equal access to areas of public accommodation. It got expensive to be so accommodating. Every time a new level of accommodation was implemented, the activist wanted more done. At first THEY appreciated the disruption but eventually even THEY found it tiresome. So THEY just started getting rid of those types who needed accommodation and the activists.

Gary got popcorn and both sat in seats near the middle. Gary pulled the usb plug off the reel in front of him and plugged it into his chest. Sheila did not. “Don’t you want the full experience?” he asked. She unzipped her sweater and placed the reel plug into her sweater, but held on to the cord looped in her lap. It was only a few minutes into the movie with the wide screen and 3d images dancing around them, during one of the bright outdoor scenes, when Gary tried to sneak a peak at her cleavage and he saw the usb was not plugged in. He observed that she doesn’t have a usb port in her chest!

On the way out of the theater, Gary had all sorts of questions, but he did not know how to ask them safely. Sheila simply told him to treat tomorrow as a normal day, but she would meet him after work, but to work late. And she went off on her own into the city night.

The following evening Sheila was waiting at his office parking lot. It was dark and his was the only car there. She said let’s get in the car. They stayed parked in the dark lot as she took out that same box and turned it on near the radio. Then she climbed under the dashboard, contorting to fit, with a set of pliers. She emerged with a black box with lots of gray wires coming out of it. She clipped two of the wires and set it back under the dash. Gary just watched. It seemed appropriate.

Sheila sat up and unbuttoned Gary’s shirt. Gary was pleased, just being passive was the right move. She plugged a jack into his usb port, the wire led to her electronic cigarette pack. When Gary realized it was not romance, he tried to stop her. Sheila scolded, “Stop, I am taking you offline. You’ll be able to move around on your own for a while.” A few keystrokes and she unplug him. “I place a virus in your chip. It won’t work until you get plugged in again someplace and THEY fix it.

“Now, we can talk.” She went on to explain that she came from a group that helped women survive in this society and how it was necessary to do all this stuff just so the two of them could not be tracked or their conversations recorded. The car was now offline. It would be days before the authorities would know that. In the mean time a small scrambler box, would allow them to pass through tolls and all gates, with a random

identity. Gary too was taken off line. The pouch adhered to his chest would scramble his ID signal. She gave him something that was the size of a pack of gum. This too would give him a random ID so he could get through gates untracked. In a matter of hours THEY would not know where he really was.

Sheila explained that she tracked him down because of the medical tests. She told him he likely did not have cancer but if he did, it might be years before he gets major symptoms. THEY decided that the cost of saving him was too high and since he had acquire so many privileges, it was time to take his job and perks and divide it among two younger workers. She could save him, but she needed his help for something special. Gary believed her because she was the only person or screen telling him he did not have to die this week.

“I can keep you unplugged from society or I can reboot you and you can go back and do what THEY want you to do. Or you can help me, and I can show you a way to live. Which is it?”

Gary agreed to go with her. But Gary had lots of questions and Sheila finally paused long enough where he could ask. What’s a *doula*? “It is term derived from the ancient Greek for a woman slave who was a personal attendant. But it was used in the previous century for non-medical women who assisted in childbirth and postpartum support. These days, we are resisting the state-controlled childbirth.”

Controlled? Gary would never have thought of that term. Women who became pregnant would get all expenses taken care of by the state. Why was that bad? Women did not need men for child support or care. Family groups were unreliable and unnecessary. With plenty of non-committal sex, food, and gadgets to play with, men lost interest in family life. Sure there were marriages but experience told the authorities that 83% would not last (up from 50% in the previous century, albeit first marriages did much better.) So marriage licenses were like driver’s licenses, renewable. It discouraged the whole concept, which was good because men, when they became active fathers, tended to be protective and distrusting of authority. THEY did not want that.

THEY found that random sex was still the best means for producing people. Cloning or other means of child-production were too expensive when they had billions willing to do it the old fashion way for free. But child-raising was by the village. THEY could do that best.

Sheila explained that when women get prenatal care, the fetus is genetically tested. If certain probabilities were likely, undesirable traits of any kind, defects, likely cancers at a certain age, criminal behavior, below baseline motor skills or intelligence, etc the baby is aborted. Or if the child was developing traits the mother did not like – hair color, height or sexual orientation the baby was aborted. If certain rare skills are detected, the in utero environment is enhanced with hormones to develop the baby along the needs of society. After birth, just before the chip and port were installed, the child is genetically tested

again with one last chance to terminate if necessary. If not terminated, his or her information is placed in a genetic registry for future use.

This way every child is a wanted child. And THEY knew what THEY wanted. The state had this right since the state provide for it - universal care – womb to the tomb. Gary still was not sure why this was bad.

They drove to Gary's apartment where Sheila activated another white electronic gum pack. This is you, she said. She placed it in his bed and plugged it into his Game-spud®. This way while you move around as other identities, the THEY think you are sleeping in bed. This will give us days for what we need to do. Meet me tomorrow night at this time at your car in the public garage. Stay here until then but bring only what you need with you when you come.

A few minutes after Sheila left, Gary notices a whirring noise underneath his bed. He looked and was startled by what appeared to be a frenzied rabid mouse and then another scurrying about hitting the box spring and the wood legs. One fell over on its side and the other came out from under the bed toward the middle of the room and into a pile of clothes. The pile of clothes then jumped two feet into the air and came to a rest. Gary carefully uncovered the mouse now still with springs and wire protruding from its body. It was a surveillance mouse, which THEY used to track areas otherwise hidden from cameras or screens. Sheila's rigged security had confused them and overloaded their circuits.

Sheila was right it would have taken days for the automated systems to detect something was wrong with Gary. But the Counselor has her own suspicions and she began to check into things. The next afternoon, the readout was indicating he was at home doing nothing – and the projection noted indications of illness or depression. The Counselor knew that in 92% of all people depression was a later stage of the death-facing reaction. After denial, anger, and bargaining. She had a hunch that Gary would be a bargainer, trying to deny death by making deals with who ever might be out there. The Counselor went about trying to find what Gary was really doing.

PART II

Weeks earlier, Barbara took the cigarette from the doctor as she sat on the exam room table in the paper gown gown and harvested in the garden behind the hospital. She was nervous because she had seen the doctors and nurses and medical technicians and the medical actuaries discussing things back and forth since she came in for her test. She thought she was pregnant and did the dutiful thing of reporting it to the government at the hospital. For doing her duty she expected the state to take care of her and her baby.

The doctor was a square-jawed white haired man, the kind that a previous century might have described as a father figure, but this century had no context for that. Still, unknown

to Barbara and even to the government, that stature gave him more gravity when he spoke to Barbara.

“Well, congratulations, Barbara,” he said as he lit her cigarette. “You are definitely pregnant.” The next sentence was more difficult and his toothy smile was covered by tightly drawn lips. “But there are complications.”

The doctor was not going to give Barbara all the details because medical confidentiality these days meant the state knew your condition and not you. And why confuse the public with complex scientific statistics.

The doctor barely understood all the parameters but the medical actuary assured him it was necessary. There were all sorts of factors. First the fetus was male which was a societal negative. Next he was going to be left-handed which meant right-brained domination and 25% of them exercised an unacceptable level of individuality. The third factor was a genetic predisposition to diabetes, which would mean a 35% increase in his medical costs. His genes did display a 68% chance of talent for spatial-relationships and mathematical understanding but the baby quota for this quarter on space/math skills was already filled. There were lots of other minor factors that contributed to the overall negative score for this potential life. The algorithm also account for race, sexual orientation, singing ability, beauty, certain disabilities all of which the state had an interest in keeping a certain balance. THEY wanted enough of any minority to serve their purposes but not so much as to cause instability. Diversity must be preserved even if it meant eliminating anyone too different. Nevertheless, to the computer program and the medical actuary it was clear: The state did not want *this* baby. THEY called this policy “Selective Harvest.”

On the positive side, Barbara was a healthy 22 year-old woman and this was her first pregnancy. She had good genetic make up and was smart enough. THEY determined via the readout on the amount of time her internal chip spent in extreme proximity to male chips during the night that she favored reasonably intelligent males. There would be not need to sterilize her on purpose or even warn here the upcoming procedure risks 20% accidental sterilization. There would be other pregnancies and other opportunities for her to produce a wanted baby. It was all part of the official government policy to limit the population and keep it filled with the right kind of people, but not too many. By policy 70% of all pregnancies needed to be terminated. As the sign said in the Doctor’s office: “Keep Birth Safe, Legal and Rare.”

Hardly a second passed since his last sentence and the doctor continued, “Barbara, sometimes Mother Nature just doesn’t work the way it is supposed to. But don’t worry, the government will take care of you.” Barbara closed her eyes to hold back the tears but they would not stop. The doctor continued. “THEY have preserved the right of a woman to choose, Barbara, so it is up to you. Do you want to abort it surgically or chemically?”

As she left the hospital Barbara cried, her cigarette crushed in her right hand from her tension. She was to return in three weeks for a procedure. This is because despite the

urgency of the states policy, they could not keep up with their own demand. THEY gave a prescription but the pharmacy was out. She had to go to another one, four blocks away.

Of course there was no charge for this, any of this. No direct charge at least. It was too complex to explain to the average citizen but productivity still drove all the industries and services whether they were private or state run. It had been that way since there was civilization and the executive actuaries knew it could not change the process but it could hide it.

So Barbara's productivity and pay scale at work were carefully calculated. She only saw 25% of what she truly earned for her company. The rest went from the employer (who probably was the state) to the state to pay for housing, healthcare, water, food transportation, a basic Game-Spud® and all those other things that the people thought were free. Of that 25% that Barbara kept, one fifth was taxed in ways to encourage certain activities and discourage others. Because the tax system was not designed to raise money for revenue so that government could do the few things it must do for the people. The tax system was designed to change peoples' behaviors so people would do the things THEY wanted them to do. The rest of the income was discretionary allowing the individual to choose things instead of human relationships and drive the consumer-oriented industries. This gave the people a sense that things were good.

Besides all salaries were government regulated now based on a series of commissions view of job worth. It started when government assisted industries were told what to pay top people. The top people began to flee to other industries. Trying to vilify the executives worked to a degree but it was too much effort and relied on a pliable public opinion. Instead the THEY used the force of law and therefore the right to use legal force to tell people what their job was worth.

Barbara knew she shouldn't be so sad. She was told everything was going to be okay. Besides, it had hardly been two weeks that she thought she was pregnant. How could she be so upset about a life that was barely alive in her? And she wouldn't want to bring a defective baby into the world. She understood it was not good for the baby or for the world.

Barbara was walking to the bus when she almost bumped into another woman – almost a serious airbag jacket bump. “Why are you smoking that thing?” the other woman asked. Barbara replied with a shrug of disinterest with the tears still coming down her cheeks. “Let's go get something good to eat,” Sheila offered.

Barbara protested that she had to get to work, but Sheila insisted and escorted her to a nearby restaurant. Sheila ordered for both of them but when the food came, Sheila removed most of the food from Barbara's dish. “I don't trust the food here.” Sheila took out a thermos of tea and a sandwich from her backpack and placed it in front of Barbara. She began to eat. On the table Sheila placed her cigarette pack and pressed a button – it gave them privacy from any electronic eaves dropping. THEY would think there was a dead zone in the wireless-ethernet and if it did not correct itself in 20 minutes they would

send someone to correct it. “I know about your situation, Barbara.” Sheila started, “And I can help.”

Barbara was getting her composure back. She did not realize how hungry she was. “Know what? Help with what?”

“I know you’re pregnant and that hospital wants to remove the baby. I can help you save the baby.” Sheila sipped her own cup of tea.

“Who are you?” Barbara said with a piece of lettuce dangling from her lip, just realizing she took food from a stranger.

“My name is Sheila. I am just a friend.”

“You are not my friend, unless you are from MyFaceSpace© I have 2,377 friends on MyFaceSpace© but I don’t remember you.”

“I am not a MyFaceSpace© friend. I am someone who cares. You are right I am not your friend, but I want to be your friend.”

“Why?” She wiped the lettuce off her lip.

“You are pregnant and the state wants you to get rid of your baby. I can help you save your baby.”

“The baby is defective and will suffer its entire life and be a burden on society. Why would I want to save it?”

“But Barbara, it is not defective. They just told you that.”

“Why would they do that?” she was incredulous that the government would lie to her.

“Why do they do anything? Because they want order because they think it serves us. But it doesn’t serve us, we serve it.”

Despite horrendous school system, despite the discouragement of free thought, the emphasis on teamwork so no one excelled on their own, despite a curriculum of minimal literary skills and almost no math skill, despite the school mantra of “it is better to get along with others than do the right thing”, Barbara had a mind and could think. But she also didn’t trust Sheila. On the other hand, Sheila opened her eyes that maybe she should not trust the hospital and doctors.

“This sandwich is really good.” Barbara changed the subject.

“Free range turkey with organic mayonnaise and organic lettuce on sprouted rye seed bread.”

“Where do you get this stuff?”

“Well it’s not like it is illegal, yet. But you have to know where and whom.” There was a pause. Sheila continued, “Do you think the father would be interested in the baby?”

“The father?”

“The man who got you pregnant?”

Barbara’s eyes opened like she bit into a lemon, “No? Why would he be interested?”

“Okay, I was just asking. Some men like the idea. Look, think about what I said and I’ll contact you again in a while. Go along with everything and everyone as if I had not spoken to you. Fulfill your prescription but don’t take any of the pills. Try to eat better and stay away from the cigarettes.” Sheila pushed a button on her cigarette pack, put it in her pocket and left the restaurant.

THEY encouraged pregnant women to smoke the same way they encourage all people to smoke. Because it occupied them, drove them to desirable actions and the negative effects on themselves or their fetus could be dealt with in a cost effective manner. Besides anyone not strong enough to survive a little smoke in their lungs was inferior and needed to be thinned from the herd.

Alcohol THEY still discouraged but that was a left over policy from the previous century. THEY still have actuaries looking at it. Obviously a lot of alcohol was bad for fetal development, but on the other hand prohibition was not necessary. Thousands of years of experience in European countries indicated that a reasonable amount of alcohol was not a danger. Yet as the state determined that citizens were not capable of reasonable behavior and prohibition was easier to enforce. In the pre Emoti-stat© society an organization once described fetal alcohol syndrome as an “invisible avalanche crashing down and overwhelming public resources.” But it was clear from the emotion of the sentence that the operative issue was public resources and not the health of the individual baby.

Later that day Barbara got to work at the Bovanian Meat Farm. The oldest people in the population will remember that friendly little jingle “Bovanian® Bovanian® beef that’s 90% better than the old fashioned way. Bovanian®!” Now there was no old fashioned way to produce meat. Originally, the privately owned Bovanian® Meat Farm was making a profit because their beef production measures saved costs. The company made too much profit and eventually THEY stepped in to make sure they shared the wealth. Once THEY took control of the industry THEY passed laws that put all other methods of beef production out of business (the acre tax, the hoof tax, etc.) because everyone knew that 90% of traditional beef production was bad for the environment. Emoti-stat©.

Like chair production, food production had undergone a tremendous change. It was wasteful to grow the whole cow when you just wanted the meat. So the beast was

genetically altered to eliminate the undesirable parts and produce in excess those hormones most useful to create plump fatty globs of flesh. Eventually a pot roast was grown, in very much the same fashion as a chair. On one rack were the growing pot roast; another had the steaks. This technology was applied to all the meat and poultry and fish. The texture lacked something, as the muscles of the flesh were never exercised but within a generation no one noticed.

The biggest problem the meat industry faced was cooking. Cooking food thoroughly to prevent *e. coli* or *trichinosis* seemed to be too difficult for people. A long time ago they found out that telling people to thoroughly cook their food was ineffective. There wasn't even an Emoti-stat that suggested what minute percentage of the population was so dull that they could not understand how they might have to cook raw meat. But THEY changed the policy so that when infected meat was released on the market instead of telling everyone to cook the meat, all the tainted meat needed to be returned. Then it just got easier to forbid selling raw food. THEY mandated only prepared meals be sold, with complete and balanced nutrition. (THEY determined the balance, which seemed to be equal to what THEY could produce cheaply.) THEY soon set up food centers that would distribute and cook food more efficiently. The centers were a big hit because everyone likes eating out.

Barbara donned the white smock (with the Bovanian® swish on it) over her fashionable airbag jacket (also with the Bovanian® swish on it), and the stretch mesh hat over her bright yellow helmet (she was a natural blonde) and stepped in to the walk-in. It was a two-acre room that had rows and rows of table height stainless steel bins with 4-pound pot roasts germinating. Inside the walk-in she put on her gloves and began to squeeze the pot roasts. Even though genetically they were controlled and the tubes fed nutrients to the pot roasts were always within 5% of optimum levels, and the temperature was within 5% of optimal levels and the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels were within 5% of optimal levels and the light levels were within 5% of optimal occasional the meat product would deviate from standard performance by up to 30%. This meant that humans who had acquired judgment skills (still beyond robot capabilities) have to go and inspect the pot roast to get the best growth for premium meat products. Barbara was one of four such humans on this shift. They would make two passes – one for grade A meats (the top 30%) and the other for grade B meats (the next 30%). The Bovanian® Meat Farm called this process “Selective Harvest.”

Once the best meat was culled from the walk-in the rest was harvested by robots, ground and mixed with Kalesoy® to create Soysbury Steaks®. All the meat was taken to the cookers and immediately frozen where its rawness would not be threat to the general population.

Kalesoy® is NOT people. Once about 80% of the population believed that rumor and it took a long time to fight that spontaneous Emoti-stat©.

Barbara worked next Yolanda who was also a grade A harvester. They talked as they worked. The Bovanian® Meat Farm had determined that people working in pairs were

30% more efficient than the isolation of working alone. Even if talking reduced productivity by 12% the automatic pacing of working with another produce faster work – in 70% of the population.

“Yolanda, you know Roy in trucking don’t you?” Barbara asked trying to sound casual even though she rehearsed the question her mind for the last hour.

“Roy? Yes, you two are bit of an item, aren’t you? How many dates?” Yolanda squeezed a pot roast that had gotten flat on one side. Either the inspector in a previous shift or the robot did not turn it correctly in its cradle. It was Soysbury Steak® for this roast.

“We dated about six times.” It was six times but Barbara didn’t want Yolanda to think she kept exact count. “I like him.”

Yolanda was older than Barbara and had a ten year-old boy. She saw him once every two weeks at his school for family visit time. He would send video messages from his Game-Spud® to her every so often but it always seemed like it was a chore. “School is fine. I am okay, Love Boba.”

THEY had determined that parenting was too difficult to leave to parents - 90% of parents at one time felt that having kids was a mistake or they were not ready to be good parents. (Gary who created that Emoti-stat© was surprise that it was the most effective number because the truth was that 100% at some point feel it was a mistake. Self-doubt is part of human nature and in another time was okay. But the truth did not allow the government wiggle room should they ever have to change their policy. THEY never wanted absolutes.)

It became easier when one or two test cases proved that people were not fit to raise children. When one person named his son Adolph Hitler, most reasonable people realized that was not a good thing for a child. So they did not speak up when the government took the child even though there was no other indication of abuse. THEY were very effective in finding the reasonable occurrence to justify sweeping changes.

THEY noted that most parents did not have degrees in early child education, so how could they understand brain development and growth in motor coordination. Once again, thousands of years of love and nurturing seemed immaterial to the experts. THEY extended school years. Student rights to privacy from their parents were brought down to pre-k which began at age 2. 85% of students in EarlyStart© programs did better on EarlyStart© tests than non-EarlyStart© children. With the federal food programs, health department vaccination series, and the state education requirements, it just made sense for the children to be raised by the school. Parents were allowed visitation at certain prescribed times. There was crying for a while but eventually everyone went along. It seemed to work. THEY were right.

“Did you ever think of marrying Boba’s father?” Barbara might have just as well as slapped Yolanda with a pot roast.

“What? Why? Don’t you know that most married women get murdered by their husbands?” Yolanda was astounded at the question and Barbara was embarrassed that she asked. She did not follow up and quickly changed the subject to clothes.

“Most married women are murdered by their husbands.” That was what Gary called a Folk-stat©, a believable and ubiquitous statistic that is not real but based on misinterpretation of real data. Since before Emoti-stat©, when people still got married in large numbers with the expectation that they would stay married forever, occasionally things went wrong. There was divorce, adultery and murder among other things. It was true that 30% of married women who were murdered would be murdered by their husbands. And while that percentage could not constitute the word “most” it was the single largest group of murders. So the phrase “if a woman is murdered it is more likely that her husband did it than any other kind of individual” is a true representation of facts. (Presuming the surveying collecting the data was accurate in the first place.) But husbands were not doing most of the murders. Yet even if it were true that “most wives who are murdered are murdered by their husbands” it is not true without the conditional phrase “who are murdered.” The Folk-stat© drops the conditional phrase implying that most (more than half) wives are murdered and their husbands are doing it.

In fact in a sample pre Emot-stat© year 2005 in what was once called the USA there were about 63 million married women and about 53 million unmarried (never married, divorced or widowed) women. The same year there were 1748 women murdered. Assuming all of the murdered ones were married (and they were not) there would still be only a 1 in 36,000 chance of her being murdered and a 1 in 120,000 of her being murdered by her husband. How a 0.0000083% chance of a wife being murdered by her husband becomes a 51% chance of a wife being murdered by her husband is an example of the power of Folk-stat©.

When her shift was over Barbara sat at the gate to the plant and waited for Roy. She tried not to smoke. He worked irregular hours on the trucking team. Roy was a truck driver, but he never had to set foot inside of one. Trucks were of course automatic and robot controlled so there was no place for humans. But the potential for variables in weather (still outside of the government’s control but THEY were working on it) or random animals or people meant that trucks needed human monitors at head quarters keeping an electronic eye on the trucks as they moved about the country. So Roy sat at a console with the data display on 6 trucks in front of him. (Six was the determined to be the average maximum span of control a human could effectively handle.) It was a couple of hours before Roy came out.

Barbara called over to him. He waved when he came out of the gate, walked over and kissed her on the lips. “Dinner and screen?” she asked. He said yes and they were off to the local Teraplex®. Both sat in the comfortable chair lowered the tray table down in front of them, plugged in the usb and mentally ordered their dinner. The dinner arrived

via subfloor conveyors and shot up at their tray table. Barbara and Roy chomped and watched. The movie spread across the wide screen overwhelming the patrons. 3d images surrounded them, sucking them inside the story. There was so many things that often people would see the same movie twice or three times – sitting in a different place to get a different view.

Roy was a considerate man, so he took Barbara home and they made love. There was no socially acceptable moment for Barbara to talk about her situation or her feelings. She lay next to him and wondered how she could express her desire to be with him and raise their baby.

But she knew that modern women did not tie themselves to men like that. The joke the girls told was “Don’t you find that lump of the flesh at one end of the penis annoying? You know the lump of flesh, the lump of flesh, you know, they call it ...the man.” Modern women were smart, hardworking and only needed men for sexual gratification. Emotional bonds were for weak people. But she cried anyway. Roy woke up. He wasn’t sure what to do. There was no framework in male-female relationships to deal with this. He held her but felt uncomfortable like being in a new job the first day when you don’t know anything.

Roy was a good average guy who did what most people did. Worked hard enough to get by and sought the pleasures society offered. The people modeled themselves after the screens – the 3d movies and television. Sure those stories were unrealistically ideal but the purpose of every person was to match what they saw on the screens as much as possible. The people in the screens were emulated. Everyone wanted to talk like them, dress like them, do the nifty expensive things like them. They wanted to make love like them and look like them when they made love.

But most people did not know that those people did not exist. The movies and shows were completely computer generated. Actors and actresses were superfluous. Why train an actor who may put on weight or get old or die of an overdose. Perfect humans were imitated perfectly. Maybe a real person would model for a 3d-manikan but that was getting more rare. Initially, only the image was reproduced, the voice had to come from a person. Inflection and tone were tougher to duplicate on the computer. But the technicians got over that hurdle and soon actors and actresses were not needed at all.

(The same was true of sports stars, who were projected holographically on the field for the people in the stands. The entire season was scripted by an ad agency in what was once Hong Kong.)

Still, the stories on the screens were getting shorter – with less and less interstitial scenes connecting the action points. People living real lives felt frustrated that real life took a long time. People could not quickly edit the time it took to get from one place to another out of their lives. But the screens could. It made the pursuit of living like the screens more desperate. Interestingly, the screens never depicted people just playing with their Game-spud® or watching a screen. That would have been media imitating life.

The next day, Barbara saw Sheila when she came out of work. Barbara walked up to her and without saying a word showed that she wanted to talk. Sheila reached into her pocket to click on her cigarette pack and they talked.

Back in the police station a desk screen whirred a small alarm. A technician took a look and called over a supervisor. “Another dead spot in the NET, Sir.” The police had been on the look out for more anomalies in the NET system, that was a combination of wifi cells, cameras on streets, the screens in home and satellite imaging. The NET occasionally would spring holes, but the number of unexplained holes was increasing and their appearance seemed more random. Organized resistance was normally detected by correlating a person’s internal chip with the occurrence of these holes. Then suspect would be arrested, instantly tried and then incarcerated or executed...depending. But no know person was near any significant numbers of these. The randomness made them obvious.

The Investigator had an idea to simply wait for the next one in his city and then send some enforcement over immediately. “Dispatch a car.” he said.

Barbara started right in “I think I want to listen to what you have to say.”

Sheila had to hold back her anxiousness to tell Barbara everything – about life about the world THEY set up, about the alternatives. But there was little time and this was not the place. “I can help you have the baby and raise the baby. I can’t tell you much more at this time. But it means dropping out of society.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means leaving the cities and the suburbs and going to the places that are just to expensive for the government to monitor. You cannot hide your pregnancy here. Too many eyes are looking and too many ears are listening.” Sheila did not know that two electric police cruisers were zeroing in on the block where she stood. “They know you’re pregnant. I can help you give birth outside the state hospitals.”

“That’s a crime! I’ve heard about your types, preying on the desperation of young women in trouble.” Barbara walked away. Sheila went to follow but she heard the tire squeal of a police cruiser turning the corner at 30 mph. (The totally electric petroleum free cars with genetically enhance bio-lubricants could not go much faster.) She switched off her cigarette pack.

First one cruiser pulled up and then a second. They held scanners our and swept the area but could not find the dead spot in the NET. When the scanner passed over Barbara, the chip imbedded in her body displayed the message on the police scanner “Barbara 54301938483023012123” Sheila had no ID chip. When they panned over to Sheila now nonchalantly walking the other way it read “Hannah 4930284549893048573240698” which is the signal her cigarette pack put out for that day.

While the information was recorded there was little chance the computers would be able to determine that the real Hannah was a 52 year old women confined to a hospital on the other side of the continent. THEY were collecting so much information so quickly that they could not successfully correlate it all instantly. Occasional glitches in data were to be expected and tolerated and often not investigated. After all it was a government worker's job to investigate. Nearly 98.74% of the glitches were nothing. And the glitches were less than 0.3% of all transactions. The workers were incapacitated by their boredom and the government soon just cut the investigations out completely. THEY were happy with a system that was 98% efficient.

Every day for a week, Sheila planted herself outside of Barbara's work and home and passively nodded hello if Barbara ever looked at her. Barbara just ignored her and went on her way. Finally after Barbara walked up to her and said, "I think I am ready to hear more."

PART III

The Investigator sat in his car. He was violating normal protocol and doing some actual gumshoe research into the matter before him. He knew the Emoti-stat© that 98% of the system worked fine. That meant 98% of the people were content and compliant. But he thought his job was to worry about the last 2%.

He was trying to find a pattern in the random glitches in the Ethernet. These were different from the grid wide glitches: the mass collapses of the information network or power for about a minute or two. People were getting used to the systemic down time although the old people were saying that it never used to happen. Those big glitches were always traced to governmental incompetence: unmotivated workers and managers or engineers who had gotten their job based on cronyism and not competence. The government monopolized all services. One had to accept the grid going down because one had no choice.

The random glitches were small and seemingly random but tended to occur within a city region. That made them more nefarious. At first he had the computer scan for ID proximities but nothing came up. So he began to call in the camera images of people around each glitch. The computer's face recognition software was useless because area in which the glitch was probably located was too big. It tended to have 400 to 500 people in it. The clarity of faces and images did not match. So the Investigator began to look at the images himself.

And he began to piece together the image of a young woman. He had her face listed as "wanted" so that the cameras using face recognition software find her wherever she went. The problem was the backlog of processing meant he would get an update two days later. The whole NET was clogged with too much information. The government computers were slow, manufactured by the government computer company for security purposes owned in part by a few Senators and Cabinet Secretaries.

The Investigator had learn to that young woman had a changing ID code. That she seemed to modify her hair color, style, and style of dress. But she was the connection. So who was she really and what was she up to. This definitely smelled of criminal intent.

The phrase “criminal intent” echoed in the Investigator’s brain as he recalled his police academy training. He was much younger, almost half the age he was now. The profession of police officer seemed a noble way to serve the state and his community. But almost twenty years on the force had blunted his blade, his idealism about doing good was gone. Now he forged ahead, doing the bidding of the government, just because it was a challenge to do it differently than the detectives who sat at their screens all day and scrutinized everything by remote control. Once a culprit was determined they sent a message and cruiser picked up the villain even if at that point they only had “criminal intent.”

He soon learned that law was not about justice, just as doctors had learned that medicine was not about healing and artists learned that art was not about beauty and architects learned that architecture was not about stability, commodity, and delight and reporters learned that news was not about truth. It was all about marketing. It was about selling an idea to a population that had a short memory, with the mistaken notion that the majority determined truth.

THEY were too smart and literary to call them “thought-crimes” THEY used the phrases “criminal intent” or “hate crime” which allowed them to twist almost anything to their needs. The talk-radio resistance leader whose sexual preference was for blonde women was actually exercising a form of “hate” by excluding other kinds of women and he was therefore dating them with “criminal intent.” As the accusations were very public, the state decided that they could not arrest, prosecute and sentence on the drive from the crime scene to the station house as they normally did. This prosecution required a public opinion campaign. They had to manipulate information, call the lack of evidence an indication there was a cover up and finally rewrite the statutes to make whatever inane thing THEY could prove he did was criminal.

The Counselor had determined that Gary was in bed too long and too immobile and that he was depressed and planning something. So while she was ignorant of his movements with Sheila, she knew that Gary needed special counseling or he would not comply with the prognosis determined by the medical actuaries. She had requisitioned a car ostensibly to transport a death designee to a hospice. It was technically true. She left off the part about having to find him and use force. Her managers would think she was not doing her job. “How could you lose someone in this day and age?” the managers would scold.

The Counselor just could not seem to avoid trouble. In school and in her profession she was always doing. And that irritated people who were not doing. The Counselor soon got the insight (and THEY would forbid such a thing as insight if THEY found out) that the world was comprised of doers and complainers.

Complainers made noise and got attention, made money and received accolades – usually bestowed by other complainers. But the world ran because there were doers. Lawyers, journalists, commentators, politicians, critics, authors and pundits were all professional complainers. Actors, celebrities and sports figures, when they still existed, thought they were qualified as professional complainers but they generally mimic what others told them. And the line between actors and politicians was gradually disappearing. Politicians resented it because if they had been pretty enough, they would have preferred being actors.

The doers did the things that kept the world working. They built the buildings, they paved the roads, they invented things people could use, they created enterprises that delivered goods and services, they grew the food, they fought in the military, they taught the young, they provided medical care, they policed the streets, they engineered the structures and the devices, they fought the fires, they saved lives – they got things done.

The complainers learned THEY could tell the doers how it was being done wrong and punished them.

When ambulance personnel got response time to emergency calls down to 12 minutes on average, the ambulance personnel were sued and punished when occasionally it took 20 minutes. Instead of appreciating how hard it was to do what the doers did, THEY used the doers' excellence against themselves. Everyone knows that no one is perfect, but THEY empowered the complainers to punish the doers when THEY saw certain doers becoming dangerous.

The Counselor knew that doing her job meant breaking some the arcane rules THEY devised. Others just let their performance wane because the others realize the managers would fake the work results anyway or find some excuse. The Counselor either had refused to learn that lesson or thought it was inherently unjust. She got her job done. She stilled believed in her mission.

The Counselor would have been content to raise her two children herself. Maybe, she thought, even with a man beside her. She understood that it would mean admitting that one person might need another instead of the State, but in her mind that was not so bad. As it were, she agitated the school officials because she was dogged about showing up at proscribed visiting times to see her children as frequently as she was permitted. She would discuss the things there were learning and find out what they thought and felt. The children were dutiful and irritated and wondered why their Mom was that way when the other kids were left alone nearly all the time. The school officials tried to stop this interference, as the Counselor did not have degrees in early education and should not attempt to raise the children. But the Counselor fought them, using the system against the officials. She would make them repeat what they were saying as if she had authority to take a recording of such to someone higher. The school officials did not want to take on actual responsibility and so they backed off and just complained. The Counselor bent the rules and frequently took the children away from the school seemingly for medical testing – but usually engaged them on some adventurous excursion. The children were

pleased but confused. The children felt an affection for this woman called Mom. But it might be years before the children realized how unique the relationship was.

Both the Counselor and the Investigator were a block away from each other unaware of their colleague's plan.

Gary, with a big shoulder bag, came out of his apartment and walked along the street. The Counselor pressed some controls on her Work-Spud® and established that officially Gary was sleeping in his bedroom. Something was suspicious. Her small red two-person electric vehicle rolled silently along the street far behind Gary who walked determinedly but anxiously the three blocks to his garage.

Waiting there was Sheila, whose hair color had changed and was now dressed stylishly in a black body hugging dress. The Investigator has spotted and scanned her: "Emily 830284743389504937216693100" and he worked a console on the cruiser. Yes! The same Emily was in a city 400 miles away having dinner with three friends. (She ordered the Kale-soy® choco-soy® shake.) The Investigator had found the person using the system glitch, but he wasn't sure for what. So he sat back. Gary met Sheila. The man registered as "Wesley 21022121986653498320483488" which the console showed was a man dying in a hospital in the southern hemisphere. The man also was a glitch. The Investigator could have arrested them on the spot, but decided he wanted to see what the two people were up to. He drove behind the gray car as it pulled out of the public garage.

The cruiser, a dark blue, had pulled in front of the Counselor's red car. She was startled at first but soon saw that the blue car was following the same gray car as she. The cars traveled through the city among buses and people at low speed each in a polite manner. After the car stopped to pick up Barbara (now scanning as "Simone 777320973750293475865430021749342") the gray car moved more assuredly through the streets. It was apparent to all three cars in a matter of minutes that there was a polite chase going on.

Sheila looked at Gary and consulted her cigarette box. "We're being followed."

Gary began to sweat. Barbara in the back cried, "I knew I shouldn't have trusted you." Sheila was thinking fast and typing something into the cigarette case. Sheila directed a series of turns, lefts and rights, to twist their path. The blue car and red car followed dutifully. They had left the intensely urban buildings and were now in the industrial sprawl at the edge of the city.

The Investigator and the Counselor knew that the car and the occupants could not be tracked by normal means since their identities would scramble. The two of them would need to follow the vehicle physically. They also checked on each other and saw that they were both officials. Presumably both of them had stumbled on the same ... crime? conspiracy? Neither knew what to make of what was happening. But they followed.

Sheila directed Gary into a Samson's Club lot. 88% of the public did their major purchases at Samson's Club, so there would be enough of crowd to get lost. Big box retailing from the previous century was only the beginning. There was an inherent inefficiency in the system. People would park their private cars in a lot (which reduced the amount of sales space), push carts into the warehouse, load things in the cart, remove the things from the cart onto a sales conveyor; load things back into the cart and move the cart to the private vehicle where everything needed to be unloaded from the cart and placed in the car.

The newer buildings were large enough to drive into them. Items to be purchased were placed directly into the vehicle and when the car exited the building, everything was scanned and debited against the cars toll account. It was much faster.

The first car entered the building. "Welcome to Samson's Club" flashing front of them "A subsidiary of Bovanian® Corporation." flashed just below that with the Bovanian® swish logo on each side of the entry ramp. Sheila continued to direct Gary, "Get off at 'Meats and Fish - Exit 5'" she pointed. Gary swerved around cars slowing down for "Electronics - Exit 1" and "Appliances – Exit 2." Shoppers hovered around their cars placing objects in the trucks and strapping them to the hoods. The diminution of car size made shopping more frequent which THEY used to discourage less useful activities. The blue and red car followed quickly into the building. At "meat" Gary made a harsh turn and went up the roast aisle turning left at the chicken parts – grown of course without the rest of the chicken. The blue car sideswiped a freezer with Swedish Kalesoy® Meatballs, denting a door that hung open limply and spilling some boxes on the floor. A robotic voice announced "Cleanup – Exit 5." The red car stopped behind the sputtering blue car and resumed when the blue car took off.

The gray car swerved from "meats and fish" to "chips and snacks" bumping a family in vehicle packed with air entrained potato goodies. It turned right and stopped short just before hitting another car. The gray car backed up and turned down another lane. The blue car seeing it change direction, made another quick turn and slammed into rack spilling pillow-sized bags of chips on top of it. "Cleanup - Exit 6" announced the voice. The red car did not want to get stuck behind the blue and backed up to the start of the chips section and turned down "underwear and socks." The chaos in Samson's Club soon became a nuisance to the shoppers and management began to see what was happening. The gray car doubled back through "meats" and got onto the main shopping thoroughfare. The red car cut across "candy" and got onto the main shopping thoroughfare.

Sheila looked back, "We lost one." She thought for a moment if leaving the club might help lose the other. "Turn on exit 12." Gary lunged the gray car toward the ramp cutting off another car, and turned sharply left under the thoroughfare. From the back Barbara saw the luminous multi-colored bottles of shampoo blurred passed her. The red car followed. Ahead a manager on a two-wheeled motorized cart held up a hand to indicate the gray car should stop. Gary jolted to the left around the manager but crunched the rack hurling hundreds of gallons of liquid shampoo to the floor cracking on impact. The red

car spun out of control across the psychedelic swirl of goo, plowing into the display racks and knock the 40 foot tall shelf tower over. The manager dove underneath a rack of conditioners to save his life.

Sticking to the side aisles for cover, the gray car wove in and out of passages. Passed exits 19, 20, and 21 closer to the building egress. One more turn across the “pharmaceuticals” and they would be out. Gary made the turn and slammed head on into the blue car. Airbags deployed in both vehicles and immobilized cars and occupants. (Their personal airbag jackets did not deploy as a proximity sensor shuts off the device in a moving car. Too many airbags going off crushes the occupants.) Sheila reprogrammed her car using the cigarette pack. The airbags deflated, the car’s controls reset and Gary backed away from the blue car. The gray car made a quick broken K turn onto the main ramp and shopping thoroughfare. They breezed past the checkout booth and the sign flashed “Your total Purchase \$0. Thank you for shopping at Samson’s Club.”

For about four or five hours, the gray car cruised unnoticed out of the city and suburbs towards rolling hills. Trees became more frequent than buildings. Sheila directed Gary along road that she knew by heart. The car rolled quietly to the edge of a large building with steep sloped roofs and exposed wood beams in crosses and angles.

Sheila got out and opened up a garaged door in a shed attached to the big building and Gary drove in. Sheila led the other two through passages and into a large dark room. The rays of the rising sun shown through large triangular windows on the west side casting deep red shadows across the columns and trusses of the building. Gary looked about as if something was familiar. “It’s a... a um...”

“It’s a church.” Sheila said.

PART IV

THEY had destroyed churches as easily as they destroyed newspaper and book reading, by appealing to the lowest level of human desire and regulating the institutions so that they could not function. To destroy formal religions all THEY had to do was convince people that there were no absolute truths. It was easy as the churches themselves were a cacophonous contest about nuances concerning God and ritual. So if there was no absolutes, there were standards and there were no standards then there was no sin and if there was no sin there was no guilt or no need for redemption.

Crimes against the state were another thing. THEY knew the meaning of guilt when it came to that.

Anytime a group was not able to police themselves, the people said “THEY should do something.” So when church leaders didn’t control their pederasts, THEY pounced. THEY never let a good crisis go to waste.

Never mind that 5% of the clergy were the problem – it was an excuse to go after the other 95% as well. And of course there were just as many sexual offenders in the government, in the public schools, in other religions and the general population. Sexual perversity was the reason THEY used. (For once, THEY had a good reason which the 95% who were not pederasts had to admit.) Lawsuits were a great way to cripple churches and religious movements. THEY went after other denominations, ministers, rabbis and imams. Any hint of impropriety or impurity was denounced and used as an excuse. THEY said that clergy were to be held to a different standard – an ideal standard - because the clergy aspired to higher principles. As they had aspirations, but were not perfect they needed to be punished. THEY called them hypocrites.

People with low standards of behavior were not punished. People publicly declaring their own abominations were heralded and rewarded in a media sideshow that the people celebrated and THEY encouraged. This was sanctioned, because THEY did not believe in absolute truth or good or evil.

It was too disruptive to call humans to try to be better than they were inclined to be. It diluted the power base. If some one had to act to God's standards, THEY would have stiff competition. If some one believed in an absolute truth and it was mankind's duty to discover and live by that truth, both theological and scientific, that person may question what THEY told them. THEY had to stop this.

It got worse when the religious began to accept governmental funds for their charity and education. Governmental standards grew more imposing until the Crosses and the Stars of David and the Crescents were removed from classrooms, offices and the houses of worship themselves. Because THEY said that expressing one's belief was an offense to the majority. Besides, altruism could not wait to be inspired in the faithful as a religious compulsion. Altruism was state run and THEY were very good at telling the people when and how much to be generous – plus THEY had the criminal justice system to support them – not abstract ideas like hell.

Then THEY started by showing the churches to be unfair themselves. Besides it was wrong to judge people and making some people feel bad about the way they lived their lives. THEY decided that unless the churches, synagogues and ethical centers taught certain things, the religions would no longer have tax free status. Many gave in; others did not.

What was once the Catholic Church in America fought hard. THEY began to tax them. THEY taxed their land and their collections and their school tuitions and their soup kitchens and their hospitals. The old idiom “the power to tax is the power to destroy” was employed for that reason. The concept of a tax system to raise revenue was 19th century. Taxes were used to modify behavior – the revenue was simply spoils.

The church looked to other means of funding their operation including commercial sponsorship. Parishes managed by laity began to sell advertising on the chasubles until the priest looked like a Nascar race driver. But the decline of the numbers of priests was

exponential and it took just one generation for them to almost disappear. Few men wanted to enter a profession so condemned. Catholics without clergy became a familiar mode. Clergy were surprised how superfluous they could become. Many Catholics drifted away with most of the population, as their many Christian brethren did before them. But like some of the other faiths and denominations, there were a determined few who held fast.

The Deacon turned on the lights of the cold church and welcomed his visitors. Tucked under his arm was this month's FAST-Express package of Eucharists that had been slipped through the slot in the side door. He blessed himself, genuflected and placed the entire package in the Tabernacle. There were three or four ordained priests left on the continent, bishops actually by default. They would perform the sacred liturgy over boxes of wafers and shipped them to the active churches in around the world so that they could continue the ritual in remembrance of Him.

The Deacon asked Sheila, "Just for the night?" He glanced at Barbara and Gary who were silent.

"One night would be great." Sheila said.

"Service and a dinner?" he asked.

"That would be superb."

The Deacon disappeared for a few minutes and Sheila explained what would happen next. "This is a safe house. The Deacon and his wife are happy to help. It is out of the way and THEY don't really know what goes on here. As long as I don't leave an electronic trail that leads here, they will be safe from the authorities and be able to help people for years."

After a few minutes, the Deacon and his wife came in. The Deacon was a little older than Gary and his wife either was a decade younger or just looked a decade younger. Their clothes were worn but authentic and they emoted a simple sincerity that the urban dwellers did not see often. The wife lit two candles on either side of the altar and the two both bowed before it and sang a hymn. She read from the Lectionary stories and letters. The Deacon read the Gospel. He spoke briefly of the pain the world is seeing these days and the small group of faithful who face persecutions. Afterward he opened the Tabernacle, genuflected and removed the gold container, the ciborium. He distributed communion to himself, his wife and Sheila. He looked to the other two but Gary and Barbara shook their heads. Neither had ever seen anything like this before.

At dinner, the five sat around a bid wood table grown at the Table factory on the east coast. It was one of the early ones and was uneven – so a wood shim propped up one leg to keep it from wobbling. The wife and Deacon served a meal and tried to engage the guests in some light conversation. But Sheila did most of the talking trying to show Gary and Barbara that it was safe. It was obvious to the two newcomers that the Deacon and

his wife were giving generously of what little they had without expectation of recompense or toadying gratitude. Gary looked upon the Deacon and his wife with suspicion.

That night they were each given sparse rooms with furniture that predated the genetically grown kind. They were strange and different pieces with expensive plastic connectors and feet. The bedding was fresh smelling and soft. And they all slept quietly. Before dawn, Sheila woke both Gary and Barbara and escorted them to the garage. The Deacon opened the door and they drove off.

Gary pondered all that he had experienced and realized there was a world of people out there that did not fit into the reports and the statistics that he read and viewed. He realized that the screens projected insulting and demeaning images of non-conforming people. Maybe, it began to dawn on him that was fabricated as easily as he had fabricated “facts” for public manipulation. After a slow start in school, Gary was used to being a well-intentioned intellectual elite. Now he was not sure if he knew what was really going on.

Gary’s slow start began in the primary grades. A teacher found him difficult and after telling his mother that all children developed at different rates, warned her that he was not developing at the preferred rates. She wanted him tested. The testers found what they were looking for. He had “Wentworth’s Syndrome.” The name sounded official and who could argue with something that had a name. Most people did not realize that it was simply an arbitrary collection of individual characteristics that some people found irritating. No one ever found a physical or psychological origin for the manifestations and no one every associated the behaviors with anything causal.

Still, Gary’s immaturity at the age of six was irritating to certain important people and he was labeled with a “disability.” This meant that, like 43% of the population, he had a syndrome identified. (THEY ignored that 43% of the population so labeled might mean normalcy rather than something non-standard.) Fortunately, the disability not only had a name but also a medication associated with making life for the adults around Gary better.

But since he excelled in the special programs, rather than admit their original diagnosis was in error, THEY said their programs worked. THEY could not remove the original label so they attached another. Gary was “disability-gifted.” Also fortunately for Gary, he was getting a bad batch of government made generic drugs (THEY has legislated most manufacturers out of business) which were so ineffective that he did not develop the usual twitching and bed-wetting side affects that plagued his fellow Wentworth’s Syndromians on medication. These side effects were cured by other medications creating a body and brain numbing cocktail. No one fought what was obviously trial and error experimentations performed on children because THEY mandated that something must be done so the special children would not be a burden on society.

The next two days and nights were routine and almost peaceful. The road unraveled a country side with green out of control fields and woods. Each night they found another

home next to a house of worship open to give a meal, a place to rest and a charge for the car. The families were different from the Deacon and wife in number, color and creed. But they evoked the same sense of charity. The Baptist minister played the piano while his young kids sang hymns. The widower Rabbi got Gary and Barbara to talk about their lives. They were becoming acclimated.

Gary found himself enjoying the change. Barbara was so thrown off by the difference in terrain and attitude of the people and she became more nervous. Perhaps it was because Gary had once looked at his life as being over and now it was starting fresh. Barbara was still unnerved by the miracle growing in her body and the responsibility it would mean. Sheila was trying to convince her that it was possible to have and raise a child without the government's help.

Sheila explained in the car that there were a number of homes they could visit on their trip. She was always careful not to visit the same two in sequence and to vary their path so it would be hard to trace. Most of the safe houses did not know of the others' existence. Gary wondered why there were so many religious ones, "Was it a growing underground conspiracy?" No, Sheila thought of it as a natural accident of their faith. But she also noted some secular ethicists who were part of the new underground railroad. What they all share was a common belief in something more important than themselves.

The fourth day out, the car was so far away from the cities that the radio stopped receiving any signal from the mundane music stations that were the last remnant of broadcast media.

Newspapers died a natural death as people began to read less and play more with phones and eventually their Game-spud®. Broadcast media, especially talking media dominated as the form of news. In the interest of fairness, THEY regulated how much of what could be said. To keep balance, THEY decided if an idea was too extreme or too angry or too accurate but damaging to society. Like industry, religion or other media outlets, THEY said that freedom was being abused. The people agreed it was time THEY did something. Pages and pages on governmental standards on what was truth and what was balanced were published. Community Boards packed with political cronies would decide if a broadcast outlet represented what the people wanted – or at least the government's version of what the people wanted. And the people did not want to be upset by bad news about life, the economy, war or the government.

It was paralysis through regulation. In the interests of equal time, if a broadcaster said murder was bad, an agent who thought murder was good needed to be given equal time. And if they could not find someone to say the con, then the pro could not be articulated. Or THEY would have been given air time to state that THEY are decreasing murders (whether or not it was true) and that saying murder is bad is just "stirring up the pot" and should be forbidden.

Most stations resorted to music with occasional news. Fair and balanced music was harder to police for a while. On each station, for every great piece of music, a

government bureaucrat decided there must be a junky piece of music. Well THEY did not call it that, but what was really happening is that untalented artists found that succoring up to politicians was an easier way to get airtime than developing a talent that other people wanted to hear. Soon half of what was heard was some politician's no-talent niece.

No station could program music for their listeners alone; that was unfair. A classical music station must have every other song a rock ballad; an ethnically urban hip-hop rap station needed to have every other song a rural square dance complete with caller. It was all done in the name of fairness.

Policing the airways got too expensive, so in the name of fiscal responsibility, THEY seized all broadcast media. THEY play the government approved music and could tell the people how good things were and that the system was 98% efficient.

People started turning it off. When THEY found out that people stopped listening, THEY mandated that media be turned on. It was on in every home at non-sleep hours, it was on in every bar, bus stop, every car, every classroom, everywhere all the time.

The sun was high in the sky when Sheila pointed to a dirt road. The car pattered off the pavement and waddled across the deep rivulets and ruts. They drove another hour that way until Sheila told Gary to park under a tree in a grassy field. A few other old cars were there as well, some rusting and in pieces like the carcass of a dead buffalo.

Sheila led them through the woods to a large cabin on the north face of a steep, moss-covered cliff. Sheila explained the house was built to always be in the shadows so even satellites could not see it. The cabin was assembled carefully from wood scraps and other reclaimed materials, yet it evoked order and comfort. The rear of the cabin opened into a large cave that provided more room and was the source of warmth in the winter and coolness in the summer.

Just inside the front door, was a larger room with a few interior columns and hefty beams overhead. A couple of dozen people, mostly women sat around long wood tables – the kind that used to be used for picnics. The people seemed calm and beautiful even though they had none of the cosmetics or apparel that Gary had been programmed to believe were associated with beauty. And no one wore helmets or airbag vests. Sheila brought Barbara to the dinner table and introduced her to her Grandmother. “Grandma is the Doula-Superior.” The Grandmother opened her arms and hugged her. Barbara cried as she smiled broadly.

PART V

The Counselor and the Investigator has spent the first couple of days after the car chase filling out reports and answering questions to commissions and inspectors. It took a week for the bureaucracies to decide that the two had done something that was not good.

But THEY were afraid the idea of the two investigating resistance or flaws in the system might get out. It might make some conclude that the system was not 98% efficient.

A public investigation was held even though THEY knew the results. As the story developed before the public, THEY reached into the vast employment records and found “procedural negligence and malfeasance.” Both were charged. It allowed the two to be humiliated by small arcane things done without malice. The two were declared enemies of the state and the governmental toadies in the media piled on. The reasons, logic and truth were quickly lost. For weeks, the two were part of a hate-story and then they were quickly forgotten.

THEY punished the two with a demotion and loss of privilege.

It was a few weeks before the Counselor felt comfortable approaching the Investigator unofficially. She knew she would be tracked, but she was too curious about what he was investigating to stay away. She sought him out on her Game-spud® social networking website. She was clever about finding him and chatting on Myfacespace®. Both knew it was not social; it was business. Their conversation online and tweets would make their meeting very common to the computers that monitored human interaction.

They met at the trendiest pick up bar in the city. The secret was to cover their actions by being in the open and making it appear as a sexual rendezvous. The music was loud so voice monitoring was impossible or just too difficult – automatic scrutiny would not be able to track them. They loudly whispered directly into each other’s ear. It looked like pre-sex coyness to the cameras.

“I was following a terminal patient who was resisting. What about you?” the Counselor said as she leaned over the table. They switched mouth to ear.

“The young lady was the key to a series of down spots in the net. I don’t know if anything was actually wrong, but I thought I should find out. She was electronically cloaked and that smells like conspiracy to me.”

“I heard that some organizations entice terminal patients to help them fight the system. Maybe that’s the link – she’s the conspirator and he is the muscle.”

“What about the other girl?” The Counselor did not hear enough to understand. “There was another girl in the car. Who was she?”

“I don’t know.”

This went on for about an hour as they tried to piece together what they knew. The two also knew a change of venues was necessary or their tête-à-tête would appear suspicious. So the Counselor and the Investigator went to another loud bar to exchanged more information. They hid their mouths just incase the computer’s cameras could read lips. To alleviate all suspicion, the two went back to her place, played loud music on the

Game-spud® and feigned embracing in front of her bedroom screen. Then the two got under the covers and wiggled around semi-nude all while talking about the case. As the screens provided two way viewing, official government voyeurism was taken for granted. If you were just having sex, why would you be afraid of the government watching?

If at anytime someone should investigate the Counselor and the Investigator, they might conclude the two miscreants met each other while the computer trial program was deliberating their case. There was a sexual spark and they expressed it in a healthy meaningless adult manner.

In the hill country, it took only a couple of days for Barbara to realize that she had made the right decision. She met people who cared about her health and her baby. She met families that were raising their children outside of the government schools. What was once incredulous to her suddenly became natural. She was not sure of the future, but she was confident that she would have a stake in it. Weeks went by very quickly for her.

The Farm, as the people called their village, was a series of houses, huts and caves loosely organized around the families. Parents worked hard to provide food and shelter and some entertainment for their families. Young kids played and did chores and learned lessons taught by parents. When parent felt ill equipped to teach, another parent would offer lessons in barter. No home was more than an hours walk from all the other homes and most had gardens and some livestock. It was not collectivism, but it was cooperative.

Families realized that in a time of need, help was not going to come from government. So they were quick to help each other with food or labor. No family gained by the destruction or misfortune of another. Each family gained security knowing that they would be helped as quickly as they decided to help. It was a choice they made, not an obligation.

Talents bartered with adjacent families kept the village vibrant. One man who chose to help his woman raise her children was particularly good with improvising mechanical repairs. He would piece together parts or wire a bolt to a certain bar, or bend a stray piece of metal and get nearly any machine to work. He might repair your chain saw, while another would distill grain for fuel. In exchange they could borrow the chainsaw for a time. Another family traveled long distances to find other useful artifacts and gadgets and traded them for food as their plot of land was not very well developed, yet. People were rediscovering what they could do without organized government.

At first, the Farm hid from the skies because they feared surveillance planes and satellites. But it became apparent to the elders that planes were not flying like they used to. The young ones had never seen or heard an airplane or jet. There was no air travel since petroleum was the only source of power sufficient for airplanes and petroleum was not being pumped or processed. A few higher ups had access for a while to fuel and made use of jets. But the market was so small that manufacturer's and repair shops went out of business. When government declared the industry *must* build and repair jets and

planes THEY took over the operation. Quality went down. Even THEY did not want to get on jets manufactured in their own factories.

With the collapse of pioneering industries, new rockets were not being built or launched – not successfully at least. So the system depended on the few aging satellites to serve the needs of the authorities. There were gaping holes in the surveillance and communication systems and no one was sure how to plug them. The myth of spy satellite lasted much longer than their orbits did.

There was organization at the Farm, but Gary could hardly detect it when he compared it to the world in which 95% of the population lived. The village center seemed to be the main room of the cabin at the mouth of the cave. The Doula-Superior, Sheila's grandmother, seemed to be the head of the government. Perhaps because this place was her parent's idea, or perhaps she seemed to have a collective wisdom that people respected. Perhaps it was both reasons and many others.

This was no bucolic utopia. There was still theft, jealousy and other small crimes. As the Farm grew and aged, the villagers expected increasing distance would introduce murder. To the extent that one had to select this lifestyle, disruptive and lazy people tended to stay away. But it was apparent that the young people who did not know of urban life were restless and not inclined to appreciate the life their parents had created. The people were not expecting utopia – the villagers had just come from one. This life seemed more real and that was good enough for them.

Still it held together despite all its imperfection and maybe because of it. The Farm was based on the concept that a thinking person with free will, despite diet, genetic tendency, or psychological conditioning, would behave if the person believed each person would be held responsible for their actions.

Gary wasn't sure what he would do next. He and Sheila had in the recent months, brought two other young women to the Farm. He was appreciative of his new out-law life, but he was not happy about his future. He saw Sheila outside the main cabin on the grass reading a book while a bunch of cats jumped and crawled all over her. "How many have you got there?"

"Five! This one is Huxley, that one is Vonnegut, there's Bradbury and Orwell. I think Rand is chasing a chipmunk." Sheila glanced a quick smile as she pointed them out.

"How many cats does it take before you just a crazy old lonely cat lady in a smelly apartment?"

"Seven." she responded without hesitations not looking up from the book. Gary noticed faded tattered cover still legible read "Pride and Prejudice" and the brown edges of the pages fanned open, loosely hanging from the glue binding. Gary had started reading books too. The cabin's library was old moldy, but it was large. The great classics could be found along side of pulp fiction. Technical manuals sat above art books.

Gary asked directly, “So what’s next?”

“That’s up to you. You can stay and start a house. You can go anyplace with a new ID and your old car or you can go back, where they will find you and terminate you.”

Gary was hesitant to speak, but Sheila knew that he did not see a life here for him. She thought it was too soon for him to decide. Many of the men came to the Farm and found young women with children who appreciated them. They built new lives and grew larger families. Gary did not think his skills as an Emoti-statistician were useful on the Farm. Sheila suggested that he talk to her grandmother.

In the cabin hall Grandmother was sipping green tea and speaking to Barbara who was standing proudly showing her bulging belly. Barbara returned to her cot. She was staying in the main cabin with Grandmother and few of the expectant mothers and some of the lifelong dedicated doulas. Sheila and Gary sat at the table and Grandmother poured them some tea. “I bet you miss coffee,” she chided Gary.

“Yes, I do.” Gary said as he took the plain tea.

“We get a bag of coffe beans occasionally here, but we save it for holidays. I guess there are a lot of things you miss about your old life.” Gary nodded. “You know, in every futuristic science fiction novel I every read, there’s this chapter about three quarters into the book when the outsider rebel meets some old fogee who explains everything to them. I am your old fogee, so ask questions.”

“How long do you think you can go on like this operating outside the government?”

“We don’t know. We just know what we are doing is good and important. We are hoping the government is busy with others and will leave us alone.”

“But they won’t, they can’t. Something like this can grow and threaten them.”

“If we grow, it is because we are providing something good. It is a law of natural commerce. Their system is already eroding from within. We did not cause it and we cannot stop it. It is eroding because it produces nothing. It is living off the products of a previous society.” Grandmother sipped her tea. “And it stifles the human spirit. No society can get people to produce for their rulers. People think and grow and love and work for themselves and those around them, for people they love. People may be paralyzed by fear to fight such a big society, but they will not work or think or create simply because they are ordered to.”

“So you see our society as dying?” Gary asked.

“Your society!” Sheila interjected. “What Grandmother’s parents created here is our society.”

“The society you came from, I don’t know if it is yours now, is oppressive and antithetical to the human spirit. It has drugged its people with sensual pleasures but it cannot feed their soul. It will not feed it because it does not believe it exists. And yet, daily it fights human intuition and yearning for freedom. You think THEY would get the message that humans want more than to be taken care of.”

Gary pondered this and spoke, “This all sounds very academic. What are you doing to stop it if it is so evil?” Sheila slugged Gary for asking such a question of Grandmother.

“Gary, you are thinking like a male,” Grandmother consoled. Sheila blurted out a “Duh.” Grandmother placed a hand on Sheila’s forearm and continued. “It is okay, it is good for men to behave like males. We appreciate that at the Farm. But what we do here is about surviving and living right. We do not feel obligated to change the world or right wrongs. If we changed our mission from spreading good news about the meaning of life to destroying the society THEY created, we would become a target very soon. And we cannot win their kind of war. It is better THEY consider us a harmless fringe group.”

The talk went on a little longer but soon Grandmother had other people who needed her advice. She was everything, judge, head chef, chief magistrate, marriage counselor and city planner. Each day was a constant line of people who needed her counsel and love.

Gary thought about the things they had discussed. He did not see himself living in the farm. He thought it was time to go back to the city, as a new person and see what kind of person he could be.

He stopped off at Jessica’s house about two hundred yards from the cabin. Jessica was a woman in mid-thirties who had come to the Farm about ten years earlier, pregnant and unsure of what she wanted in life. Jessica was one of the last women that Grandmother herself brought from the city to the farm. Jessica’s boy, Robert was in the yard tending their chickens.

Jessica was working at her table, when Gary came in. He started to say hello, but Jessica held a hand up to ask for more time. He stood there silently. On the table before her were pieces of circuit boards, memory chips, wires and a soldering iron. (It was powered by a battery taken from one of the rusting parts vehicles at the edge of the road.) Jessica had a wire plugged into the usb port on her chest to a compact wallet computer and another wire running to a Game-spud®. Jessica was the master electrician/programmer at the Farm. She was responsible for the gadgets and cigarette packs that Sheila used.

Jessica was a bit heavy when she came to the Farm and her face betrayed a former roundness. A few years of natural hormone-free unprocessed foods and some manual labor had made her a sturdy slender farmwoman right out of the 19th century. So the electronics wizardry displayed in front of her was a visual incongruity.

“Testing, 3, 2, 1” and she unplugged the wire from her chest. “Thanks, I was programming a new gadget. I am not sure how I am going to teach my boy the family business since he doesn’t have a usb on his chest. But I will figure something out.” She gestured Gary to sit down. He did.

Gary explained that he intended to go back to the city and wanted to start a new life. He wondered what stuff he would need. Jessica came up with a list of things that would help him. “It would take about a week to get all that stuff ready, in the meantime you can cut and split firewood for me.” The two shook hands on the deal.

The trees were at the height of their fall colors for the week that Gary worked shirtless in the country sun. He sawed up some recently dead trees with the moonshine powered chain saw. (He bartered it from a neighbor in exchange for his collection of plastic. Gary spent his free time at the Farm digging in an old site where lots of plastic toys had been thrown into a landfill.) Jessica worked on rewiring some devices for him. Robert paid a lot of attention to Gary and talked him into playing catch when Gary was taking breaks from his labors. There was a moment the three all shared, when Jessica brought Gary some water as he sat on a stack of logs and Robert stood by his side. The three saw that there was a unit present, a collective group somehow working together. But it was a fleeting moment. Gary could not get involved when he was headed back to the city. He was sweaty and covered in sawdust and wood chips. She suddenly felt self-conscious. He didn’t want to bed Jessica just because it would have been fun. Jessica for her part, appreciated Gary, but knew the difference between the initial infatuation and love. There was the impulse to give into the primordial drives. But Jessica had live that life too and wanted more. Robert did see the obstacles, just the potential. He was disappointed the adults were being practical.

Inside her house, at the end of a week, Jessica instructed Gary on the devices and their operations. She gave him a new faux Game-spud® and held up a red gum pack and told him this was his new identity – Bill.

The Investigator held up, above the water spray, the white gum pack that once sat on Gary’s bed. The Investigator and the Counselor were naked but sexless in his shower. The two were so determined about their case it was easy to ignore the biology just inches away from them. It was part of their ruse to talk unobserved by the two-way screens in his bedroom and bathroom. Behind the shower curtain and with the water running nosily around them they could talk.

“I tracked the device we found in your terminal patient’s room. It’s like some others we have found. Trace genetic material revealed that about six people touched it. Four were untraceable – people not in the genetic registry. Of the two we could identify, one was an electronics technician named Jessica, superior gifted. She used to work at the Department of Investigation dismantling and analyzing illicit electronic devices. Eleven years ago, her medical records said she was pregnant, but before she gave birth she disappeared.” Water cascaded from the Investigator’s nose onto the naked flesh of the Counselor.

“The third woman in the car, a Barbara was also pregnant. She is gone too, like my Gary. I ran a check on the people movement patterns the day we had the car chase. It’s taken weeks but I got something interesting. While the car and the people inside had random and ever changing identities, I could trace the route of two women and a man in car. Starting from the Samson’s Club, that pattern at that time was unique enough that I got a full itinerary. I know where they went for three days... at least to a certain point out of the city... the trail ends there in the middle of no where.”

PART VI

Gary, or Bill, had been in the city for a few months during the cold but snowless winter and got things set up the way he wanted. His plan was going perfectly. Gary had used the Farm’s library and Jessica’s tutelage to educate himself on some basic electronic and programming techniques. He was planning on ways of using his mathematical probability skills to do some good in this world.

He traded his vast plastic collection on the black market for debit card credits in a few discreet bank accounts and “cash.” Street cash was plastic coated decks of cards. The plastic coating had the real value (like gold coins of the past) and the cards were simply the medium that held the plastic. At any given moment the plastic could be melted off and used for the expensive industrial purposes. Paper and metal coinage were obsolete and the underworld had no use for currency with no real value. Decks of cards accounted for 7% of all financial transactions.

Now independently wealthy, Gary (that is Bill) got a multi-room apartment the kind that less than 4% of all citizens had. He set up a large closet in his apartment as a Faraday cage using scraps of metal he snuck past the screen wall paper in his front room. It consisted of a layer of conductance and insulator and another layer of conductance on the walls, floor, and door of the closet. No electromagnetic wave could get in or out. It was giant capacity and once inside it gave him freedom to operate his experiments and speak in total privacy.

Gary would move about the cities with his ersatz Game-spud® and introduce into the net random and erroneous transactions. He was trying to spread diseased information. GIGO. Garbage in and garbage out. Unlike a virus, which was a program designed to do damage to the programming and could be detected, Gary was trying to distort the information. He was hoping to cause great disruption with small bits of bad information. It was like the theory that a butterfly beating its wings would throw off any long-range weather calculation. He calculated that introducing just 0.5% of bad information would irrevocably destroy the system.

For example, Gary hung around a weather station at the train station and uploaded a month’s worth of erroneous weather information to that device (and many of the devices to which it was attached) that would spike the average temperature by 4 degrees Celsius. That would ultimately affect governmental projections on energy consumption for

cooling, water usage and farm production. About six months later, tons of emergency ceramic bottles of water would be erroneously shipped to a southeast city based on this data.

At the police headquarters, Gary up linked the crime statistics program to the debit swipe at the restaurant across the street. So each purchase would register crimes according to the value of the swipe. This would cause a misalignment of police resources and probably get someone fired. Keeping the police off guard was part of Gary's plan.

Gary would not launch bad information from his room because that could be traced. And his faraday cage was isolated so he could not launch anything from there. But the cage did allow him converse with a few other underground compatriots. He met other guys who like himself did not trust the system and were working against it. In his faraday cage he helped them adjust their Game-spuds® to upload other bad data and instructed them to travel to other cities. He gave each a deck of cards for expenses.

A sixteen-car trainload of toaster pastries was shipped to the heart of the southwest desert because weather data suggested that a hurricane was about to occur there. Water pressure was increased in anticipation of a surge in demand that did not occur. 58% of the toilet flushometers burst all across the northwest coast. Police raided a Senator's home thinking that an illegal religious gathering was occurring. When all it was, was an underage sex and drug party, the embarrassment to the police was devastating. An irritating children's video/song played continuously for five hours on screens throughout the capital city. The system-wide minute-long blackouts of power or data began to become daily occurrences. The system was becoming less than 95% efficient. THEY got nervous.

Gary was back in his home city enjoying as much as he could of the dinner in front of him at the outdoor café. He was pleased that the disruptions were undermining the control THEY had on society but he was not sure if the cumulative affect was sufficient. It made for fun headlines – what little of it got publicity, but it was not bringing society to its knees. He wondered if Grandmother's advice about not trying to change the world was right. He pushed the scraps of the premium Bovanian® Filet Mignsoy Steak around his plate with his fork. He was missing the fresh taste of food on the Farm. For all he and his colleagues had done the job was not even one hundredth complete in introducing the amount of bad information that was needed to install. The operation was too slow. The system would self correct and within two weeks they were starting over.

From his chair Gary noticed two young ladies on the corner holding hands and crossing the street. One was thin and blond with big red sunglasses wearing a denim airbag vest pants suit. The other had short reddish hair and obviously pregnant, slowing their flight. They were walking at a rapid pace. "Could it be Sheila and another girl?" thought Gary.

The two crossed the street from Gary's corner to the other side of the street. Gary got up, left a three of clubs as a tip for the waitress and followed slowly. Suddenly a man passed him running after the women. Gary following him and at the right moment pushed his

face into the wall of a building. The man fell unconscious to the ground; his nose bleeding. Gary ran more swiftly down the street where the two women had walked. He saw them duck into an alley and he followed. When he turned the corner the thin blond held out a cigarette pack toward him and shouted, “Stop or I will use this!”

It took only a second for them to recognize each other for sure. They each exclaimed “Sheila!” and “Gary” as they jumped to hug each other. Their airbag vests instantly inflated and sent them back on their rears onto pavement.

While recovering Sheila ask if Gary could help. Gary brushed himself off. “You, organic home-schooling, Jane Austin-reading, midwife-birthing, damn Doulas! You never give up.” he said with a smile. He gave her the ID key to his car, the same one, and told her where it was parked. He offered to create a diversion for them. Sheila, removed her blond wig and glasses, kissed him on the cheek and left.

Gary went back on the street and offered to pick up the bleeding official. He yelled loudly for help, and drew attention to the two of them. Soon there was crowd. Gary was hoping to slip away and not be seen. But a pair of hands grabbing each arm stopped him. “Come with us.” the Counselor and the Investigator instructed.

PART VII

It took a while for Gary to recognize the woman as his Counselor. The Investigator he knew he never met. Both the Investigator and Counselor had worked they way back to their old positions but without the commiserate privileges. Even bureaucrats had to recognize that having some people interested in doing their jobs was helpful. For a few months they conducted their investigation secretly while they performed their job at a minimal standard so they would appear normal to every one else.

They sat Gary down in a chair in the back room of a restaurant. The Investigator clicked the button on a device that whirred and lit up. Gary recognized it as a jamming device. They would talk without detection. “We have spoken to people who have been to the Farm, Gary. Tell us about the Farm,” the Counselor started. Gary was silent. “We don’t need to question you, we can just hook you up.” Gary did not respond.

The Investigator continued, “We don’t want to hook you up. It might have unnecessary consequences. We would rather you just tell us. We don’t mean any harm, we just want to find out more about the Farm.” Gary stared straight ahead. He did not think speaking and being clever would help. He did not want to betray any information, even lies, because that might tell them too much.

The Counselor shouted, “What’s the matter with you? What are you hiding?” She got close to his face. “Pregnant girls, Gary? What were you doing with them? Trying to be like a Father to them?” The word father was meant derisively.

Minutes went by and the two could not get anything out of Gary. The box stopped whirring and all three went silent. The Counselor gestured that Gary could leave. He was surprised. The Investigator and Counselor sat in the chairs at an empty table and shook their heads. What had happened to them? Neither of them could perform their job as ruthlessly as before.

A day later, Gary, or Bill rather, was picked up by Police. They had consulted the street cameras and saw that he pushed the officer into the wall. Bill had left a signature trail that was easy to follow. They hauled him down to headquarters. They tried questioning him about what he knew, why did he assault an officer of the law? Gary tried to make it sound like he just saw a creep following two women and thought he would help. What did he know about the two women, why did he interfere? He stopped answering questions.

An investigator did not say anything more. He just plugged a wire into the usb on Gary's chest and plugged it into the wall jack for the computer. First the computer sent Gary a numbing pulse so he was paralyzed. Then the computer cleaned his body chip of the virus Sheila placed there. It reset his ID. His name was not Bill, it was Gary and he was due for termination. Then an investigator did word searches and information and images began to be translated to the screen on the wall. They downloaded information they got as much as "Sheila" and "doula" but nothing else made sense.

Just then the Investigator walked in with the Counselor. He had been notified of the arrest. "Let me question the prisoner." He demanded. "Alone." He had pulled rank.

When the first investigator left the room, Gary fought the numbing pain of the computer brain scan. Tearfully he cried. "Erase it." They were not sure what he meant. "Erase the Farm... you know what THEY'll do to me, erase it." He was fighting the computer-induced coma.

The Investigator called up the images of the Farm, pictures of the Farm, faces of people on the Farm, paths to the Farm all began to appear and disappear from the wall screen. The Investigator and the Counselor looked on in amazement. "Erase it!" he commanded fighting the numbness that covered his body. The Investigator isolated the time frame of memories of the Farm and began an erasure.

The other investigator came back in with the Chief. "On whose authority did you decide you could question the prisoner?" he demanded of the man and the woman in the room. The two could not answer and were dismissed from the building.

The investigators correlated his Bill Game-spud® with his recent activities and correlated his Gary ID with his termination record and the notes that the Counselor has originally left in his file. Details of his life experiences began to be revealed on the screen and correlated with street camera images and recorded conversations. The automatic trial program got an easy conviction for an array of petty crimes. THEY were not getting the whole story, though. There were big gaps. The intensity of the brain scan was

increased. There was a conspiracy here someplace and THEY would find it, even if it meant erasing whole sections of his brain and leaving the subject a vegetable. He was slated for termination anyway. After two slow, painful days, THEY learned nothing, his life was snuffed out and his body was incinerated at the city morgue.

The next day at the Farm, Sheila saw was washing up. She and Grandmother and another doula had just delivered Barbara's healthy little boy. Sheila was hanging a few towels out to dry when she saw an unfamiliar red car bucking across the gravel and road that led to the clump of trees near the cabin. Out stepped the Investigator and Counselor, hand in hand, their fingers intertwined. The Counselor spoke to Sheila, "We would like to join the Farm."

The End