

# THE CANDIDATE

By David M. Antonelli

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The Candidate  
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## THE CANDIDATE

BY DAVID M. ANTONELLI

“A rich man is nothing but a poor man with money”  
WC Fields.

### I

#### 1. The Interview

The Candidate walked into the conference room and wiped a lone bead of sweat off his gleaming white forehead. He smiled and adjusted his wafer-thin gold watch, making sure it stood out against the background of his white suit and black bow tie. The appointment committee looked on in awe. They'd never seen such a demonstration of pure magnificence parcelled in a single entity. His shoulders were broad and sharp, chiselled to perfection like pieces from the Elgin Marbles. His torso was cut with the precision of an Antwerp diamond and his head towered upwards from his mighty figure like the central column of a great art deco palace. Crowned by a laurel of golden hair groomed and sculpted in the style of a prize-winning poodle, he was the very image of classical beauty. The odour of something sweet and profound - a new Hellenism? - wafted through the room. He looked with humble deference at the five professors seated at a large table in front of him.

“It says on your resume that you were a rower,” said Benson.

“Sorry?” The Candidate tilted his head in confusion. “A mower, sir?”

“No, I said a *rower*.”

“Rows, sir? Mowing rows of what, sir?”

“Look, do you even know what a paddle is?” Hedges snarled. He wore thin round glasses that looked like they’d been assembled from pieces of an antique telescope. He was the most distinguished scientist on the panel, acting as chair of at least a dozen international committees.

“Yes. Something you spank babies with.” The Candidate shifted nervously in his suit and adjusted the knot of his tie. He once read a test report in *The Economist* that proved that a man could land an office job from a distance of up to two hundred meters on the strength of a well-constructed Windsor knot alone.

“I think *oar* was the word you were looking for,” said Gables as he fumbled through a leather-bound copy of *The Iliad*. “Interesting etymology. Celtic, I think.”

“Thank you *Mr. Joyce*,” Hedges snapped. He turned to The Candidate. “As you can see we have some vintage *literati* on staff.”

“Christ, man,” said Benson. “If you spanked a baby with an oar these days the dyke squad would be on your ass in no time for child abuse.”

Benson was a wilting travesty of a man, once hailed by his young admirers as a new Don Juan only smarter than the first, spun off years of white tequila midnights and simpering undergraduates eager for something more - *life experience* - than the standard degree had to offer. He hadn’t published a paper in ten years and was nowhere near retirement. Students held him up in curious reverence as an emblem of the free love generation gone bad – a kind of Dorian Gray of the Haight Ashbury scene. Thrown out of the sixties as if from the back of a garbage truck, he wore orange bell-bottoms and platform shoes and drove around in a van with bubble windows painted with images of naked women decapitating twelve-headed dragons. He was living proof that there was still hope for a twenty-year-old in the dreary post-Regan modern world – “no matter what happens to me I’ll never end up as bad as *him*,” they would all think as they listened attentively to his physics lectures laced with halcyon tales of group sex in see-through neoprene tents pitched in the back alleys between Castro and Mission.

Benson stared across the table at Hedges, who was cleaning out his pipe with the sleeve of his oak-brown cardigan.

“Why do you want this job?” Hedges asked, smiling like a man who had just forced checkmate.

“Excellence,” replied The Candidate. He wiped his nose on his sleeve. “Excellence, sir. I’ve always striven for perfection in all areas of life. Western Polytechnic has always been a world leader in this category.”

Hedges was visibly flattered and looked over at Benson, who was braiding a portion of his hair into some kind of miscarried dreadlock. Benson looked up and gave him the nod.

“How do we know you’re not lying?” asked Zhitnik, a balding Polish dissident with a thick rubber band anchoring his lab safety glasses to his head. “The government has been lying to us for years. Aliens could be watching us even as we speak.”

“From outer space?” The Candidate asked cautiously.

Zhitnik nodded his head portentously. “They are probably even be working for Virgin or British Telecom,” he said. “Do you know what will happen when these two forces join together into one massive legion of destruction?”

Hedges rolled his eyes in disgust.

“You’re so naive, my son,” Zhitnik continued. He looked at The Candidate as though he were a pubescent child who still believes in Santa Clause. “My latest calculations predict that UPS will meet a hell-spawned British Telecom-Virgin conglomerate in a great futuristic apocalypse. UPS by a hair, wouldn’t you say? You can’t send parcels by wire, but you can always cut off a phone and communicate by mail instead.”

“What about the future?” asked Gables. He was the youngest in the department. Sleek and athletic, handsome and tanned, he was the joy of young women across the entire campus and the rue of Benson, who saw him as a cleaner cut version of himself twenty years earlier – his youthful, more debonair doppelganger with artistic pretensions to boot.

“Build,” said The Candidate, suddenly oozing with an almost theatrical brand of confidence. “We must build and strive for that which is rightfully ours.”

Brown, who was sitting quietly near the back wall, frowned in scorn. As far as he could tell, The Candidate was a shallow big-city boy with nothing to boast but a head the shape of a skyscraper, and one of those crumbling east-coast jobs at that. As far as Brown could tell, The Candidate had no publications on his record and had probably never done an experiment in his life.

“This is a science job,” said Brown. “We’re not talking about sales or ass-kissing here, young man.”

Brown was a hard headed Mississippi man, a self-professed mercenary of the renewed Confederate cause. He hated ass-kissers even more than pansies and suck-holes, equating them with the more heinous *Easterners* and frightening, almost bone-chilling *Liberals*. He’d spent five years in the army and rolled his own cigarettes with dried US tobacco leaf, frowning upon a younger generation who used exotic brands of European papers out of what he saw as a misguided attack on the archetypical Virginian and some vacuous supplication to Jack Kerouac, yet another *Easterner* and *Liberal* as far as he was concerned. The fact that Kerouac died a racist alcoholic in his mother’s care was just another morsel of evidence showcasing the futility of the left.

“And this crud about space aliens,” Brown continued. “They ain’t nothin’ compared to illegal aliens. At least space aliens have the decency not to beg on the streets and hang around in unemployment lines.” He looked sharply at The Candidate. “Have you ever seen a space alien tryin’ to welch its kids off into one of our schools?”

The Candidate drew a long slow breath, his chest expanding like that of a rare tropical bird before a mating call. Then he exhaled.

“If you would like to discuss science with me,” he said, “I’d be glad to meet with you later.”

Brown looked puzzled. Perhaps this Dixie slim felt a certain *shine* wanted to move in on him. He’d heard tell of queers in these parts but had never seen one in the flesh. The thought was horrifying. That big totemic head - columnar with tight swirls of hair like clusters of icing flowers. A rape by a wedding cake.

“That won’t be necessary, young man,” Brown said with a truculent sparkle in his eye. He knew what this boy was up to and he’d just called his bluff. “We’ll just convene now. I’m sure you’re exhausted from the day’s interview.”

“I certainly am, good sir,” said The Candidate. “But I’d be happy to go on if any of you have any more questions.”

“What do you think of British Telecom?” shouted Zhitnik.

“Have you any current business ventures?” asked Benson.

“Do you like golf?” asked Gables.

The Candidate turned to each man in turn with the grace of a figure skater performing the final stages of a medal-winning routine.

“A powerful company, indeed,” he said to Zhitnik.

“Shares in Mobil,” he said to Benson.

“Yes,” he said to Gables with a smile.

The three professors looked at each other, all beaming in satisfaction. Brown lowered his head in disgust. “Meeting adjourned,” he proclaimed.

Hedges escorted The Candidate to the main office where the secretary gave him his reimbursement documents and promptly called a cab. The Candidate grabbed his long white coat and scarf and thanked Hedges for his hospitality.

Hedges leaned down to the open cab window and shook The Candidate’s hand. The cab driver waited politely.

“We’ll be in touch,” said Hedges.

“I’ll look forward to hearing from you, sir.”

Hedges smiled with the proud satisfaction of a man who’d just harvested his first cornfield. The cab rolled into motion. Soon it was just a blur on the horizon. Then it was invisible.

That night The Candidate stayed up in his hotel room going over the possibilities. Interviews were always nerve-racking. But then, wasn’t life just one great marathon of interviews? A date with an attractive woman was an interview for a post in her life. A game of tennis was really an interview for a position on the winner’s roster. Being shot to death on a subway train was hardly the tragedy a Sunday night news program would have you think. It was really something so much greater: a surprise promotion to a chair in the afterlife.

He looked out the window of his hotel room into the sweet marmalade of night. Then he threw his bathrobe on the bed and took a shower. As the water hammered down on his face he speculated on the results of the day. His first interview, he was sure of it, had been a success. How could it have been otherwise? Failure was something that only happened to other people. It happened to failures. So why should it happen to him? He shut off the water and dried himself before going to bed. He was at peace. He closed his eyes and fell asleep. That night, he dreamed he was a rocket ship hurtling through space, a thing so lofty and wondrous it appeared only as a smear of blinding white light to those lonely figures left straggling like broken twigs on the earth below. As the ship blasted higher and higher it faded into the ghost of a smear and finally just a memory of the ghost of a smear. Nothing could stop him now. The next day The Candidate woke up to a clear blue morning.

## 2. The Selection Process

The appointment committee met the morning after the interview in the Feinman Room, a great chamber finished with oak panelled walls, portraits of bearded old men with mortar boards capping their heads hanging above each of its four carved fire places. The professors gathered around a long wooden table, each with a copy of the search file in front of him. Gables was the first to speak.

“Well, any thoughts?”

The others shuffled the papers around in indecision, seemingly not quite ready to risk an opinion. Brown finally broke the silence.

“I don’t know about that guy with the white suit. He’s got that Harvard look about him. And if I didn’t know any better, I’d say he’s a bit queer. He has eyes like a...” He paused for a moment. Then his voice dropped to a shrill whisper. We have to be careful. I don’t wanna have to watch my back every time I walk down the hall to the waterin’ fountain.”

“Don’t you think he has the look of genius with that tall, proud forehead?” asked Gables.

“Yeah? Who cares what he looks like?” said Brown. “As far as I can tell, he hasn’t published a cotton pickin’ thing.”

“His letters are all supportive,” Gables countered. “He even sang in the glee club. And didn’t you see that glow? He’s going to be big. You can just feel it. And with that recent donation to the department we could give him new labs and do the renovations we always wanted.”

“You guys have been hanging around with too many Jew-landers,” said Brown. “Can’t see the forest for the trees. He hasn’t done a morsel of science in his entire life. We’re trying to run a university here, not some early retirement home for ass kissers.”

“I agree,” added Hedges. “He interviewed well, but where is the science?”

“What about that other guy?” asked Benson. “The one with the greasy black hair. He was sort of a nerd, but seemed pretty smart.”

“Alan Shaver,” said Hedges.

“You mean that gangly kid with the *Star Trek* lunchbox?” asked Gables. “His letters are amazing. They say he’s the closest thing to true genius they’ve ever seen. I heard he proved the existence of the Higgs Boson by studying the diffusion of his urine through a public swimming pool.”

“And that other guy, Hopton,” added Benson. “I’m not so sure about him.”

“His pants were half way down his ass,” said Brown. “You know what that means. On top of that he says *cwafey* instead of *coffee*. The sign of a true New Yorker. Sure, he might have a brain the size of Texas, but you don’t have to tell me what he does in his spare time. Drugs. Women’s clothes. You name it...he just has that smell about him. A no good Yankee liar, I’d say.”

There was a long silence. “Well,” said Hedges after almost a minute. “I think we should think it over and meet in a few days to make our final decision.”

The others nodded in agreement and filed out of the room.

The next day the halls of the science wing at Western Polytechnic were virtually empty. Hedges had flown to Cambridge that morning to present a paper on world peace and its relation to modern physics. He was always careful to keep a low profile with his public activities lest somebody suspected he was losing his interest in science in favour of shallow statesmanship. If anyone at the grant agencies found out, it would be a fate worse than death. He'd lose his funding and be lauded by the international community as *a man whose cunning intellect and passion for knowledge led to the flowering of at least a dozen fields* - in other words a *has been*.

Benson spent the day in the Zen cocoon of his private hot tub splashing water at Theresa his new fiancé. She was round in face and body and had ropy black hair that fell to her hips. He loved her for the batik cotton pants she wore like a uniform for some kind of post-utopian phantasmagorical army of love. She had children from three marriages and owned at least seven pairs of Birkenstocks.

"Ah. This water's so nice," said Benson. "And to think. I left a *Do Not Disturb* sign on my door! Half the university probably thinks I'm busy working on some great new theory."

"You are, dear. A theory of love!" Theresa grabbed Benson by his legs and pulled him closer to her. "Love and sensuality."

Before she gained weight after her third child, Theresa was a Yoga master at an aroma therapy retreat in Boulder. She had even spent a summer in a Tantric love camp in Madras. She first locked eyes with Benson at a commune in Vermont. He had long since given up on younger students and had even adopted a wardrobe of pinstriped Hugo Boss suits with reinforced shoulders in an effort to improve his love life. It'd been ten years since any one under fifty found his hippie wash-up image even slightly compelling. Perhaps he had finally grown up, or was forced by age and modern fashion to at least *look* like he had grown up. Either way Theresa was perfect for him. She, too, was dumped out of the sixties as if from the back of a garbage truck. A match made in heaven, she tossed out his suits and bought him a closet of tie dyed shirts only a few weeks after they met.

Theresa dug her fingers into Benson's waist and pulled down his hemp fibre bathing suit.

"Wait, dear," said Benson helplessly. "Let's roll another spliff before we..."

"No dear, it's time to roll out your chakra!" she said. Theresa stuffed her tongue between his lips and pushed it to the back of his mouth. Benson wrapped his arms around her waist, probing the base of her spine with his fingers. He loved the self important jiggle in her ass and the way he could see the outlines of her thighs beneath the fabric when she stood in silhouette in front of the heat lamp in his bathroom.

Zhitnik spent the day as usual. He put up a *Do Not Disturb* sign on his office door and took the bus to the office of public records. It was his daily duty to see if any suspicious transactions had been made. No doubt if Virgin and British Telecom completed their dreaded merger, they'd do it in secret to make sure no one would get wise and try to stop the great battle that was sure to follow. But in spite of all this chaos, UPS was still just a passive bystander. The two British companies were harmless until the great merger occurred, awakening the sleeping giant parcel company and forcing it into action.

After perusing the records to his satisfaction he went to a European-style café and spent the remainder of the day in contemplation of Frank Zorton and what his role in the big merger might be. Zhitnik knew nothing about Zorton except that he called the same number in New Jersey every day of the week at exactly nine PM. The mysterious man normally dialled a second number in Zimbabwe, but that was only once a month, and always at two PM on the first Sunday. He imagined Zorton to be a tall bony man with a thin spindly beard - like an intellectual from a bad cloak and dagger play - who was fundamentally good inside, but because of some great personal tragedy in his life had been swayed over to the *darker side of things*. Every day Zhitnik would pour over maps of Africa and the stock exchange pages in at least ten different papers looking for that secret sign. *Virgin up by one*, he'd hear on the nightly news. One what? he would always ask himself. He wasn't so naive as to think there wasn't some secret code hidden behind those simple words. And what was British Telecom up to? You'd only have to multiply their Dow Jones industrial average by six, the sign of the beast, and divide by the price of a share in Virgin to arrive at some pointer as to when the big one was going to happen. The solution to this great riddle was to be one of the great discoveries of the century, linking together things as disparate and far reaching as the frequency of a neutrino and the cyclical nature of war through the history of mankind.

While Zhitnik was absorbed in careful thought at the café, Gables was strolling through a lush suburban park with Ginger, one of his newest sophomores - a budding sex tiger with a mind like a harpsichord. She saw in Gables everything a modern man should be. He was smartly dressed, both dapper and hip, a man at once of action and reflection. He was as literary and entrepreneurial as he was athletic and *Gen X* - once having stayed up for three days to buy Radiohead tickets, doing push-ups and reciting Leaves of Grass to random passers by in order to stay awake and hold his place in line. He bought stocks in high-tech start-ups and even bet on the horse races, once winning big on a late triactor, using the money to refinish his kitchen in antique cedar panels he bought at an auction in Paris.

"Ginger," he said, rolling over a half-eaten goat cheese baguette to get closer to her.

"Yes?"

"Don't you dare let any of your friends know that I wasn't in my office today. I put up a *Do Not Disturb* sign as a decoy. Clever, eh?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Just making sure."

"You have my word."

"Ginger," he said, twining her hair around his index finger.

"What?"

"There's something about you."

"What?"

"I don't know. You just *have it*."

"It?"

"The *It Girl*."

Ginger shrugged her shoulders in admittance of her ignorance. She'd never heard of Clara Bow - or was it Greta Garbo? It didn't matter, because she'd never even seen a silent movie. She was from a different era altogether. These days you weren't supposed to know about silent movies until you took a film studies course. Even then you'd be

considered pretentious or gay for admitting you'd so much as stood outside the door while one was being screened once the final exam was over. Gables took it as yet another invitation to dazzle her.

"Tonight, at my house...*darling*," he said in an exaggerated eastern European accent as he caressed her hips. "I'll teach you everything you need to know..."

"Zsa Zsa Gabor! At least I picked that one up."

Ginger took Gables' head and pushed it up her dress. Gables groaned in ecstasy as he rolled his tongue along the tender inside of her thighs.

Brown put a *Do Not Disturb* sign on his office door and jingled the keys to his truck. He chuckled in satisfaction as he walked down the stairs of the science building and out the door to the parking lot. In less than half an hour he'd be shooting dice at *Chuck's Truck's* with his two buddies Army and Fred. They were Chevy men and proud of it. *Chuck's Truck's* was their baby. It was located on outskirts of town between a tattoo parlour and an ailing diving shop that hadn't sold a flipper for the last six months. Army and Fred were Brown's truest friends. The three of them would often spend hours talking on subjects as diverse as whether blacks should be allowed to quarterback in the Superbowl and which brand of bourbon got you how drunk and why and what were the differences in the quality of the drunk or type of hangover induced by each.

When Brown pulled in to the parking lot at *Chuck's Trucks* he wasted no time. He jumped out of his pick-up truck and kicked the garage door open. The room was filled with greasy car parts and *Playboy* magazines. "How 'bout some whiskey!" he shouted as he tossed his dice on the table in the far corner. Army and Fred rushed in from the front room to greet him. In minutes they were swigging *Canadian Club* and shooting dice. Brown opened with boxcars.

"Boxers," said Army.

"Sure ain't snake eyes," said Fred.

"Shut up and roll," said Brown as he shovelled the dice over in Fred's direction. "What would you know about snake eyes? Ever had a snake stare you right in the eye?"

"Yes, I have," said Fred proudly.

"Well, Mr. High and Mighty here says he's looked a snake in the eye," said Brown. "Where? At the zoo? My, how frightening!" Brown slammed his fist on the table. "I'd venture a bet that you ain't never had a cottonmouth crawl out of the swamp and stare you right in the eye before snaking up your pant leg and licking your arse clean with its tongue."

"Nope. Just a garter snake. It was all green and stank like gutter water. And it didn't even bother trying to lick my arse. I guess it figured there wasn't anything there for it to lick."

"I bet you think you're funny. Well, if you had this cottonmouth starin' you in the eye, you'd wish you were in a vat with a thousand garters lickin' your arse. I tell you, gutter water stench ain't nothin' next to twenty feet of angry cottonmouth trying to crawl up your ass for a holiday!"

"Shut up, Brown," said Army. "Just let him roll."

### 3. The Appointment

The Candidate adjusted his cuff links and walked through the main doors of the science library. He took a deep breath. The job was in the bag. Not that he'd been offered it, but simply that it was *in the bag*. Why should he assume otherwise? He felt strong and confident as he browsed through the current periodicals neatly displayed on a wooden shelf to the left of the help desk. Things were rolling along more smoothly than he could ever have imagined. He'd spent the last four days looking for an apartment and had already finalised arrangements to sign a lease. He even had time to open up a new bank account and tour the downtown shopping plazas. He was already getting to like the place and even made a point of memorizing the name of the man at the donut shop next to the science building. He walked over to a wall of books and pulled out a few titles - works he had as little comprehension of as desire to comprehend. He imagined them decking his office shelves like Christmas ornaments, impressing anyone that entered. He stacked the books under his arm and walked towards the door.

"Sir," said the librarian. Her voice prickled with authority.

"Yes," he said, matching her tone.

"We normally don't allow strangers to just walk off with books. You might find us strict but, it's just *policy*. I hope you understand."

"Miss," he replied and cleared his throat. "Allow me to introduce myself." He put the stack of books down. "I'm the new appointee."

"Oh, *I'm sorry*," she said contritely. "I hadn't heard that they'd selected anyone yet."

"Just yesterday in fact. Yesterday afternoon."

"Oh. Well. I must have missed the e-mail circular. Pleased to meet you. I'm Abigail." She shook his hand. "One thing, though. We normally ask faculty to sign out books. You can keep them for as long as you want, but you still have to sign."

"Certainly. How thoughtless of me."

"Not at all. How were you to know?"

The Candidate smiled and signed the appropriate borrowing cards. His next task was to make his way upstairs and claim his new office.

On his way up he ran into Hedges. He looked at The Candidate with a vague sense of recognition as they passed each other on the landing. Hedges continued down half a flight before stopping. Then he turned around and looked back at The Candidate.

"Is there something I can help you with?" he asked.

"Yes," said The Candidate. "I'd like to talk about setting up my new lab."

"Your new lab? I didn't know..."

"I just started yesterday."

Hedges squinted his eyes in confusion. No doubt the others met while he was in Cambridge and decided to make the appointment in his absence. Admitting he was away at such a crucial time without any real research purpose would certainly be fatal. He'd be perceived by the others as intellectual deadwood and an offer for early retirement would surely follow. But if he apologised to the others for not showing up, he'd draw attention to the fact he was gone and questions as to his whereabouts might surface. If there was a

meeting, they might even have knocked on his door and discovered that the *Do Not Disturb* sign was really a decoy. He could only hope in the busy hustle and bustle of Western Polytechnic his absence from campus would soon be forgotten.

“Congratulations,” said Hedges. “We knew you were the best candidate all along.” He walked back up the stairs to the landing and shook The Candidate’s slender, clean - almost glowing - hand.

“Thank you,” said The Candidate. “To be congratulated by a man of your stature is such a rare honour. You’d never know how much this means to me.”

“Thank you, son. As for the lab, we’d better get on it soon. I’ll talk to the Dean as soon as possible.”

“I really appreciate this, Professor Hedges.”

“The pleasure’s mine.”

Hedges walked down the stairs and turned the corner to Benson’s office. He knocked. Benson opened the door with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. Hedges looked at him suspiciously.

“Hydroponic tobacco,” Benson said. “Theresa and I have been growing it in our basement.”

“We have to get the new appointee a lab,” Hedges said, hoping that by being the first to help out the new appointee, his colleagues would forgive him for not showing up at the meeting.

“Who?” Benson looked puzzled.

“Yes. Of course you must already know he started yesterday.”

“Why...yes.” Benson’s mind drifted back to the day in the hot tub. He felt suddenly guilty. They must have had a meeting while he was floating away in bliss. “I was actually working on the plans last night.”

“Any ideas?”

“Not yet. We’ll have to see the Dean.”

Hedges and Benson rushed down the hall to Brown’s office. They knocked on the door. After a few seconds Brown stepped out with a tin of chewing tobacco in his hands. There was a copy of *Penthouse* spread wide open on his desk only a few feet away - a melange of white cotton and golden skin that was close enough to whet Benson’s curiosity while still being out of focus. Benson locked his eyes on Brown’s face in an effort to keep his gaze from drifting to the point on the desk where he imagined a center fold was lying in full view.

“So,” said Hedges. “It looks like we have a problem on our hands.”

“Problem?” Brown grunted. “Every day it’s a new problem around here. It wasn’t like that where I grew up in Missouri. I didn’t even know the word. I used to go out every morning in the summer with a slingshot huntin’ rabbit and gopher. Those were the days. Since then it’s all been downhill. Like sittin’ on a log at the top of a mountain and riding it all the way to the bottom. Then came the seventies. Those were the bad days. *The dark ones*, I call ‘em. Carter and his fuel problems. It was enough to drive any God-fearing man to whorin’ and liquor.”

“The Candidate,” said Hedges. “We have to find him some lab space.”

“Candidate? Which one? Since when did we decide to hire anybody?”

Benson moved aside, craning his neck ever so slightly. *There*, he thought. *Exactamente*. As long as Brown didn’t move, the tiny triangle made by his elbow, armpit

and the intersection between his wrist and torso would be safe, a perfect window through which he had a direct line of sight to the open pages of *Penthouse* gaping on Brown's desk.

"There was a meeting yesterday, wasn't there, Benson?" Hedges looked unsure of himself as he furtively nudged Benson in the stomach for support.

"If there was I never heard of it," said Brown. He stared down at Benson's purple bellbottoms. "The seventies," he shook his head in disgust. It was the era of Afros in the White House, nuns on motorcycles, and Cub Scouts in nudist camps. An era when time-honoured values like hotcakes and country ham sunk to the bottom of a vegan slop pale of communist manifestos and quadraphonic sound systems.

Hedges scratched his eyebrow nervously. Was Brown just testing him? Perhaps he was in league with Benson and this was all just a ruse to make a fool out of him. No, he couldn't give in. There clearly was a meeting while he was away and Brown was there. Brown probably even chaired the meeting.

"Listen. Cut out this nonsense. We both know there was a meeting yesterday. Didn't you see me sitting in the back row? I was ducking a little because of the sunlight."

Benson nodded in agreement. "You may not have seen me there either," he said. "I was in the back row, too. I was there with Hedges, but he probably didn't see me. I was in the *other* corner."

"Oh, were you," said Benson in false surprise. "How strange that we were both there but didn't see each other."

"Funny, isn't it?"

"I never went to no meeting," said Brown.

"Come on," said Benson. "We all know you were there. Maybe it was just a memory lapse. Let's get on with it and find the new guy some lab space."

Brown stepped backwards through the threshold of his office door. Then it came to him. One of his deepest fears had just come true. It crawled out of the swamp, wiped the mud off its swollen feet and slithered its way through the marshlands of his memory. He really was at the meeting yesterday, only he was so drunk on Bourbon that he had only imagined he was playing dice down at *Chuck's Trucks*. He looked up at the deer head on the wall. It was his good luck charm. In times of trouble it always helped him pull through. If anyone found out he was lapsing into dementia he'd be stripped of his job and sent on a leave of absence to some place where he'd be thrown into some encounter group and be forced to admit that his father sexually molested him in his youth, even if he had no such recollection.

"Oh," he said suddenly. "*That* meeting. I was just pulling your leg. Of course I remember. How could I forget? The memory's burned in my head like a carving on a totem pole. That was one son of a bitch of a meeting. Best of the year, in fact. But, why am I telling you, though? I saw you both there. You were in the back sitting in opposite corners."

"We saw him there, too, didn't we Hedges," Benson said earnestly.

"Indeed."

"So," what are we going to do about getting this kid started," asked Brown.

"We have to see the Dean," Benson and Hedges said in earnest unison.

“We’d better get him an office before we do that, or the Dean might think we’ve already dropped the ball,” said Brown.

“Good idea,” said Hedges.

The next day The Candidate moved into a sunny playboy suite on the top floor of a fifty-story apartment block. It had two bedrooms - one that could be used as an office where great ideas would no doubt be born in the endless depths of night - a dining room, a kitchen and a bathroom. The bathroom had a standing porcelain tub, pristine faucets and a shower tap with ten different pulse settings. The kitchen was small in proportions, but modern in every aspect. It had sparkling white linoleum floors, a brand new microwave, an ice cube dispenser, and even a small ceiling fan. His living room opened up through a set of wide French doors into a patio with a small garden to the left and a tennis court to the right.

He spent the first night trying to sleep on the bare wooden floors of the living room with only a sleeping bag to comfort him. He tossed and turned until seven in the morning, when in complete frustration he got up and dressed. In a matter of minutes he was in the back seat of a cab.

“Keep going until we hit the first furniture store,” he said to the driver. A few minutes later they pulled up to the front entrance of the classy but eclectic *Earl’s Interiors*. If the cab had been going in the opposite direction, fate might have differed and he may instead have ended up at the tremendous, almost iconic *Hollywood Bowl*, a place that specialized in nineteen fifties rock and roll and burger bar styles, or the more gaudy and even outrageous *Bluebeard’s Cove*, located on the fringe of town directly across from a corrugated paper warehouse the size of a race track. But chance had dictated that his apartment was not to be one of those rock-around-the-clock soda shops with chrome bumper sofas and closets filled with bowling trophies and high school bomber jackets. Neither was it to be a trompe l’oeil houseboat decorated by the set design team from the latest Disney film, as *Bluebeard’s* might have had it.

The Candidate tipped the driver and walked up to the door of *Earl’s Interiors*. He looked through the window. He was impressed. The inside was clean, spacious, and seemed to have a little bit of everything. From the ultra modern to the slightly eccentric and antique, it spanned every realm of taste. He walked inside and a salesman approached him.

“Take a look at this,” said the salesman, a cigar jutting out of his mouth like a stray log from a fireplace. He was pointing over towards a cut glass leopard with a green light flicking on and off in the center of the head. “An absolute beauty. Venetian glass, for sure.”

“We all need a little nature in our lives,” remarked The Candidate. “I’ll take it.”

“Amazing,” said the salesman, who had just butted out his cigar and wrapped it in a white napkin before stuffing its remainders in the pocket of his double-breasted ice blue suit. “I was thinking just that this morning. I was driving into work and those very words passed through my mind. There must have been some vibe in the offing that you were coming through. I must admit that I felt something like a tingle of mountain air when I rolled that *Speed Stick* through my armpit this morning.”

“I felt exactly the same, sir.”

“You really are a nice kid. How about I throw in an extra one - this baby over here with a blue light – an Icelandic puma I think it is - for free?”

“That sounds like a whale of a bargain, sir.”

“It really is your lucky day, isn’t it?”

“Sure is.”

As long as it was the *best* of any such and such available, The Candidate continued to approve of the man’s every suggestion. If he ever had the Dean over for dinner he had only one chance to make a positive impression. That morning he spent twenty thousand dollars on furniture and stylish little knick-knacks. He bought a five piece modular bookshelf, a mahogany office desk, a glass-topped dining room table with a set of fold up director’s chairs, a waterbed - all key components in the life of a successful academic.

Later that day a big red truck pulled up to his apartment block. A team of five short men, muscles glistening with sweat and heavy, proud moustaches jumped out the back and proceeded to deck his entire apartment with the spectacular furniture and decorative pieces he’d just bought that morning. He spent the rest of the evening rearranging the furniture to his satisfaction. His heart churned with exhilaration. His new life had started. He swayed and rocked in his new armchair to the rhythm of his own heartbeat. He was happy. That night he slept a deep and peaceful sleep on his brand new waterbed.

## 4. Starting Up

The launch pad sizzled and glowed in the engine’s fiery blast as that great metallic needle pushed away from the ground and soared higher and higher into the vast blueness of the morning sky. Where that final precious module - decked out so beautifully in reflective gold foil and a dizzying array of small dials and mechanical arms - would land, nobody knew. Only time would tell how many comets and asteroids it would leave behind in his shimmering white vapour trail. The Candidate’s colleagues never questioned the appointment. There was something of an Elvis honey trickle in his voice that made everyone trust him. Even Brown eased off. After all, the slim young man was from the south. Underneath all that east coast fluff, The Candidate was really just a greenhorn southern gentleman, a budding Joseph Cotton or General Lee. Working in the same department with the boy would be like a ride down the Mississippi on a prohibition day riverboat or maybe even the mighty iron-clad the Merimac itself - a tour through an old and cherished south that had long since faded away into the three-buttoned blue suits of racial liberation and left-wing feminism.

“You can’t be all bad, son,” Brown said one afternoon as he scratched his thick grey beard. “‘Cause if you were you wouldn’t be in here talking to me. Queers and phoneyes have a sneaky way about ‘em. Crafty buggers they are. They know their way around or they’d been wiped out a long time ago. Like cockroaches they have a strange survival instinct. A true phoney would never walk in this door seein’ what I’ve stacked here about me.” He gestured at a display case on the wall filled with antique American guns of every persuasion. There were small gleaming pistols with carved ivory handles.

There were handsome old rifles, barrels matted and grey like freshly cut graphite, elegant cherry wood butts gleaming like legs from a Louis Quinze chaise lounge. There was even a lady's *Smith and Weston*, so small it could fit in a ballet slipper.

"That's right, sir," said The Candidate.

"But I got a little piece of advice. A jumpin' Louisiana-style morsel of the stuff."

"Any advice from you is damn welcome."

"Quit kissin' my ass and listen."

"Yes, sir."

"Publish, son. Publish."

"Yes, sir." The Candidate repeated as he smiled obediently.

"Quit kissin' my ass, I said. Just publish. Then you'll have nothing to worry about.

*Publish.* As soon as you possibly can."

"Now, sir?" The Candidate buckled his eyebrows in confusion.

"Now?" Brown looked surprised.

"I'm not sure I have enough material yet."

"I didn't say nothin' about no *now*."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Look. Just publish. Not now. Not tomorrow. Just publish!"

The Candidate thanked Brown and walked away.

As he walked down the hall one big question loomed in his mind. Where should he begin? Starting up a lab in any field of science was always tough. It was tough for Newton, it was tough for Curie, and it was tough for Sagan. No doubt it would be even tougher for him, since everyone knew that most things had already been discovered. There were very few questions left to answer or even address. Artificial life and immortality were said to be just around the corner. The universe was old hat. So, too, was the electron. Even the mighty quark had become a closed book. The one remaining quandary was that of God, but that was for the theologians to quibble over. If God couldn't be isolated in a flask or analyzed by a spectrometer, He wasn't even worth thinking about.

In his ten years studying at the finest schools in America he'd least *a few things*. Results were always controversial. Good results made enemies and enemies stood in the way of promotion. Bad results made you the laughing stock of the scientific community. Results of any kind were a definite *no no*. That much he knew. What you had to do these days was look good. You had to be able to make people think you were on the verge of great results without ever actually getting them. You also had to have a lot of flashy equipment. Your whole operation had to have the hustle and bustle of those overbooked aerobics classes in huge downtown gymnasiums. You also needed exposure. Major corporations needed to be perceived as being interested in your work. Smart industrialists in tight grey suits - shoulders white with dandruff - had to be seen lining up at your office door every morning for tours of the lab.

A week after his appointment, the university granted him a five hundred thousand dollars to get things rolling and he was off to the races. Over the next month he bought equipment. Lots of it. He flipped through the science catalogues day and night picking out the most elaborate contraptions he could find. The loading bay of Western Polytechnic's shipping and receiving building buzzed with greater intensity than had ever been seen before. He ordered samples of every element on the periodic table. He filled

his labs with drums of toxic fluids, canisters of exotic gases, and bottles of strange and explosive chemicals. He bought biogens, antigens, mutagens, and virtually every other item he could find listed in the major supply catalogues. He was determined to be a success and to be a success you needed to *have it all*. In what seemed like no time his lab was stacked to the roof with scientific equipment and unopened boxes. It was so cluttered it was almost impossible to walk through without knocking something over.

“My goodness,” said Hedges one day as he was puffing on his pipe. “You’ve got hardly any room in here to do any science. It’s appalling. How do they expect you to get anything done in this little broom closet of a lab?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“We used to give our new appointees labs three times this size.”

“I’m just doing my best with what I have.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” said Hedges as he scanned the room one last time. “You need more space without a doubt. And you know what? The lab next door is virtually empty. Technically it belongs to Benson.” He shook his head in disgust. “But to be honest I haven’t seen a single person in there for the last five years.”

The next day The Candidate unpacked his equipment and filled the empty boxes with old bottles and iron bars he found in the basement. He neatly retaped the boxes to make them look unopened. Now, he thought, there really was no room. When he finished Benson walked in.

“Hey, man. I hear you need some space.”

“It’s just that I’ve got so much equipment...”

“I’m already claustrophobic. You would have been better off just filling the room floor to ceiling with cement.”

“I can’t see how that would have...”

“Look,” said Benson. “We all need some space. Inner space. Outer space. It’s all the same. To be honest, I’d rather not have that lab next door. It’s too far from my office and the view of the sorority houses is horrible. If I give this one to you maybe I can push the department into giving me one of the labs in the west wing with the groovy view out onto the quad. The babes here in spring are just amazing!” He pumped his knees and played an air guitar lick. “Speaking of which, there’s some southern belle coming tomorrow with a view towards making huge donations to science.” The Candidate smiled eagerly as Benson continued. Perhaps this was his chance to get his first grant. “We can’t let her get the impression we treat our young scientists like this or she won’t give us a cent.”

“If you could be so kind...” The Candidate said as he blinked his eyes in contrition.

“Consider it done.”

The Candidate spent the next day in his new lab space throwing out all the boxes and hiding his equipment in closets and under the sinks. When the lab looked virtually empty he was satisfied that he was ready for the visit.

“It’s really quite sad,” said The Candidate the next day to Dessie McCaul, who had just stepped off the plane from Texas. She wore a white straw cowboy hat and used a golden lasso for a belt. “All we scientists want is knowledge and truth,” The Candidate went on in the mournful tone of a priest in a village of lepers. “But I guess society just isn’t interested. So we’ll just have to go our own lonely way and make best of the few

pennies thrown our way.” He walked her through his labs and gestured out to the empty grey expanses of the room. “It’s just so tough to get equipment.”

“Golly, you poor thang,” she said, her breath a wall of alcohol. The Candidate had read her portfolio. She was a recent widow of a Texas oil king known to make massive donations to any charity – from 4-H Club to Aryan Nations - after just a few vodkas. The scuttlebutt said she drank so much *Smirnoff* she was a walking billboard for the stuff, more effective than all the Borzois and Tsars their advertising campaign usually milked for sales. “How can you fahnd the truth if you got nothin’ to look at it with?”

“If only...”

“If only what?”

“If only. No, Ma’am, I shouldn’t be so greedy as to expect...”

“You southern boys are so sweet and modest. What do you want, honey? Just tell me. Whisper it in my ear.”

“I couldn’t.”

“You sure could, honey.”

“It’s so expensive, though. You really don’t...”

“You poor dear. You’re havin’ yourself such a hard time. You name it and I’ll buy it for you.”

“I feel so embarrassed and guilty, Ma’am. It’s just that the project can’t continue unless we buy a mass spectrometer.”

“A what?”

“A mass spectrometer.”

“Awe. That sounds so sweet. How much is it, darlin’? I couldn’t see you goin’ without one of them *mossy spect-rascles*. It just wouldn’t be right.”

“You’re too kind. You don’t know what this means to us.”

The Candidate smiled with deep satisfaction, the corners of his mouth rising high enough to touch the upper ridge of his cheekbone, as she pulled out her cheque book.

A week later The Candidate hired two Japanese men as research assistants. Their names were Nakahira and Monashi and they were unemployed actors of the Noh theatre. To get big in the science world, you didn’t just need equipment, you also needed big-time industrial contacts. And Asia was where the money was. Always appearing to be on the verge of landing Japanese money was the first step to true success.

“Now men. I want you to come in every morning and knock on whatever door you can find. Just tell them that you’ve come to fund my research.”

They smiled deferentially and bowed in tandem.

“You can start tomorrow,” said The Candidate.

The two men turned and walked out of his office.

The next day they showed up in matching black suits, each with a shiny black brief case. They started with Gables. “I am from Mitsubishi,” Monashi said as he stood at the door of his office. “We are looking to fund the new appointee’s research.”

“So soon?”

“Soon? Your have to keep your ears to the wind. He is already a household name in Japan.” Monashi’s eyes widened and he spread out his arms in a gesture of uninhibited veneration. “In the mind of many back home he is the smartest man to pass through the turnstiles of science in years.”

“But he just started,” Gables said in disbelief. Was there some watershed publication that he somehow missed? “I’m not aware of him publishing anything yet.”

“He hasn’t yet, but he will. We at Mitsubishi have an untarnished record of always funding the best.”

During his first semester his teaching load was light. His only responsibility was to teach a small course on the history of science to general arts students. Since preparation and teaching combined only took up a few afternoons a week, he had hours of extra time every day to plan the expansion of his scientific empire. By the end of the first term he already had seven undergraduates working for him. Although they didn’t yet have specific projects, he’d still have meetings every day - investment seminars of sorts - in which he underlined the key aspects of becoming a respected laboratory worker. It was best, he reasoned, to inundate them with lectures to set them on the right path and instill them with the right attitudes rather than throw them directly into research while letting their bad habits propagate. He also taught them the ropes of *space days* and *equipment days*. On a space day he’d order them to stack his labs to the roof with boxes, outdated equipment, and anything they could find that was likely to make the lab look cramped beyond habitation. Then he’d complain to the department that he had too much equipment for the miniscule laboratories the university had allotted him. It had worked once, so why not make a habit of it? With a little pressure, they would always grant him an extra lab to accommodate his needs. *Equipment days* were exactly the opposite of *space days*. When potential investors came through for a tour, The Candidate would hide all of the equipment in broom closets and bathroom stalls to give the impression that the great American dream of his future scientific enterprise was scandalously under funded and in desperate need of support. And if they wouldn’t cough up the cash there were always the untapped university accounts that were hidden away for emergencies or earmarked for future expansion projects.

A week after he gave his first exam, The Candidate finally met the new chairman Professor Lapoisie who had just come back from his sabbatical in Italy. The Candidate was walking down the hall cradling a stack of textbooks in his arms when Lapoisie stepped out of the bathroom with his head down and slammed directly into him, knocking his books all over the floor.

“Who are you?” Lapoisie asked with rude indifference. “How dare you bump into me. Who gave you permission to be in this building? Now I can’t remember what I was thinking about. People have no respect anymore. No respect at all.”

Lapoisie was tanned all over, even on his palms and in the socket of his eyes. He had a deep furrow in his forehead and a neatly trimmed beard that might be called a goatee if it weren’t for his conservative dress style. He was thin in his limbs but his stomach bulged so far out he looked like an advanced species of marsupial yet to find its way into the terrestrial gene pool. Educated at the Sorbonne he was a man short of few skills and graces, known to shoot billiards with ex-presidents and spend summers yachting in the Mediterranean with the likes of Sofia Loren and David Beckham. While some took this as evidence of snobbery, Lapoisie was fascinated by famous people from all walks of life, a true student of acclaimed humanity regardless their upbringing or class. A small-town gardener in Memphis once made it to the cover of *People* for developing a new strain of wheat with built in beauty promoting peptides and Lapoisie was on the plane the very next day to congratulate him. There was something of the outlaw in every famous

person that intrigued him. And that was what Lapoisse was searching for. Even Mother Theresa was a bit of an eight ball, he'd say. You had to be to get famous. You have to go against the grain. The Catholic Church was so misogynistic and its power structure so deep and impenetrable, she must have had a little *Machine Gun Kelly* in her to get as far as she did.

"I'm so terribly sorry, sir," said The Candidate as he knelt down to pick up the textbooks. He looked up at Lapoisse. "Was it animal, vegetable, or mineral?"

"What?"

"What you were thinking about."

"What effrontery. How should I know? I can't even remember anymore."

"Perhaps it was..."

"No. It wasn't."

"What about..."

"Listen, young man. I don't know who you are but why do you insist on pretending that you can somehow read my mind and tell me what I can't even remember?"

"I'm just trying to help, sir."

"Help? With what? Are you some kind of clairvoyant?" The chairman's interest suddenly perked up. What if this dapper young man actually *was* a clairvoyant? What if he was a famous key bender from Eastern Europe? Yes, who indeed was this white-clad fellow that just bumped into him? What was *his* claim to fame?

"No, sir. I'm the new appointee, sir. I'm very pleased to meet you." The Candidate extended his hand, but Lapoisse shrunk away in contempt.

"Is that your only claim to fame? Don't waste my time any further." So what if he was the new appointee, what had he done to deserve attention? Lapoisse had absolutely no time for the quotidian. There were far too many rags to riches stories happening every day to waste his time with nobodies.

"But sir," The Candidate pleaded. "When I was ten I set the record for the number of cub scout badges you could fit on one arm."

"Interesting, but *only interesting*. So I can't say it qualifies you to be worthy of my attention."

By this time The Candidate had picked up the books and was slowly stepping backwards in an effort to break off the conversation. He was already late for his lecture.

"I'm so very pleased to have made your acquaintance, but I really have to go, sir."

"*Go!* That was it. Thanks for reminding me. I was thinking about making an appointment with last year's *Go* world champion. I've already met Bobby Fisher and the world *Monopoly* champion. They were such a disappointment."

Lapoisse rushed down the hall with the enthusiasm of a child stepping out for recess on the last day of school. He was in ecstasy. Nothing made him happier than the possibility of meeting someone famous.

"You're going to make it, kid," said Lapoisse in a singsong voice as he skipped down the hall. "When I first met you I wasn't too sure. Now I can feel it. If there's one thing I can sniff out, it's fame. You're going to be the James Dean of science. *Take me to the five and dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean!*"

"Thanks sir!" said The Candidate. He was overjoyed. Gaining acceptance from your colleagues was one of the most important keys to success. With Lapoisse on his side he was surely one step closer to promotion and advancement.

## 5. Review Reviews

The Candidate took daily inventory of his ever-expanding laboratory. Dizzying octopuses of glass and wire spread their arms across myriad workbenches, each heaped to capacity with bizarre scientific instruments and opaque vials of corrosive and radioactive substances. Machines hummed and whirred to every pitch audible to the human ear. Spectrometers ticked away into the depths of the night, probing sample after sample for some shred of precious information that might give some further clue to its ultimate composition. He already commanded five labs - a third of an entire floor – and was already receiving phone calls from oil companies across the nation eager to fund his expanding research operation.

In spite of his success, however, he was still worried about publications. Without anything in print he would soon be seen as a failure and repossession agencies would be lining up at his door to reclaim the precious founding stones of his fledgling empire. But, how could you publish without results? Although he'd already received half a dozen grants to *start* projects, he was wary of letting out the intimate details of his results lest he undermine his chances at a patent, or worse, make waves by seeming too clever or ingenious.

One day he walked down the hall to ask Zhitnik for advice.

"I'm having a bit of a publication lag, sir."

"Ah. Publications," he said. He raised his index finger in caution. "Be careful."

"Yes. You can publish only the best."

"No. It's not that."

"What, then?"

"Have you noticed how many packages were delivered last month?"

"No, sir."

"Do you agree that on the average there should be as many packages delivered by UPS as picked up?"

"I guess I do, sir."

"You should. I have worked long and hard on this problem and I have come to the conclusion that it's a universal law. If there were an imbalance the universe would collapse. You'd be making matter out of nothing. Where would all those extra packages come from? Aliens don't send us china bowls for our birthdays, now do they?"

"No, sir. Or, at least I haven't ever gotten a gift from a space alien. Come to think of it, I can't recall anyone ever getting such a parcel."

"And have you ever heard of a package vanishing in thin air? Could you imagine going to bed on Christmas Eve with gifts all stuffed under the tree only to wake up the next morning to find that those pretty little boxes have all vaporised into clouds of nothingness?"

"That would be horrible, sir. Just think of all the poor little children..."

"It would not only be horrible, but it would also violate all laws of conservation of matter."

"Oh, of course...that too, sir."

“This month I’ve counted that twenty more packages left the premises than were delivered. I’ve applied every statistical test known to man and the results are always the same. This is no accident.”

“My.” The Candidate’s eyes glowed in wonder. “It really makes you think, doesn’t it?”

Zhitnik closed the door of his office and his voice dropped to a hush.

“There is an information leak. UPS is stealing our work. There are spies amongst us.”

“Spies?” The Candidate raised his eyebrows in suspicion.

“Yes. They’re getting ready for *the big one*.” Zhitnik’s voice was heavy and grave like a prophet foretelling the coming of a great famine. He imagined a sky filled with shiny brown warheads – painted in the same color scheme as their menacing trucks - metallic gold lettering on each nose cone etching out those fatal letters *U P S*. In any battle they’d be intrepid, if not deadly. Not even British Telecom with all its armies of operators, all polite, sophisticated, and English, armed with warehouses of fibre optic cables, could stop them. UPS would blast a missile at Tokyo. It would disappear for weeks on end. Then one day it would mysteriously reappear - a brown needle of doom - over the skies of New York. And nobody would be able to track it in-between. Not even UPS. Worse, their claims department would accidentally end up sending the customs declaration forms to Tokyo. It was a nightmare waiting to happen, a tab of bad acid in the hands of some shaggy-haired speed freak like Benson just waiting to be swallowed. The skies would be brown and gold with terror.

“All of the delivery mistakes they’ve been making,” Zhitnik paused and took a cautious breath before continuing. “The frightening thing about them is that it isn’t just incompetence. I fear there is something far more perfidious at work - a satanic grindstone of duplicity crunching away somewhere in the bowels of the earth.” Zhitnik knew how UPS operated. Although they rarely, if ever, had delivered a parcel for him without something going wrong, he was always getting customs forms for other people’s shipments. Perhaps one day he’d even get a parcel meant for Zorton. He swore if this ever happened he would surprise them by accepting the taunting package – no matter how dangerous the contents might be - and use it to lure the enigmatic man out of the fold.

“Excuse my ignorance, sir.” The Candidate shrugged his shoulders in confusion. “I just...”

“Be careful.” Zhitnik raised his index finger a second time. “I’ve said enough, my boy. Just be wary. If you plan to publish, stay clear from anyone with a brown suit and an electronic signature device. They’ll make you think you’re someone else in an effort to drive you crazy. They might even make you think you’re Zorton. Don’t let them, my boy. That’s my final word.” By this time, his voice had dropped to an almost inaudible scratch.

The next morning The Candidate woke up and looked out the window. Rain filled the streets and the hiss of all those millions of tiny droplets hitting the streets in turn filled his ears. He put on his suit and knotted his tie. He selected his finest patent leather shoes from the bottom drawer of his dresser and slipped them on. When he was satisfied he looked good enough to tackle the events of the day he looked out into the streets through the vast picture window of his living room and quickly closed the curtains. Something

wasn't right. He'd been at Western Polytechnic for over six months and he hadn't had a single publication. Brown was right. He'd never get a promotion without anything in print.

He drove into work and greeted everyone as usual. When he stepped into his office he noticed an old copy of *The New York Review of Books* on his desk. It must have been Wilson, he thought. Wilson was a self-conscious artsy undergraduate who often wore an electric-blue beret. The Candidate had given him the keys to his office the night before so he could use the computer and finish a lab report.

The Candidate opened up the tabloid and flipped through the crisp yellowed pages. Why would anybody want to review a book? Reading them was bad enough. Books were even worse than science journals. But maybe that was the point. If you read a book review you could claim to have read the book but it only took a hundredth of the time. And that meant you could claim to have read a hundred times as many books. As The Candidate set the tabloid back down on his desk an idea came to him, suddenly appearing in his mind as if from nowhere. He could write review articles. That was the answer. That was his key to success. Review articles showed depth and scope of understanding. In a scientific world where men and women slaved away like voles burrowing through endless passages of earth, it was always an asset to show you had *vision*. You had to show the community you understood where a field had gone in the past and propose where it might or should go in the future. All the great scientists had the ability to see a research area as a whole rather than as a series of isolated events occurring in the dark basements of universities around the world. It was more important politically - and easier - to publish a well-cited review in an area than to actually conduct groundbreaking research in it.

Over the next two weeks he worked hard, often writing late into the night, but came up with nothing. All the topics he chose to review had either already been reviewed or were in areas dominated by the most powerful men in science. If he reviewed their work they would certainly take him for a phoney. They might initially be flattered, but then they'd turn around and shove a knife in his back at some conference he wasn't attending. Yes, there were places in the American scientific community that you wouldn't want to go without a gun.

One night, the plumes of hair on his sculpted head drooping with anxious sweat, he started thinking again. Outside of the main journals - where all of the established scientists sent their best work - most review articles were published in obscure internet journals that no one ever read and rarely made it into print. These journals were always cited in literature searches but attempts to actually locate them were difficult if not impossible. Libraries never stocked them. They were far too expensive. You might as well go searching for the Yeti in the Sahara than try to find *Reviews of the Greek Association for Ceramics and Industrial Materials Proceedings*. But this was their strength. If nobody ever read them or could ever even find them, than why write an article at all? It was just stupidity and waste. In a world so preoccupied with environmental problems it was the best idea to avoid waste of any kind. In this respect, he was definitely *green* in his worldview. Yes, it was enough to say that you had written such an article rather than to take the trouble to actually write it. And to avoid the slim chance that an editor of such a review journal found him claiming to have written an

article when he really hadn't, he'd simply make up journal titles. If nobody read these apocryphal publications, how would anybody ever find out?

He got to work immediately, making up all sorts of names of journals and articles. What made everything even easier was that journal titles always appeared in abbreviated format on publication lists and most of the abbreviations didn't bear any direct relationship to any word that had ever appeared in any dictionary. So, what seemed like painstaking work at first was reduced to nothing more than a simple entertaining word game.

"Tony bony bambony banana fana fan fony..." he sang merrily one morning as he carefully put together his publication list. It took him a mere thirty minutes, a millionth of the time it would have taken to actually write such arduous and dull pieces. There was the iconic *Zhit. Nev. Che. Fork. Rev.*, the slightly more obscure *Borg. Snok. Filo. Bird. Com.* (special edition, invited authors only), and the Earth shaking *Fe. Fi. Fo. Fum.* Then there were the industry-related publications: *Phi. Kappa. Gamma. Ind. Rev.* and *Jap. Ind. Rev.* as well as the more general, but no less comprehensive *Jap.*

The next day he sent out a copy of his publication list, now over fifty articles long, to all the major companies in America and Japan. He also sent copies to the chairmen of all the world's finest universities. He sent them to the grant funding agencies, schools, newspapers, anywhere he could think of. This was his coming out party. The entire world had to know how well he was doing. That very afternoon he contacted *New Scientist* and invited them to his labs for an interview, suggesting that they write a feature on how rapidly his publication list was growing. The next week they sent over a balding Italian American photographer nicknamed "Hutchi" who always scratched his armpits and blew his nose as he spoke.

"Lets take a few shots of some people in action. No. I've got a better idea. Science is dull. Every scientist I ever met plays more golf than he talks about science. Why not get a shot of you with a golf club putting in the middle of your lab? It'll be a hit for sure!"

"Whatever you say, sir."

"We have to sell magazines too. Most scientists are so sick of science they'd never bother to subscribe unless there was at least a few pages on golf or anything else at least a little more exciting than *science*." He said the word *science* as if it were something heinous, like the clap or scabies.

"I couldn't agree more strongly, sir."

A few months later *New Scientist* published a two-page spread of The Candidate holding a nine wood as he posed beside his new mass spectrometer. In the bottom right hand corner was a small blurb on his work. Although the coverage was only two pages, it was certainly a start. How many young scientists got a page - or even a sentence - in such a prestigious journal? In only a few weeks, bouquets of compliments started coming in from the World's finest universities exclaiming how amazing it was that he'd been able to accomplish so much in such a short time. And to have so many papers in some of the most specialised journals on the planet was just another testament to his spawning greatness.

The Candidate was so excited he went to find Benson. He was sitting in his office, hair loose and falling down his shoulders, holding a Rubik's cube in his palm. The Candidate noticed a pungent vegetal smell as he stepped up to Benson's desk. Theresa

crawled out from under his desk. Her hair was styled Medusa-like and there was an eye painted on her forehead. She smiled proudly and walked out of the room.

"Please excuse the avocado smell," Benson said. "It's her newest perfume. She got it from a mail order company in Seattle. I love it."

"I didn't notice, sir."

"I saw your picture in *New Scientist* a few weeks ago. Good work!"

"Thank you."

"You've also got a lot of those groovy Japanese dudes just crawling the place hoping to get a moment with you. A day doesn't pass when they don't bang on my door."

"I'm so sorry, sir. I'll try to give them better directions next time."

"You must be doing well to have all that interest in your work. But you have to branch out and try and reach more companies than just Mitsubishi."

"I'll try my best, sir."

"So, what's on your mind?"

"I was thinking last night. I've got a new idea for a review."

"A review article? Far out."

"That's right, sir."

"On what?"

The Candidate paused and scratched his head. For some reason he couldn't remember what his idea was. It seemed so good the night before, but now it was just a mental fog. "On reviews," he finally said to fill the silence. The answer was as good as any.

"What?" Benson looked surprised.

"A review of all reviews," he continued to ad lib, sensing Benson's enthusiasm. "There's just so many out there that you can't keep track of them. So I want to review all reviews every month so it's easier to find them."

"Just like the set of all sets. Is it a member of itself? That's the main question. Bertrand Russell could never figure it out."

"I never thought of that, sir. Do I cite the review of all reviews in its own list of references?" He leaned against the wall and scratched his head. This was going to be difficult.

"I wouldn't bother. Just keep it to yourself, though. It's a great idea, but don't let that straight-ass Hedges get his hands on it. Just be forewarned. He'll steal it and claim he thought of it first."

"I'll make note of that, sir."

Benson opened up his desk and pulled out a small green crystal. He handed it to The Candidate.

"Not to change the topic, but how does this make you feel?" asked Benson.

"Feel? I'm not sure I understand what you're getting at. Good I guess. Happy that you just gave me a present."

"You see, you feel good. That's exactly what I'm getting at."

"I'm sorry?"

"Let me explain. It's like this. The sample in your hand is gallium arsenide with very low gallium content. It made you experience a certain sense of joy, didn't it?"

"Yes."

“Well, I felt the same. But when I made up a crystal of a different composition, rich in gallium and low in arsenic, all I felt was terror. Sheer, blind terror. It was so overpowering that I had to pick up a chair and run into a corner to protect myself.”

“Terror? Why didn’t you call the police?”

“What do they know? But to be fair, what does anyone know? Don’t you see? I’m on the frontier of an entirely new field. Most people think gallium arsenide is a semiconductor, but one thing all science has failed to notice is how it makes you feel. We’ve run studies on dozens of samples of varying concentrations and tested them on subjects from every ethnic origin and sexual orientation in the book. The results are always the same. Some compositions make you sad - even suicidal. Others make you angry and pound your fist with rage on the desk. The thing is...it’s all repeatable!”

“That’s fascinating sir. That means if you coated the walls of everyone’s house with the right material people would be happy all the time.”

“So, so true. But then there’s the yang of it. The dark side. Shiva’s death dance. This shit could be used in wars to bring entire nations to the brink of suicide! A blessing in one hand...an atrocity in another. That’s why I’m not so sure what to do. But one thing I do know. This is some groovy shit!”

Benson looked down at his watch. “I’ve gotta fuck off, man,” he said. “I’m late for an appointment.”

They left his office together. The Candidate followed him halfway down the hall before deciding to turn back and go for lunch. The avocado scent from Benson’s office had made him hungry for Mexican food.

After a quick burrito, The Candidate went to see Gables in his office. Maybe Benson was right and he had inadvertently stumbled on something big. Gables had just come back from a game of tennis with Ginger and had a brilliant white towel draped over his shoulders.

“A review of reviews? Sounds stimulating to say the least. It reminds me of the days when I was a postdoc at Imperial and I’d go out to write theatre reviews for extra money.” He smiled and looked wistfully off in space. “Ah...if I could do it all again. The smell of broken pencil lead in the air, a cup of lukewarm tea in my hand, and a lovely English rose singing opera in my bedroom...”

“It sounds...”

“Wonderful. I’ll have to tell you more some time. But right now I have some marking to do.” He looked at a stack of papers on his desk. Then he looked back at The Candidate. “Great idea,” he said encouragingly. Then he turned his head as if to signal for The Candidate to leave.

The Candidate started working on the new review article immediately. He was sure it was going to be a hit. First, he assigned Nakahira and Monashi to library duties. “From now on,” he said to the two men, “you’ll walk into the library every day posing as visitors from *different* companies. They’re getting sick of hearing about Mitsubishi. It’s time to try something new.” He handed them a box filled with dozens of wigs and fake beards and moustaches.

“Very good,” said Nakahira.

“Very, *very* good,” said Monashi. “We Noh actors hardly get any job offers any more.”

“That’s why you’re called *No* actors. Because you get so little work people can hardly call you actors at all. Noh actors - *no* actors. Get it?”

“You are so humorous, sir,” said Monashi gracefully.

“Just make sure you disguise differently each day and say you’re from a different company. I’ll pay you twenty dollars an hour out of my research budget.”

“Thank you. You are so honourable,” said Monashi as he bowed.

The next morning Nakahira and Monashi walked into the library in matching blue suits and brown brief cases.

“We are from *Pho Tung Yap Industries*,” Monashi said to Abigail Horton at the entrance desk. Nakahira nodded and smiled in the background. “We are visiting with your new appointee and would like to research his voluminous publications in your library, if you could be so kind.”

“Why, certainly,” she said. “If you need a hand don’t hesitate to ask.”

Nakahira and Monashi vanished behind a row of books. When they were sure they were out of view Nakahira produced a pocket computer game from his suit and Monashi pulled a pair of chairs over from a nearby desk.

“Nothing like a steady acting job,” said Nakahira.

“Sure beats working for HBO,” Monashi replied as he grabbed the computer game from Nakahira’s hands and took a seat.

## 6. Sonic Incorporated

Stage after stage of the mighty fuselage fell from the sky, each spent fuel cylinder blossoming into an exotic white flower of fire as the rocket ripped faster and faster through the thinning stratosphere. The Candidate’s reputation grew with every passing second. *Review Reviews* was well on the way to becoming an instant success. Every Friday Nakahira and Monashi culled together a list of every review published in every scientific area that week. To that they’d add The Candidate’s ever growing mass of landmark reviews, always listing them first and bulleting them to make them look more important than all the others. After just a few short phone calls, The Candidate managed to secure a publication deal.

“We just have so many publication offers,” he said on the phone one morning. “It’s just that *Elsevier* is the world leader in science publications and we want to give you the chance to keep it that way...”

“All right,” shouted the editor. “Just leave us alone. This has got to be the tenth time you’ve phoned in the last week alone.”

“I just don’t want you to miss the chance.”

“What, to get rid of you?”

“I’m so honored, sir,” said The Candidate. With a big scientific publisher like *Elsevier* on board, *Review Reviews* was sure to be a hit.

The next day The Candidate was sitting in his office smoking a six-inch cigarillo as he went over a recent grant proposal. His labs were getting so cramped with all the new equipment he didn't know how much longer he could hold out before it was time for another *space day*.

The phone rang.

He picked it up. A deep muffled presence coughed on the other end.

"Hello," said The Candidate.

"Yes," said the voice. "This is Jed Henderson from *Sonic Incorporated*."

The Candidate scratched his head. Although he had never heard of them, he reasoned anything with the word *incorporated* in it couldn't be all bad. "I've heard so much about you," he said, salivating like a dog in front of a fresh steak.

"Yes, we're an ever-expanding enterprise. And with your growing reputation I'm not surprised that you've heard our name before."

"Thank you, sir. What can I do for you?"

"Well, we don't want to sound fulsome, but it's so rare that a man like you comes along in science. You see, in industry, we're just dying for that one scientist that speaks our language. I know most academics complain about how all we care about is money and profit margins, but we complain that academics are all a bunch of stuffy old farts."

"Many are. You're so very correct on that issue."

"Yes. But we really need the universities and their expertise to help us achieve our goals. It's just that so many of the brightest minds are doing research that we find neither innovative or valuable."

"I hope you don't think that of me. I try my best to do the most innovative and valuable of all research."

"So we hear. We're so sick of all those wispy old professors with their stupid little theories and dusty old chalk boards. They're going the way of the steam engine. They're the scum of society - like heroin addicts, pimps, artists, and snuff-film directors - living off public money so they can masturbate to the drum beat of their own fake success story."

"I can't argue with that."

"You just seem to know what it takes. You're plugged in. You're real." Henderson cleared his throat and paused before continuing. "What I'm getting at," he said, "is that we'd like to back your work."

"I'm so very honoured," said The Candidate in the strongest, sweetest southern accent he could find. "It's just that we have so very little lab space. Since I'm so new here the department is unwilling to let me have any more than a few labs. That's hardly enough, given my plans to expand to meet the demands of the money that's pouring in."

"Aren't there any unoccupied buildings? You hear about departments closing all the time."

"Not that I've heard."

"Hmmm. This sounds like it could be a problem. We were looking forward so much to working with you. Isn't there *another solution*?"

"I'm not so sure I understand what you're getting at."

"Well, let me be blunt with you. We're prepared to invest at least a million dollars into your work every year over the next five years - of course you will have to write

formal proposals for our records - and it seems that Western Polytechnic could really use the overheads from this. What are they now?"

"Fifty percent."

"Half of a million is five hundred thousand."

"It sure is."

"Don't you think - all respect to the arts intended - that...well, I actually just took my daughter out to see the *Guns N Roses* last week. True artists, don't you agree?"

"Oh, without a doubt."

"No one can ever say Jed Henderson doesn't support the arts."

"They sure can't."

"Anyway. Without seeming crass, why not just expand into some arts building? You could completely annex the space occupied by some dying department like Drama or Art History. I bet they don't bring a dime to the universities. Just get the President to shuffle them off to the basement of some old warehouse - isn't there an abandoned Seven Eleven just across the street? That would be perfect. And if they complain, just give me a call. We have ways of being very persuasive with our clients."

"How generous of you. That will certainly bring in a lot of money to the university. And maybe with that kind of cash they can even build new arts buildings for them somewhere down the road."

"Yes. That's it. Now you're thinking! In a manner of speaking, anyway."

The Candidate smiled into the receiver. He could hardly believe his luck.

Three weeks later a fleet of orange moving trucks arrived on the grounds of Western Polytechnic. The Candidate stood outside the fine arts building and watched them unload two three-story cranes and what looked like enough scaffolding to scale the side of the Empire State Building. He walked inside, passing a few construction workers dressed in bright yellow jackets on his way. The corridors of the building were strangely empty, lacking any visible sign of life. Students and professors alike were missing, nowhere to be found. The Candidate left the building and sat down on a bench across the quad to watch the construction team go to work. He felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Brown. He was carrying a soup ladle in one hand and a dead rabbit in the other.

"Just went huntin'," he said. "Gonna cook me up some rabbit soup in the lab."

"That's one nice rabbit, sir."

"Yep. Can't say I disagree. Just shot him a few minutes ago. Some fat guy in a lab coat was chasing it around in a parking lot, trying to catch it. I picked it off with my twenty-two from a hundred yards away. When Minnesota Fats heard the gun he ran off like a rutting walrus. One less rabbit to run through a maze, one more meal for me, I say."

A sound like a thousand diesel engines suddenly filled the air.

"Have you ever seen such wonderful machines?" asked The Candidate, pointing over to the pair of bright orange cranes, their necks swooping through the crisp clear air.

"I was gonna ask you about that. What the hell is going on here?"

"I'm moving my labs."

"Into this building? This is where all those artists hang out being all modern and stuff." When he said "stuff" he pumped his hips and pointed to his crotch.

"I guess they all left."

“Good. The place is better off without them. If I had it my way we’d take over the whole campus.”

“You have such vision, sir.”

Brown nodded and walked away in the direction of the science quad.

By the next morning droves of arts students and professors lined up to demonstrate in front of the administration building. Half a dozen drama professors had already written letters to the campus newspaper. What would they do now that the entire fine arts program at Western Polytechnic was slashed? A few days later the protesters vanished without a trace. A week after that the president of the university drove into campus in a brand new Ferrari and announced his retirement.

No doubt, reasoned The Candidate as he was admiring the renovation job done on the old fine arts building, *Sonic Incorporated* had hired the entire fine arts faculty and sent them off to work on charity art projects in strange and distant countries like Madagascar and Thailand where they could make more of a global impact. Yes, The Candidate had a good feeling about Jed Henderson and his company. All those professors and students - maybe even the retired President - were probably having the time of their lives painting avant garde wall murals on the sides of former communist prisons thanks to *Sonic Incorporated*. A faint voice inside him whispered that there might be something more to the situation, something darker and more treacherous that he didn’t want to deal with, but he quickly brushed it away as he would an autumn wasp. After all, Western Polytechnic seemed like an institution that looked after its own and who was he to question the will of the higher administration? He felt calm and happy inside as he watched the cranes put the finishing touches on the renovations for what were soon going to be his new labs.

A few weeks later he was just waking up and getting out of bed when a strange feeling came over him. His head was pounding, but he wasn’t sick or hung over. His limbs felt slow and creaky, but he wasn’t tired. He dressed and fixed himself a piece of toast. For the first time in his short career he felt something like dread at the thought of going into work. Perhaps a let down period was bound to happen after the jubilation of his sudden success. As he drove into work, he felt dull and frightfully average. He felt like everyone else must feel every day when they woke up. He felt dirty and plain. Science wasn’t all fun and games, he was slowly beginning to realise. To be a great scientist you had to learn how to work with people. You had to tolerate your colleague’s mediocrity and lack of taste. You had to put up with people like Benson walking down the hall in hideous striped polyester shirts that were only in style for ten minutes before ending up in Third World delivery bins for liquidation. You had to go to meetings with the likes of Gables, who would sit across the conference table grooming his blow dried hair while he pretended to be interested in things like the number of chairs that had to be put into the main lecture theatre. You had to play psychiatrist to men like Zhitnik and pay false homage to the puffed-up likes of Hedges and Lapoisse. You even had to teach courses with people like Brown, who went on half hour tangents on bounty hunting through the deepest gulches of Texas for Mexican alligator thieves or renegade ass-bandits escaped from some summer ballet camp or beauty school.

The Candidate parked his car and collected his course notes. Just as he was about to start his lecture he heard a shout from the center of the auditorium.

“Sorry?” he said.

“Why don’t you tell funny stories like Professor Brown,” a young female student wearing a bright pink mini skirt asked him one day after class. The students loved Brown’s stories. They had the flavour of old western myth or southern fable. Men hunted down on all sides, tormented with lust and greed, afflicted with an insatiable thirst for gambling and women, secretly searching for God in a bottle of Tequila at five in the morning under the blood red dawn. In his tales crazed outlaws would scurry like dogs across deserts and dried lakes before hiding out in swamps from villainous sheriffs and their fat whoring posse as they screamed at the moon for redemption. Native women, horny old squaws he would call them, would always appear at the end of his stories, often in groups of seven to ten, totally naked, just as the last bullets were about to vanquish the dying hunted outlaws.

“Don’t you like science?” The Candidate asked the student.

“No. It’s too dull. I know who’s getting the better teaching review.”

“What if I bring a bowl of candy to every class?”

“Are you trying to groom me to be your sex slave? You’d better hope I don’t tell the Dean!”

The class broke out in a tidal wave of laughter that slowly subsided into the odd giggle or simpering face from the dark ocean of the lecture theatre as he stumbled his way through his notes to the end of class. The warning bell could not have come sooner.

After answering a round of questions The Candidate felt mocked and humiliated. There was nothing he could do. Bribing his students would only drive his career to ruins. The only solution was to climb so high up the university ladder he’d never have to teach again. To do that he needed military contacts. Then he could become chairman, the dean, and eventually the president of the whole university. Only then would he be free from the enslavement of his colleagues. No. Academia with all its promise of intellectual freedom and random petticoat upliftings offered little more autonomy than a trip to your local prison. It was just a different kind of prison.

Later that night The Candidate was sitting in his office waiting for a UPS shipment - a field emission gun for an electron microscope. Now that he had moved into the renovated arts building he had acres of empty space that needed filling. Why anybody would want to look at electrons, he didn’t know. All he knew was that you had to have a field emission gun on your electron microscope to be competitive. The hustle and bustle of the campus by day had tapered into a peaceful silence. Not a single Japanese industrialist or UPS delivery man could be seen in the hallway. The Candidate pulled open his door and sat down in his office chair. It was getting late and he was starting to think that he might be better off at home reading the newest laser spectroscopy catalogue. There was nothing like a new laser to impress your colleagues and garner points for promotion. He already had six of them although he couldn’t quite figure out how to fit them in his research program. But boy did they look good and they sure kept the grant wheels rolling. That’s what the corporate executives liked. A few laser blasts, a big steaming lunch, and a few drinks at the end of the day and you were set. Sometimes they’d write you a cheque for a new laser right there on the front steps as they were getting ready to step into a cab. “How ‘bout a green one this time,” they might say as they waved goodbye. He knew the ropes with these guys. It was all in the beverages. *Exxon Mobil* were beer drinkers. As far as they were concerned, cocktails were for sissies. You wouldn’t get a cent out of them if you so much as glanced at the speciality

drinks menu. *General Electric*, on the other hand, were smooth and sophisticated society men who travelled with polished leather brief cases and beautiful pens. They were partial to Martinis. Beer was for the common man, the wasted underbelly of society. But some companies were so puritanical you wouldn't dare even suggest a coffee after lunch. The Candidate was wise to these operations as well. He'd simply pencil their visits into his diary as *Clamato days*.

After waiting for what seemed like hours, The Candidate stood up and looked at his watch. It was almost eleven. As he reached down to pick up his brief case he heard a rustle and spotted a brown clad figure rushing past his door. He leaned out into the hallway just in time to catch a leg - also garbed in brown - disappear behind the far bend of the hall. He broke into a run and chased after the figure. By the time he caught up The Candidate was panting and covered in sweat. All the teaching and administration had cut into his personal health program, which normally consisted of tuna fish, celery and regular trips to a racquet club and sauna.

"Glad I caught up to you," The Candidate exclaimed.

"Oh, you must be Zorton."

"Zorton? I should say not."

"The package is for someone named Zorton."

"There's no one here by such a name."

"Are you sure?"

"Perhaps in another department," said The Candidate.

"The address is right."

"There must be some mistake because I've been waiting for a shipment all night."

"Oh, you must be..." The man made a sudden realisation and hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. "There was another delivery about a minute behind mine."

"Damn," said The Candidate. Then he looked embarrassed. If you wanted to get tenure swearing in the halls was a definite no no, even late at night when nobody was around. "I mean, save the beaver dams from extinction. Yes that's it." For all he knew their conversation was being recorded on CCTV by the Dean.

The man looked confused. "I'm sorry," he said.

"I have to catch this delivery," The Candidate said. He ran back down the hall. When he got to the office, the door was closed. A delivery notice was pinned to it, requesting that he call for redelivery. He went into his office to call, but with every attempt only got a different British Telecom long distance operator, each equally polite and apologetic for the dreaded inconvenience of crossed lines.

"No sir," they would all say in their cool halogen-lamp voices. "This is not UPS." Then they'd go on to explain to him with the loving patience of Mr. Rogers which departments he should call to correct the problem, none of which would ever answer after the call was apparently transferred to the appropriate service agent.

A week later The Candidate picked up the local newspaper. On the fourth page was an article about a field emission gun that had mysteriously shown up on an old woman's doorstep on the outskirts of town. She was an amateur artist and had no trouble incorporating it in a sculpture she had been preparing for a local art fair. It was awarded first prize and according to the article was already on show in a shopping mall on the west end of the city beside a miniature Ferris wheel, stocking-stuffer sale items placed in

each carriage. The Candidate shook his head in disbelief and poured himself a strong cup of coffee. Such was the plight of science in the twenty-first century.

## 7. The Tantalus Project

The Candidate broke his pencil in half and thrust his head into his open palms. He'd spent the entire summer racking his brains for the one big project that would push him over the edge and get him instant tenure. But whatever he came up with was too close to research someone else had already done, or something that just wasn't worth doing at all. Every day he'd drive into Western Polytechnic with new hope that he'd come up with some new revolution in science, passing by the same rows of sweetly gabled houses, their squares of lush flowers and neatly etched zones of deep green grass charging him with renewed enthusiasm, yet every day he'd drive home, the sun already engulfed by the pitch-black horizon, devoid of inspiration. Those same houses, blooming with promise and tranquillity by day, would be transformed into hideous satanic lofts, rife with shadows and perfidy, homes for pimps and panhandlers at best. In the mornings their owners could be seen watering the lawns under the fresh sparkle of the sun, while at night gangs of teenaged children would gather in randy crowds on the front lawns as they laughed and guzzled beer to the loud and atrocious music booming from their miniature stereo systems.

Hoping for new inspiration, The Candidate went to find Gables. He was standing alone in his lab examining an execrable brown compound one of his students had just isolated. On the walls hung faded posters from various London productions and even an original ticket to *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Broadway 1972, hung on the inside of the door inside a tiny glass case. There were paint stains on Gables' torn blue jeans and he had what looked like shoe polish smeared all over his face. The Candidate walked in and pretended not to notice his colleague's soiled appearance.

"*Western Brown*," said Gables, holding up the brown solid as though he were selling it on a commercial for a new lawn product.

"Sorry?" said The Candidate.

"I'm trying to name a color after this new compound."

The Candidate looked at the solid and then stepped back. "It looks *horrible*, sir."

"*Horror Brown*, though, just doesn't sound right, if that's what you were thinking. It has to have more of a ring to it. Let's take a look."

Gables walked over to a desk and took out a catalogue of specialist oil paints. He leafed through until he found the browns.

"Burnt Oak, Colorado Pine, Memphis Mahogany..."

"Sir," said The Candidate. "I'm sorry to protest, but I am from Memphis and I have never seen a single mahogany tree in my life."

“You have to open your mind. Lubricate your imagination. Perhaps they only meant *Memphis* or *mahogany* in a figurative sense. Perhaps the man who named the color was in Memphis thinking of mahogany, or sitting in a mahogany chair in Toledo thinking of Memphis. Or maybe he was in Detroit sitting in a teak chair thinking how much he would rather be in Memphis sitting in a mahogany chair. Or maybe he wasn’t in a chair at all. Maybe he was under the influence of peyote, standing in the middle of a great desert when he had a vision of a giant eagle from Memphis carrying a mahogany staff.”

“I must admit I’ve never seen a single eagle in Memphis, let alone one carrying a wooden staff.”

“You’re too literal. You have to open your imagination. Let associations flow. That’s one thing you learn in art school.”

As an undergraduate, Gables was sure he was going to be the greatest artist of the twenty first century. He had always hated science. It was too easy for him and the classes were too peopled with geeks and failed football stars. No, he certainly wasn’t one of *them*. He was touched by the breath of the starlit muse and blessed with the soul of a poet. Jackson Pollock and Jasper Johns were his heroes. Who wanted to end up with a balled head dressed in a lab coat for the rest of their life? Gables was going to be different, he was going to smear his sub conscious spirit over large white canvases - plates, leathers, furs, anything he could find - while smoking fat zeppelins of tobacco and drinking litres of cheap scotch in some burnout shag pad in SoHo. He would dine in New York cafés with women of the Rockefeller mould as they sprayed their money and attention at him like canned whipped cream at a Hollywood orgy.

At the age of twenty he abandoned his parent’s plans for him studying science and took up studies at the Elmwood Art School in Nebraska. Located in a once-condemned building that used to be a nursery school, it advertised a three-year program in pottery and flea market candle crafts with an ongoing course focussed on an individual project of the student’s choice. It didn’t do metal sculpture or performance art, but the individual project was what intrigued him - it would give him a chance to prove himself. Without the background to get into the best art schools he was hardly in a position to complain. But he had the talent. He was sure of it. He felt it in his bones. After a few years of painting he had already produced a closet full of wall-sized atrocities that looked more graffiti scribbled on the side of an East Berlin train station than anything ever termed *art*. But that was why they were so unique – they undermined the concept of art itself by elevating the grotesque and rebellious to the level of a Rembrandt or Cezanne. But his teachers didn’t see it that way, and after months of conflict and negative feedback he decided to drop out at the end of his second year. It wasn’t that he had no talent. It wasn’t that he hadn’t sold anything. No. His teachers were too conservative and just didn’t understand. He needed to be in the right environment to let his talents grow and flourish. Nebraska just wasn’t it. Pollock never had to cope with Nebraska. Why should he?

Gables held up a sealed tube containing the brown crumbly solid. He assumed the stance of Hamlet holding a skull.

“*Something wicked*...no, damn. That’s not it.”

“What, sir.”

“Hamlet. It’s been so long I’ve forgotten the lines!”

The Candidate smirked. He remembered having to read it once in school. All he could remember was how ridiculous all the characters names were.

“*Hamlet* sure is a funny name, sir.”

“What?” Gables looked indignant.

“It sounds like something you’d call a baby ham.”

“Sorry?” Gables looked confused. “The lines, I mean. Haven’t you ever heard of Shakespeare?”

“Shakespeare is quite a silly name, too. It sounds like...”

“Be quiet. I’m trying to think.” Gable’s soft blue eyes hardened with frustration and he pounded his fist on the wall.

Gables was also a failed actor. After dropping out of art school he finally found his true calling. Painting just wasn’t for him. Too many long lonely hours in the studio with too little money and no exposure. *If I can’t make art, I’ll make my life a work of art*, he thought. And what better a way to do this than to become an actor and let the borders between himself, his characters, and all of art dissolve into nothingness? As an actor he could be any character at any time. The possibilities were endless. Painting was all about creating the eternal in a lifeless object while acting was about creating the eternal out of the inspiration of the moment.

Trying to avoid his inevitable transformation into a scientist, Gables moved to London to try his hand at the stage. Shaftsbury Avenue was hard on Gables. The agents all turned him down and it was almost impossible to secure an audition without one. Once he was even chased out of a Sloan Street talent office with a broom for camping out in the reception room demanding representation. They even threatened that if he ever came within a hundred yards of the building they’d have him deported. The only parts he could get were in low-budget drama productions put on as year-end events by returning education schools. In his best role he played a swordsman in a beach party version of Camus’ *Caligula* and his only offer for paid work was for the part of a naked cowboy in a plastic-curtain peep-show production. After a few rainy winters in his Southwark flat staring at the paint peeling off his ceiling while he drank yet another pint of Tesco’s highest lager, he returned to America, older and wiser, convinced of his ultimate destiny as an actor, but mature enough to realise that he needed to have a real career to back up his pursuits. Very few actors were ever lucky enough to give up their day jobs, and those that did were either flashes in the pan, or had to wait half their lives for the perfect role before they were finally vaulted into stardom.

When he got back to America he finished the science program at Western Polytechnic and never looked back. Only four years after graduating with the highest honours possible, he completed his PhD. After a short postdoctoral stint at Boston College he was lured back by Western, the older faculty agreeing unanimously that he was the best student they’d seen in years.

“I think I’ll go with *Western Brown*. Western...a coming together of sorts. A clash of artistic sensibilities. Ugliness as a cult. Science as art and beauty. To name such an ugly color is to give it some tacit form of beauty. I like the irony. So ironic as to be an ironic commentary on irony itself.”

“It’s beautiful,” The Candidate said uxoriously.

“Look at it,” said Gables as he held up the tube. “It’s the ugliest compound I’ve ever seen. And it’s so very reactive. It explodes on contact with air with a terrible smell. Something like you’d expect from burning incense in a fridge full of rotten meat.”

“Let’s see, sir,” said The Candidate eagerly. He tried to grab the vial.

“No. Be careful.” Gables pulled it away. “Who knows how toxic it is. We could end up dead by just looking at it. My group has been trying to collect data on it but it’s completely refractory in every sense of the word. It doesn’t dissolve in anything. It’s totally amorphous. It has no spectrum as far as we can tell. We’ve tried everything from radio waves down to gamma rays and nothing seems to affect it. All we know is that it burns violently in air and smells bad.”

“Perhaps you should just throw it away, sir.”

“What?” Gables jerked back in remonstrance. “This could be a major breakthrough. It could have military applications. It could be the ultimate building material if we just found a way to stabilise it.”

“What’s it made from?”

“Tantalum.”

The Candidate struggled to remember what part of the periodic table this element was from.

“Ah, tantalum,” he said knowingly. “We’re doing a lot of tantalum work.”

“I guess you could say,” remarked Gables, “that what I have in this tiny glass vial is really just a pile of *tantaloid* crap.”

“Tantaloid?” The Candidate’s face puckered with doubt. “That’s not even a word, is it?”

“Yes it is. Check your dictionary again.”

“Are you sure?”

“Obscure Scottish derivation. First used in the sixteenth century to describe a woman’s behaviour. She was said to be possessed by an evil spirit and was running around town in the nude. The story has it that the local poet conjured up the word *tantaloid* to describe her peculiar brand of psychosis.”

The Candidate was sceptical. Besides, what made Gables so smart and eloquent?

“I’m sorry, sir. I have to go.” He left the room and immediately checked the dictionary back in his office. Indeed, in hideous black ink, the word *tantaloid* jutted out of the eight hundred and sixtieth page. Its definition and derivation was exactly as Gables had described. He spent the next hour in a huff.

As if life was delivering him some secret message, The Candidate heard the word used over and over again as the day wore on. This often happened to him with new words. As soon as he looked them up he’d start hearing them everywhere for the next few weeks. But perhaps this was really no coincidence and was only because he unconsciously blocked out any word he came across and didn’t know. Yet *tantaloid* was such an unusual sounding word he certainly would have remembered it if he’d ever heard it before.

Yes, everything that strange and bleak day seemed utterly *tantaloid*. While out in the quad having a cup of coffee, he overheard a black man with an afro and huge round sunglasses talking to a thin scraggly man on the street corner.

“That shit you sold me was totally *tantaloid*,” the man said. “Like really fucking d-grade.”

Later, he accidentally walked into a seminar room where a classics lecture was in progress. The lecturer, a middle-aged woman, a huge stump of tightly wrapped black hair seemingly balanced on her head, paused in mid speech and looked at him for a second. Then she cleared her throat as a way of voicing her disapproval at his interruption.

“With reference to the Niobe complex,” she continued to the class, “it could be said that the protagonist had distinctly *tantaloid* leanings. This is obvious from the Ovidian ellipsis of the text.”

On his way home, he passed a grocery store. In front stood a crumpled-up Jewish woman who was shaking her fist at a passing bus, which seemed to have neglected to pick her up at the bus stop.

“You...you...you...*tantaloid* bastard!” she shouted.

It was as if there was some great conspiracy at hand. He looked up at the sky and his head started ringing with the wretched word. He imagined troops of gibbering dwarves singing *tantaloid* songs in strange off-key voices like atonal radio jingles. He felt sick to his stomach. He was sure he was going mad, poisoned by some invisible neurotoxin somehow absorbed through his skin by simply looking at Gables’ hideous brown compound.

A block from his apartment, he passed a man who was shouting out an evangelical sermon to an unseen audience in the sky as he held up a copy of the Bible like a shield. Somewhere in mid-flight the words of the man’s speech became distorted and The Candidate couldn’t tell if the would-be pastor was hollering “*Can’t the void steer* us on the path to righteousness?” or “*Tantaloid steers* on the path to righteousness.” But why would a Christian be talking about the void? Yet on the other hand why would a herd of cattle be walking on the path to righteousness, and on what grounds could you really say they were *tantaloid*? When he got home he swallowed two aspirins and collapsed on his sofa in a trembling heap.

By evening everything was *tantaloid*. The word became a slippery black sheath - wet like the back of a giant eel - that wound through all things simultaneously. His curtains were *tantaloid*. His carpet was also *tantaloid*. Nothing escaped the grasp of the heinous conflation of syllables and consonants. Even his brand new dinette set was *tantaloid*. In fact it, above all things, was *tantaloid*. And those shiny new dishes with their intricately woven wheatlets rounding the outer rim had taken on a distinctly sinister appearance that could only be described as *tantaloid*.

He locked himself in his room and emptied his drawers and closet out of fear that his clothes and shoes might also lunge up at him in some fearsome *tantaloid* assault. It was then, shivering wide-eyed under his blanket - which was no doubt being courted that very instant by some *tantaloid* emissary trying to convince it to switch allegiances to the dark side - that he came up with the idea that was to change his life completely. Two brain cells met, shook hands, and the words *The Tantalus Project* appeared before him as if blinking on a billboard in glowing pink neon letters. He looked about his room. He trembled in awe. He imagined himself directing great laboratories that looked like the set of *Time Tunnel*. He imagined himself in a silver space suit flying through the galaxy on the back of a rocket ship that had *Tantalus* written in large black letters on the side.

But what exactly was the Tantalus Project? That, he didn’t really know. He knew what it would do for his career, and that was the only important thing. The details would

fall into place later. They always did. The one unique property of details was that they always seemed to work themselves out later as if guided by an invisible hand. Although he was no expert on mythology, he'd been permeated with enough classical references over the years by watching cartoons like *Hercules* to know that Tantalus was associated with man's striving to escape from himself and delve into the secrets of the underworld, either within his own soul or around him in the world. Tantalus was punished by being immersed in a lake, which dipped exactly the same amount his chin dipped whenever he went for a gulp of water. Hence to *tantalise* was to hang a carrot over someone's face and then pull it away just as they were about to bite into it. To always have the promise of something great without ever really achieving it or finding out that it can ultimately never be achieved: this was to *tantalise*. It was the way to get to the top as well. Always promise the world while never quite giving it. Keep them grovelling for more. As with women, he thought, if you gave them everything you promised them all at once, they'd suck you dry and you'd have nothing left to offer them. Then they'd think you were treating them poorly for not continuing to shower them with gifts and love. That was when they dumped you. A smart man would *tantalise* his woman, never quite giving them what he had promised while always continuing to promise.

The Candidate picked up an encyclopaedia. After flipping through for a few seconds he found a section for *Tantalus* and one for *Tantalum*. He started reading immediately. The word *Tantalus* had profound connotations. It simultaneously conjured up images of antiquity and of the future. And wasn't this precisely what he stood for? He was educated at Yale, soaking up the ambience of centuries of brightly clothed men with three cornered hats and flintlock pistols who spent night after night reading indecipherable exigies under the sad light of lonely candles. He was a part of that same great tradition that stemmed all the way back to the great men of history. He had the blood of Newton and Napoleon pulsing through his veins. Great men of knowledge and war. And like the metal tantalum, which was the most refractory element on the periodic table as well as the best electrical insulator when used in the form of its oxide, he was a pillar of strength and perseverance. He also stood for the future. A world of seamless metal surfaces where people happily went about their business without a care in the world.

*The Tantalus Project.* He shouted these words out the window of his apartment. His voice echoed off into the night. It would be scientific initiative so great in its vast repercussions that its influence would be felt for centuries. Everyone would benefit from its rich and prodigious harvest. The universe would flow and bend in new directions. The Tantalus Project would take the entire world in its reins and guide it with a gentle yet unimpeachable force to the palace of the future. He pictured himself standing in a great metallic hall cloaked in tantalum foil shouting out orders to legions of giant chrome androids while metal-garbed jesters danced in front of him. He imagined needle-shaped buildings piercing the clouds while glowing orbs of light darted like ferries through the air. He imagined legions of great warriors armed with lasers and missile launchers bowing to his every command. The Tantalus Project was guaranteed to vault him to the highest plateaus of success.

The next day he was on the phone at seven AM. He had no time to waste. If he didn't get onto it soon, he might get scooped and someone else would get credit for conceiving of the Tantalus Project first.

"Virgin customer service," said the operator.

“Can I have your project development division, ma’am?”

“You can’t *have* it, but I’ll be happy to connect you to a representative.”

“Very funny, ma’am.”

There was an almost musical sequence of bells and buzzers followed at last by a man’s voice.

“Yes?”

The Candidate introduced himself.

“You need no introduction, young man.”

“I’m glad you think so. I’m honoured, in fact.”

“What can I do for you?”

“The Tantalus Project,” was all he said. There was a moment of silence. The man was already in awe. “It’s so big and so important, I can’t even tell you what it is. The equations I’ve developed are far too complicated to explain over the phone.”

“The Tantalus Project?”

“Yes, *the Tantalus Project.*”

“I see.”

“Well?”

“Well, what? I’m not sure I understand.”

“*The Tantalus Project,*” repeated The Candidate in a low-pitched whisper.

“You’ll have to be more explicit.”

“The...Tantalus...Project,” he said with long pauses between each word.

“Ahhh. Said the man,” I think I understand now.

“You see, I’d like to give Virgin the opportunity to always be seen as the first company to recognise the importance of the Tantalus Project. I’ve selected Virgin to fund this work over several other companies, dozens of them in fact, because of my loyalty to your research interests.”

“I’m flattered that someone of your stature would say that. But we’re not really a research company.”

“That’s why I selected you. To get in on the ground floor.”

“When can we meet?”

“Lunch next Monday.”

“I’ll be there at noon. You’re at Western Polytechnic, right?”

“That’s right, sir.”

He phoned twenty-five corporations that day and arranged twenty-five lunch appointments. The Tantalus Project had already entered the first phase of its development. That night The Candidate sat at home in his armchair humming to the tune of an unheard song as he revelled in his new found glory.

## II

### 1. The Billionaires

It was almost Thanksgiving. The start of his second year at Western Polytechnic. The Candidate scratched his head and looked out into the empty hallway. For the first time since coming to Western Polytechnic he felt lonely. Most of the faculty had already left for the long weekend. Gables was out playing golf with a German exchange student. Benson was brewing asparagus beer at home for the holiday season. Hedges was off at an international meeting on the use of nuclear waste in society. Lapoisie had just jetted off to Syracuse to meet a young woman who had just broken the world record in the three thousand meter steeplechase. The only people, it seemed, that were left in the department were Brown and Zhitnik. Even the secretaries were at home, no doubt laughing and clinking glasses with their families as they stuffed the turkey.

After flipping through a few new equipment catalogues, The Candidate went to see Brown. After a year of unease, the middle-aged professor had finally accepted him, taking him under his wing like a son.

“Well, well, now,” said Brown as The Candidate entered his office. He stood up and patted The Candidate on the shoulder. The boy was clearly misguided and just needed some sway in the right direction. All those years at Yale fluffed up with those preppy left-wing Jews had left the kid more than a little bit traumatised. Although Brown had never studied at Yale, he imagined it was like being locked up in a red velvet faggot’s lair with a gang of traipsing transvestites. And that was just scratching the surface. You didn’t have to tell Brown what went on after hours at a place like that. “*A little drink, sir?*” *You can’t fool me.* Even the toughest men, seasoned war veterans like Sherman and Custer, would have gone donkey mad in such conditions.

“A little Jack Daniels and some hard poker winnings and you might turn out right yet,” said Brown as he sat back on his colonial rocker and gazed admirably at the bear skin carpet on the floor. He was the world authority in bear hide. He knew everything about it from its chemical composition, heat of combustion, and vapour pressure. Next on his list was ant hide. It was understudied, underused – a scientific revolution in the making. You could drop an ant off a building and it would survive, so just think what kind of boots you could make with the stuff.

“I’ve never gambled,” said The Candidate. He had always equated gambling with kidnapping and international espionage.

“Gambling will put a few hairs on your chest. But, you know what?”

“What?”

“I’ve been thinkin’,” said Brown, picking up a wad of chewing tobacco that he’d left on his desk the day before. You need a woman, son.” He looked up at the gun collection

on the wall. "See these babies?" He picked one up and aimed it out the window at a passing student. "Boy would I like to blow that guy's ass off. He was in here last week beggin' for marks."

"Married? That would interfere with my career."

Brown turned around and let the gun barrel drop to the floor.

"Career? You gotta be jokin'. You're settin' the world on fire. In the short time you've been here your group has expanded to the size of an army of Chinamen. You're doin' fine in that dugout of yours. What you need is some good old fashioned nookie." He held the gun up. "I'm willin' to bet the skin off a blind man's toe that every man that ever fired this gun had a good little woman back home stoking the fires. Part of bein' brave and carryin' the load of a real man is havin' a little sweetheart. Mississippi muff. Harlem hide. Birmingham bush. Pensacola poom-tang. You name it. There's a little out there for everyone. Get on the hunt. Me, I had a woman, but she done gone from the world."

"I'm sorry sir."

"It was an ugly old hog that done the deed. We were out huntin' one day and she got gored by the fattest meanest wart hog I've ever seen. I can remember it like it was yesterday. The skies were almost black. We were perched in a muddy old marsh. A gator slithered into the water like some kind of liquid log. She was pickin' a piece of corn outa her teeth when out of this bush comes the hog. It had this look on its face like it knew her and was tryin' to get back at her for something she did to it a long time back. The fat thing stopped for a second and snorted. She told it to go run off and mind it's cotton pickin' business. I just stood there starin'. The biggest mistake of my life. I should have blown its brains out. Then it goes and takes a run at her. It was only a yard away but it was strong enough to ram its horns right through her stomach." He shook his head back and forth in recollection. "That honey-sweet stomach of hers. If it wasn't for that stinkin' old hog. To this day I still haven't found the damn thing. I go out lookin' every Sunday in the woods. It better watch its stinkin' ass 'cause I still remember what it looked like. It had these funny eyes close together - like a retard's - and a broken tusk."

"I hope you find it, sir. It deserves a good talking to."

"And so do you, son."

"How is that, sir?"

"Get married."

The Candidate stood there jaw agape, not quite sure what to think of Brown's words. The Candidate lived in a pristine modern apartment with clean, well-mannered plants, and all the best *Moulinette* appliances available. He even had a blender that could be switched through eighty different settings and seventeen temperatures from the same remote controller that ran his television. As far as he was concerned, he was set at home and a woman could only stand to drag him down or hinder his path to success.

Disgruntled and confused, The Candidate spent the rest of the day on campus surveying the grounds of his growing empire. He walked about his labs holding up a golden compass - an item oozing with dignity and history - pretending to make important humidity measurements. His research group had just moved into the seven labs in the basement of the old fine arts building, now called *The Sonic Emporium*. To him the labs were symbolic of the seven levels of heaven and had been converted into bacteria-free high security biospheres where scientists could work together in blissful peace as if

planning a new Eden. Members of his research group wore special head-to-toe suits with bizarre silver badges sewn all over them. The badges had no meaning but were meant to impress visitors, intimidate potential enemies and send spies on wild goose chases. Undergraduates wore blue suits with golden collars. Graduate students wore yellow with orange horizontal stripes, making them look like henchmen of some super-villain from the comic strips. Postdocs wore matte black with little silver daggers on their shoulders, bringing to mind desperados from an early western melodrama. The Candidate wore white, as he felt should all leaders. The white of clouds. The white of light. The white of stars. The white of God. The scientists were all trained with special salutes and hand codes, which like the silver badges, also had no meaning.

“About face,” The Candidate would scream every morning as his researchers scrambled to line up in front of him in the main hall of the seventh sub basement. “Let’s see those fingernails. If there’s one thing that goes into making a good scientist it’s clean fingernails.” He’d then go on to examine their hands, one by one, frowning and scowling at the slightest sign of dirt beneath the nail. “What sort of science is all this?” he might say. Then he would point at random towards some experiment in progress and say something like “What do you call that?” The researchers would quake with fear. Every morning he delivered exactly the same pep talk to his research group. Every morning they would walk away depressed and demoralized.

Thanksgiving came and went. In no time the campus of Western Polytechnic was back to normal, buzzing with the usual hordes of UPS officers and equipment salesmen. In a last minute effort to raise more money before the end of the semester, The Candidate flew to a special birthday reception in Miami in honor of a famous chemist who had just turned eighty. People slithered about the central mezzanine of the Hilton like frenzied water snakes in a shallow cove, each sporting a shiny plastic badge advertising their name and affiliation. Food was laid out in neat trays beside the bar and drinks flowed from every spigot. The Candidate sparkled in his white suit, standing like a Roman pillar as he ate with a plastic fork from a cardboard plate of stuffed cabbage. A tall, slender gentleman approached him. The Candidate trusted him immediately. There was something warm, almost fatherly, in the man’s eyes.

“I’ve heard so much about you,” the man said while leaning over a tray of boiled lobster. “They even had a small feature on your new review journal in *The New Yorker*. A review of reviews, now that’s bound to make the world a better place!”

“Yes, things are going well,” he said. “But we could always use a little more money. Research is so expensive these days.”

“I’ve always been fascinated with science. It’s so strange that the same thing that once divorced mankind from nature may one day reunite him with her.”

The Candidate smiled. “Yes,” he said uncomfortably, not sure of what to say next. “Yes, indeed...”

“Sorry, the name’s Wexford, Thomas Wexford.” Wexford leaned across the tray of boiled lobster to shake The Candidate’s hand.

Wexford was a self-styled Chicago intellectual who made it big in plastics back in the fifties. He wore a blue suit, had white hair and spoke with a light scratch of age in his otherwise mellifluous voice - a clarinet heard on short wave radio. With a special blend of humility, intelligence, and class, he could have been an American in Paris when it still meant something. In his spare time he liked to listen to Roy Orbison and Duke Ellington

while reading from the memoirs of the presidents - Taft and Wilson were his favorites. In spite of his money and social graces, Wexford hated plastic and loathed himself for amassing such a fortune on the stuff. Plastic was man's greatest sin. All those miles of once-virgin beach strewn with old Barbie dolls and garbage bags were all his fault. A billionaire twenty times over, he learned to hate the money he'd made off what he felt was *the ruination of the planet*, and so channelled his resources into fostering various noble causes and charities, most of them financial turkeys. His last project involved the resurrection of Grandfather clocks. Most clocks these days were ugly plastic boxes with flashing LEDs. What happened to the days when time was symbolized by Kronos, the greatest of the Titans? So he invested a few hundred million into building the most glorious clocks in the world. Time would once again be a shrine. Exotic varnishes the price of liquid gold were imported from the depths of the Amazon. Architects and artists alike were paid exorbitant consulting fees to develop the perfect design. The parts were painstakingly cut from diamond, gold, platinum, and even osmium, while the bodies were fashioned from woods so rare and expensive they made ebony look like particle board. Each clock was different. Only fifty were made and three sold, each one costing at least ten million to manufacture. With sales at a standstill and forty seven magnificent clocks chiming away like church bells in his Evanston mansion, he became disillusioned and eventually gave up, giving the clocks away to local schools where they invariably ended up in teachers lounges and cafeterias. Obviously the world wasn't ready for the second coming of Kronos.

"Well if you need any money to get things going, we can talk sometime." Wexford gave him his card and smiled like some kind of second coming of Jimmy Stewart. If he couldn't resurrect Father Time, technology and science were the next best thing. Perhaps investing in the Tantalus Project was just the thing he needed to finally absolve him of all his sins.

Later that evening The Candidate met Sandro Della Casa. The obese Cuban lumbered across the room like a man surrounded by miniature siege machines, each trying to drag him to the ground from a different side.

"I've heard of your ventures," he said, whispering into The Candidate's ear in the smooth slither of a Latino pimp trying to line up a customer with one of his girls.

"So have a lot of people, sir," he said.

"I'm sorry, perhaps I should introduce myself." He slipped his hand around The Candidate's waist and smiled. "My name is Della Casa. Sandro Della Casa. I'm a billionaire of the greatest proportions."

The Candidate straightened his stance. "Della Casa! Of course! I've heard so much about you. We're always interested in making contacts with investors like you. Science is such a money-maker these days. High tech is the way of tomorrow. Just look at us. Have you ever heard of John Wexford? He just invested an armful into our work."

"Wexford, hmmm. Isn't he the man who started a campaign to burn all plastic toys?" Della Casa raised his eyebrow querulously.

"No. Couldn't be. Must be someone else." The Candidate was nervous. Judging from Della Casa's response, admitting to any association with Wexford might kill any investment the Cuban was ready to make.

"That's strange. I don't know of any other Wexfords."

"Must be his brother."

“Perhaps.” Della Casa smiled in the wise avuncular way of Mafia leaders about to order a kill. It was an expression that had taken him far on the streets of Miami. He wore gold jewellery in layers - including a two-pound watch - and a white leisure suit speckled with cigarette burns, but somehow managed to exude a certain class with his sunglasses, Panama hat, and five-hundred-dollar white suede shoes. The Ford LTD was his vehicle of choice - a rusted gold tank from the seventies still equipped with an eight-track player. His aviators were right out of a seventies cop show - huge, tinted in banded zones, with drooping plastic lenses, the name of some island resort or other written in smart gold script just before the ear hook. Driven solely by greed, his only goal in life was to make even more money than he already had, a slug on the biggest leaf dreaming of the entire tree. He’d hit out-of-the-park home runs in every area, from the drug trade - the first to introduce crack to the CIA - to the Russian *Levis* clone industry. Just a month ago he was watching *The Nutty Professor* on his own private yacht and decided that science was the next big thing. The Japanese had already experienced their technological orgasm, and now it was time for the US. Della Casa was going to be on the forefront of this great explosion, sucking every last penny he could from it.

After a short conversation The Candidate agreed to meet up with Della Casa the next day at a South Seas cocktail theme party in Disneyworld. After a few Blue Mongolians Della Casa’s cheque book was already in action.

“I like a the science. It’s a good for the life,” said Della Casa as he handed The Candidate a freshly inked cheque. “Now let’s have a drink!” Della Casa walked over to the bar. He came back and handed The Candidate a glass of a thick pink fluid with a miniature parasol leaning over the rim.

“How thoughtful,” said The Candidate. “But I’ll have to decline. My stomach is fine and I always found *Pepto Bismal* makes me sicker that I am to begin with.”

“You’re a so funny, my friend. *Pepto Bismal*.” Della Casa chuckled. “This is a Pink Squirrel!”

“A squirrel?” The Candidate wrinkled his eyebrows in confusion. Perhaps it was some sort of psychology game or intelligence test. “Oh, now I get it,” he said. Then he pointed to the cigar case sticking out of Della Casa’s suit pocket. “And that’s an ant eater!”

Della Casa paused for a few seconds before breaking into uncomfortable laughter.

“My friend! You’re a so sharp. You should be in comedy. Now drink up!”

The Candidate squinted his eyes and sucked down the pink fluid in one gulp.

“To the Tantalus Project!” said Della Casa.

The next day The Candidate flew back to Western. He felt a deep sense of satisfaction. Not only did he have backing from major corporations but also from two of the wealthiest men in the world. His future success was virtually a given. He watched from the window of the DC-10 as they rose higher and higher, bursting through one layer after another of clouds until all that was left was clear blue sky.

But his sense of bliss was to be short-lived. As the plane touched down on the runway a new and much darker feeling came over him. In spite of his trip’s success and the early promise of the Tantalus Project, Brown’s words echoed through his head like an imprecation. *You need a wife, son*. He could never be truly successful without one. No matter how many settings he had on his blender or how much money was being pumped into his research, he would still be a failure if he didn’t have a woman to stay at home and

watch television with him. Every successful man had a wife. Even the most brutish of championship boxers had wives. So why was he left out? This was the one missing piece to his puzzle. The Candidate believed in solutions, not problems. Whatever he wanted he always got. Why would romance be any different? With a few trips to the local department store he'd have all the right accoutrements and all the right aphrodisiacs. He'd be set and it wouldn't be long before his life was graced with the scent of love. He grabbed his brief case and walked off the plane with newfound confidence, strutting through the boarding lounge and across the terminal to the baggage claim like a modern day Gene Vincent on his wedding day.

## 2. Mini

The Candidate looked out the window onto the bright and sunny science quad of Western Polytechnic. It was unusually warm for late December and the grassy grounds were buzzing with action. Bright red delivery vehicles wove through small groups of students, their legs sumptuously tanned and their arms wrapped around stacks of brand new textbooks. People smiled and birds were chirping in the ginger glow of the late autumn sun. The Candidate had every reason to be happy. In no time the Tantalus Project was too big to be contained within the tiny borders of Western Polytechnic. Caltech had already established itself as a major collaborator, embracing the Tantalus Project like a long lost son. Three-day meetings involving world-class scientists, influential statesmen, leading industrialists, and curious entrepreneurs had become commonplace. The military was soon involved. Seeing it as an opportunity to move yet another step ahead in weapons technology, the US Army swooped in and staked their claim. Matching the financial support of Wexford and Della Casa combined, they claimed proprietary leadership of the entire enterprise. Maximum security protocols were imposed across the board. Barbed wire fences were erected around the science quadrant of Western Polytechnic, a pair of security outposts looming by the two main gates. Highly ranked generals, decorated like Christmas trees with badges and medals, showed up daily at the gates of Western Polytechnic in olive drab jeeps to enforce new rules that visitors and students alike be required to produce papers upon entry and exit of the university grounds. Every student was a potential spy and traitor. Nobody could enter or leave without security clearance. Even the guards were required to line up for half an hour every morning to get briefed on the new security codes which would become obsolete only a few hours after they'd been implemented.

The Candidate grabbed his brief case and called a cab to take him to the airport. It was already late in the afternoon and the next day he had to be in Pasadena for a top-secret meeting with Wexford, Della Casa, and a US General by the name of Heisman to determine exactly how much the public could be allowed to know about the Tantalus Project. Too much, and Middle Eastern spies could easily copy the secrets and use them

to underpin terrorist initiatives. Too little, and public opinion would be set against them. Why, the average man on the street would ask, is so much money being funnelled into something that is so top secret that nobody is allowed to know about it?

The next morning the four men gathered around a huge oval table, somewhere in the deepest sub-basements of Caltech. The sun, as viewed from a state of the art surveillance monitor on the wall of the room, was bright and early spring perennials were already in bloom. Wexford stood up. He pulled out his reading glasses and set them on his nose. "I favour complete openness. I believe that that Tantalus project is the beginning of a new Hellenism in western culture. Not since the days of ancient Greece will such heights of social and religious splendour be possible."

"That's a pile of crap," said Heisman. He was stern and tight-lipped, concealing his dignified bald head beneath a visored green officer's hat. His eyes had the proud severity of a great statesman or president. He would have looked perfect on the side of Mount Rushmore.

"Let the man speak," urged Della casa. Heisman and Della Casa were friends from the old CIA days, now just a snowy blur of cocaine and rocket launchers.

"Science is the art of tomorrow," said Wexford. It was the right of every last American to know what his tax dollars were being spent on. Why not the Tantalus Project? "Look at the last thirty years of social development. Ever since the fall of abstract expressionism, the average level of civilisation has dropped. All we have left is science. People don't read anymore. And it's all because of the great atrocity of plastics." Wexford rested his head in his hands in a gesture of extreme regret, like a man found guilty of genocide. "We need a new art, and that new art is *science*."

"Balderdash," said Heisman. "If it wasn't for plastics we wouldn't have putty explosives or bomb raid flight simulators."

"Or the interior of my Ford LTD for that matter," said Della Casa emphatically. He leaned back in his chair with the smug look of a man in a massage parlour. He didn't care how much publicity there was. At the end of the day, all he wanted was the money, the dividends that would inevitably come raining down in his direction once the Tantalus Project had reached its full fruition.

"What do you think?" Heisman asked The Candidate in a more respectful tone. "It's a your work after all."

The Candidate hesitated. Any answer was potentially controversial. "Well, I have to admit," he finally said. "I like plastic. It's fun. When I was a kid I used to play with Silly Putty."

"About the level of publicity of the Tantalus Project, I mean," said Heisman impatiently.

"Well I have to admit, however much I appreciate you guys flying around in jets defending us from all those awful invaders and terrorists, I think, and I am in no way trying to discredit the US Army with all their great achievements..." The Candidate stopped and looked at Heisman, who was visibly flattered and blushing. Then he continued. "We need at least some publicity. How can anything be successful without publicity?"

"Yes," said Heisman, "But secrecy *is* publicity. Do you know how much the public will thirst for knowledge of the Tantalus Project if they only know a little bit about it?"

"The very essence of Tantalus!" exclaimed Della Casa.

“The essence of *Hades*,” Wexford objected. “Secrecy is...”

“On another matter entirely,” Heisman interrupted. “We have to do something about *Sonic Incorporated*. I spoke on the phone to this Henderson character and he seemed to think he had some higher hand in the Tantalus Project than I do. Imagine that. After the military won two world wars and ensured the safety of every man woman and child in the union by fending off the red nightmare, this dinky little company comes along and thinks it owns everything.”

“I’m not sure what to say, sir,” said The Candidate. Agreeing with any one of the three meant disagreeing with the other two and potentially losing their support. “I think you’re all right.”

“They want to patent everything that comes out of your lab. The Tantalus Project is a military venture as I see it. We have to make everything top secret. We have to save all the lab notes on microfilm and have them processed at our top secret head quarters.”

“Where’s that?” asked The Candidate neutrally.

“Rangoon,” said Heisman. Then his eyes sharpened and he looked suddenly worried as if he’d just said something he shouldn’t have. “Oh, no. I mean...” He suddenly stood up and paced back and forth behind his chair.

“Rangoon?” queried Wexford. “What’s the US doing in Rangoon?”

“Rangoon?” Heisman stopped and sat down. “Did I say...well, what I meant was Pantaloon...no, wait. That’s not a city. I mean, I meant. Racoons. That’s It. We have, well, a secret base in Colorado. There’s lots of racoons in Colorado. That’s what I meant.”

“A secret base called *Racoon*?” asked Wexford in confusion.

“We do testing on racoons. Yes. Racoons. The critters. A lot of military potential. How silly of me. What would the US be doing in Burma? I hear it’s impossible to get a decent lunch there.”

“I disagree, Mr. Heisman,” said Wexford. “Rangoon has several fine restaurants.” He had never been there, but took it as his responsibility as a cultured citizen of the modern world to know where to dine in every capital city in the world.

“That’s *General Heisman*, and don’t ever get that wrong.” Heisman lifted his chest and straightened his back.

“Sorry. *General Heisman*. Back to the point of this meeting. You see, science is a public venture and with my investment in this project, I feel it is only right that I be heard.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard that one before,” said Heisman. “The lord gave you money, he gave me power. What good is all that money going to do you with a squadron of jets smart bombing your bony little ass off?”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Yep.”

“Certainly we can come to an agreement,” said Della Casa. Perhaps if...”

“There ain’t no agreements to be made. Only wars to be waged and won. Let the winner sing his victory song and the loser die in the dirt.” Heisman slammed his fist into the table.

“But, sir...General, I mean.”

“Nope,” said Heisman stubbornly.

Wexford sighed in frustration and took a sip from his Dixie cup of water. He was far too gentle a creature to ever risk committing an act of aggression. It wasn't his cowardice or weakness, but a hidden form of strength, the will to serve the higher cause of *being a true gentleman*.

"Well," said The Candidate. "I guess we have a bit of a problem on our hands. I suggest we keep everything top secret while letting the public know everything at the same time. Maybe if they promise not to tell its still secret. Or maybe we can advertise for the Tantalus Project and let the public know it's going at top speed, without ever having to tell them what it is."

"That'll just encourage more information leaks," said Heisman.

"But just think what it'd do to your career," argued The Candidate. "With all that publicity, maybe one day you'd be promoted to president!"

Heisman's eyes went all misty as if he was witnessing the birth of some kind of new Shangri-La. "I never thought of that." His eyes became even wider and more dreamy. "*Pow, Pow, Zoom. Rat-Tat-Tat*," he muttered to himself. "That sounds mighty good. Mighty, mighty good. *Rat-Tat-Tat*. Yes." He looked up at the ceiling in awe. "I'll have to sleep on it," he said raptly.

"So, are we finished?" asked The Candidate. Everyone shrugged their shoulders and looked around.

"I guess so," said Della Casa.

They adjourned the meeting and went to Old Town Pasadena for a few drinks.

"Milk, straight up," Heisman demanded as if he was calling for a dormitory inspection. The others ordered margaritas. As The Candidate was licking the last traces of salt from the rim of his glass a slim, large-busted blond walked through the door. Della Casa was the first to notice. He leaned over to The Candidate. "Look at her, my friend," he slavered in The Candidate's ear. "She's a beautiful. Just like my Mama."

The Candidate looked over as she took the table beside them. She was clean and wholesome – like a cheerleader for God. Her eyes were the vast cloudless blue of the Wyoming sky. She had a mountain of platinum blonde hair moulded into a smooth luxurious form around her head, small rivulets and sub-rivulets falling to her shoulders like eddies from a summer stream. She wore a fifties-style sweater with a poodle knitted on the breast and tight chequered pants. The Candidate had never seen such beauty.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said.

"Yes," she said, a twang of the West in her voice.

"Are you here for the parade?"

"Why, yes, I am the parade. Part of it at least."

"Wow, ma'am. You mean you get to ride one of those *flower floats*?"

"Not only do I get to ride one, but I also helped weave all those little stems together."

The Candidate was impressed. The Rose Bowl parade was the symbol of everything America stood for and this sweet little raspberry was at the centre of it all. "If you could be so kind as to come and join us..." he said invitingly.

"Why, I'd be flattered," she replied with a smile. "The name's Mini." She came over and took a seat between Della Casa and The Candidate.

The evening rolled on smoothly. An hour later Heisman left, leaving Della Casa to dominate the conversation with stories about his empire of sugar plantations in the Caribbean.

“I can still remember one time we set fire to a three hundred gallon drum of white rum after dancing on the beach all night with a bunch a Jamaican whores. It was so - how do you say? - perfecto!”

Wexford blushed and turned to Mini to gauge her reaction. He had to turn the conversation back to something more appropriate – even virginal. “Have you ever been to the Chicago Art Institute?” he asked.

“The Chicago Art Institute? No, never,” she replied. “Wait. Is that a part of the Chicago Hair and Nail Institute?” She bubbled with excitement. “We have so much in common. I’ve been there. Three or four times.” She looked at The Candidate, her smile as big as The Rose Bowl.

“No, ma’am,” said Wexford as delicately as he could. “They’re two entirely different things.”

“Oops,” she said, turning red with embarrassment. “Now you all must think I’m stupid.” She sniffled a few times and started to cry. The Candidate handed her his napkin.

Wexford was visibly mortified and leaned over to beg forgiveness. “I’m sorry ma’am I didn’t mean to imply...”

“You think you’re so polite and smart,” said Della Casa. “You made a the lady cry. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Wexford apologised three times before making a quick escape to the bathroom to wipe the sweat off his forehead. The Candidate looked over at Mini and smiled. Here was a woman who cared enough about her appearance to attend one of the world’s great hair and nail institutes. The two qualities in women he always cherished most were the desire to always look good and the ability to pull it off. All woman were born beautiful and it was only out of arid feminism or sheer madness that they ever *lost it*. Yes, certain woman *chose* to be ugly. It was their only way of expressing their independence from men. So that was just another reason to always date attractive women, because the ugly ones obviously didn’t want men anyway.

The Candidate gazed for a long moment at Mini. He felt something like love - or at least that precious feeling that an emotional pot of gold was waiting for him at the other end of the rainbow. Mini was everything he could ever ask for in a woman.

“Would you like some juice, ma’am,” he asked her gently as he fluttered his eyebrows.

“You’re too sweet,” she said back.

Della Casa called over a cheeky Mexican waitress to show off his cigar collection and The Candidate was home free. By the end of the evening she had already agreed to let him ride on her flower float during the parade.

The next day was a dream. Mini showed up at the float bunker as pretty as a bundle of balloons at a birthday party. She wore a silver bathing suit with a diamond-studded tiara, looking like a recently crowned Miss America. The Candidate arrived in his finest seersucker suit and a pair of white patent leather shoes Della Casa loaned him the night before for fifty bucks and a tin of shoe polish. The parade was a walk through Eden. Mini and The Candidate smiled and waved to the happy crowd as they rode the float the length of Colorado Boulevard. The Candidate was in seventh heaven.

The next day they sipped ginger ale in Hollywood cafés, they walked down Venice beach dressed in shorts and white tee shirts. Life blossomed into a bouquet of pure bliss.

He asked her questions about high school and beauty products. He tried to learn everything about her, soaking her up like water into a sponge. She was born in Idaho, the only daughter of a failed rodeo cowboy and pancake house waitress. When she turned fourteen her mother taught her everything she knew about beauty. To her it was an enterprise as complex as making the perfect omelette, perhaps even a science. Over the next few years they became a team devoted to uncovering the deepest secrets of perfect feminine beauty. Like Watson and Crick, mother and teenaged daughter experimented with every line of beauty products they could find.

“All that time daddy was getting bucked by whatever horse the stable had to offer. Once he was even thrown by a Shetland pony.” She laughed and rubbed another squirt of sun tan oil into her shoulders. “He broke his collar bone.”

“But as we all know, the hand bone is connected to the collar bone...” The Candidate’s voice rose to a song.

“And to make him feel better the owner swore it was the meanest baby stallion he’d ever seen. But I know the truth. It was just a gelding so sweet you could eat off its hooves.”

Mini went on to explain how after years of trying everything she became a convert to the revolutionary new *Solar dex pH Program*, an arduous but precise method of attaining the smoothest skin possible. All you had to do was test a few small skin samples by putting them in the reusable plastic test tubes *Solar dex* so generously provided and carry out a few quick tests in the bathroom. This way you could determine the exact proportions you needed of the fifteen creams, exfoliants, moisturisers, and toners that came as a complement to the test solutions.

The next day they went to Knotts Berry Farm. The day after that they went to Disneyland. Then they went to Six Flags Magic Mountain. As the sun set over Castaic Lake reservoir, The Candidate took a Polaroid of Mini hugging *The Great Root Bear* by a water slide. The smile on her face was too wide for any known level of happiness.

“I love you,” he said.

“That’s so sweet,” she said.

He swept her off her feet as they walked past the Huntington Garden rose collection. “Ma’am...”

“Yes?” She twinkled her eyes.

“I’d like to propose to you ma’am.”

“Why, you sweet little devil, we’ve only just met.”

“I just have that feeling, ma’am. I’m sorry to be so bold. But I’m just an honest boy from an honest town.”

“By golly,” she said, smiling like a girl who’d just seen Oz. “This is such a shock. I don’t know what to say. And I have to fly back home tomorrow.” She put her hand on The Candidate’s arm and squeezed it. “Can we meet again before I go?”

“What about tomorrow morning?”

He set her down. Flowers covered the ground like an oriental carpet. From yellow to dark purple they spanned the entire spectrum of colour. In that mist of beauty and floral splendour he could say nothing to himself but that he was in *love*. The world filled his soul like an intoxicating perfume.

The next morning Mini cancelled her flight and The Candidate took her back with him to Western Polytechnic to live with him. When they got back the newspapers were

filled shocking images of crumbled buildings and crying people. A fifty acre industrial park in Nebraska had apparently been bombed to the ground in the middle of the night. *Sonic Incorporated* was no more! Only a great lunar-scale crater remained in its place. Terrorism was suspected as one man claimed he saw a gang of Muslims in a bar armed with hand grenades an hour or two before the explosion. An eccentric religious group argued that apocalyptic aliens were behind the attack as a few of the locals claimed to have seen huge glowing orbs of green and gold descend from the sky just before a great gush of energy came from the centre of the formation, levelling the industrial park to the ground. Another man claimed he saw a flock of giant fire breathing geese flying in a perfect V-pattern over the site of the attack only seconds before the explosion. Whatever the truth, a few days later *The Sonic Emporium* sign on The Candidate's building was mysteriously replaced with one of similar size reading *The Heisman Centre*.

"Heisman seems like such a sweet man," said Mini, big pools of innocence welling up in her eyes.

"He sure is," said The Candidate.

"I love you," said Mini.

The Candidate smiled. He'd never known such happiness. How could he have been so foolish to think that commercial success was the only key to life? Personal success was just as important, only adding to the great overriding success equation that dwells at the peak of every man's life. Yes, Mini was *the woman for him*. With a wife like her he was destined for even more greatness than he ever thought possible, but a brand of greatness so great that it spanned from the centre of his belly button all the way out to the highest mountains and furthest stars floating through the midwinter sky.

A week later The Candidate came home early from work to find Mini standing beside the bathtub naked except for a pair of pink plastic boots. The room was filled with steam. A portable tape player beside the washbasin blasted some kind of sixties spy music through the air. He parted the wall of steam with his hands and walked up to her. She turned her head and screamed.

"Dear," he said. "It's only me."

Her face relaxed from shock to embarrassment. She looked down at her boots and struggled for an explanation.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was just..."

"No need to explain," he said. "I think it's lovely. Let me guess. You were pretending you were the Sugar Plum Fairy taking trays of goodies out to little boys and girls."

"Yes, dear. That's it," she said with relief. She leapt out of the bathroom and grabbed a candle that was sitting on the counter. She swept it through the air like a wand. "I'm here to bring you all the sweets and goodies in the world!"

"Ahh, dear. I'm so happy to be involved with a woman with such a firm sense of right and wrong, such a great love of children, and such a sweet smile. Next time we can play Tennessee Tuxedo!"

Mini ran over to the Candidate and hugged him, her taut red nipples brushing against his firm white jaw. "I love you," she said. It was then that The Candidate first noticed that she was naked. He felt something hot in his pants and blushed.

"You're...you...well...look at you!"

"Come on, dear. Say it!"

“But we’re not married.”

“My minister says its OK to do it before you get married as long as you tell God you wanna get married. It’s like getting a loan. You get the money before you actually earn it.”

“How are we gonna tell God?”

“I’ll take care of that,” she said. She closed her eyes for a second and whispered something. Her voice was too soft for The Candidate to hear. Then she opened her eyes and slipped her thin hands down his pants. She undid his zipper, revealing a small patch of his Benjamin Franklin underwear, part of the new *Fruit of the Loom Independence Collection*, which featured images of early presidents and founding fathers printed on the mercerized cotton fly.

“Did you tell God yet?”

“Sure did, sweetie!”

“What did you say?”

“I said I was in love and wanted to share my lover’s body under the bliss of his mighty gaze.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said it was OK, as long as we didn’t use a condom. Then he changed his mind and said that it might be OK to use a condom, as long as the money we spent on them went to the church.”

“Do you have any?”

“What?”

“Condoms?”

“Sure, do. I even bought them *from* my church.”

“I guess that means we have the green light.”

“You gotta see the red light before you get the green,” she said. She pushed her breast into his mouth and rubbed her hand on his penis. It was tall and pillar-like, a miniature image of his head. The Candidate sucked on her nipple and climaxed almost immediately, leaving Mini’s hands warm and wet.

“You ran a red light, honey,” she said.

“I love you, God!” shouted The Candidate. He fell backwards and smiled at the ceiling. “I’ll run a million red lights if you want me to!”

That night The Candidate dreamed he was in a sleek white car ripping through the freeways of Los Angeles. As he went faster and faster he ran more and more red lights, each one getting bigger and more foreboding, yet each one getting more joyful to ignore as he raced on through. Suddenly there was a police siren and then the face of Andrew Jackson frowning down on him from the sky, a pair of underwear balanced on top of his wild unruly hair. He looked like some kind of crazy homeless man, certainly not a successful president or person that would end up on the side of a twenty-dollar bill, but something in his expression said he was disappointed in The Candidate and expected more from him for some reason he was not prepared to reveal. He awoke in a cold sweat to Mini’s peach-white face glowing in the moonlight where Jackson’s face had been. She was smiling like there was nothing left in the world to frown about. It was then that The Candidate felt he had finally and truly grown up. No matter how jealous people were of his success, they no longer had any right to call him a greenhorn or a sissy. And that too was yet another form of success, perhaps the sweetest yet.

### 3. Sweet, Sweet Success

The Candidate's love for Mini only fuelled the young scientist's desire for even greater success. How could he have been so foolish as to ever think that a woman wasn't a necessary element in the grand equation of *making it big*? He wanted to kiss her toes, lick her stomach, and even burrow in her ear lobes. She was a finely cut diamond nestled in the very center of crown of his success. He dressed in even smarter suits than before. He started wearing fifty-dollar underwear, using it only once before tossing it down to the Salvation Army. He purchased cologne in tiny jade bottles from upscale shops in Beverly Hills, dabbing it in delicate touches across the snowy blanket of his skin every morning before going in to work. If you wanted to be number one, you had to smell number one. Mini was the great glass elevator in the luxurious hotel of his burgeoning greatness, hurtling him to higher and higher levels of exaltation and bliss. In his first year at Western Polytechnic he'd exceeded all possible expectations. In his second he'd exceed even more. Each day was a classic Joe Montana fourth quarter touchdown drive, two minute warning looming on the flickering electronic clock on the sidelines. Victory was commonplace. It was no longer a question of winning, but of degree of embarrassment to the opposing team and celebration level of his eager fans.

*Rev. Rev.* was a hit. After only a year in print, circulation had climbed to twenty thousand copies per month. *Why didn't anybody think of this before?* was the general response. With *Rev. Rev.* on the shelves, the science community no longer had to wade through endless piles of boring review articles or suffer through cumbersome data search programs that never came up with the full picture anyway. Four times a year there was even a special edition dedicated to some great professor who was near retirement. No better way to curry favour with the research community than to make friends with the biggest names of science. Everyone knew that flattery led to acceptance and popularity, which in turn led to advancement and promotion.

The Tantalus Project was a bull's eye. In only phase one of a projected seven, it was already capturing the imagination of the American public. Della Casa and Wexford won out on an edge in the lengthy publicity debate with Heisman. They decided to have monthly press releases electronically mailed to all the major newspapers in the country. They hired a PR agent to arrange interviews and even commissioned a cartoonist to offer wry portrayals of the Tantalus Project as it developed. The New York Times and Washington Post featured regular updates and erudite editorials by social luminaries as diverse as Barbara Walters and Noam Chomsky. Pop star Bono equated it with the next stage of evolution of the collective American psyche. There was the dirty thirties, WWII and the victory over Japan, the cold war era, the sixties with its riots and sexual liberation, the decadent inflated seventies, and then the Reagan/Bush years, a period of international wars and rising national debt. But now there was the Tantalus Project. An era of luxury and promise combined with knowledge and spirituality - an Atlantis of hope and prosperity. Huckabee saw it as a firm advance in the financial sector. A way of keeping the US ahead of nations like Russia, China and Iran, nations who threatened the ideological fabric of goodness as we know it. The public view was divided. To some

commentators, the Tantalus Project was a neo-classical reactionary movement striving to resurrect the beauty of antiquity in the bleak consternation of the modern industrial world. To others, it was a violation of all peace treaties and established the United States as the belligerent and thoughtless country most pacifists had always taken it for. Blue-collar workers and union men dreamed of the jobs it would create. Artists were inspired by its depth of symbolism and mystery. Accountants and corporate managers threw parties to celebrate the mile-high stacks of investment statements and stock reports they knew it would generate. Generation Xers, sensing the complete lack of substance beneath the fanfare of hype, embraced it as an anthem reflecting the emptiness of existence in the post-baby-boom era.

Bill Clinton loved it. The two-time president and current statesman licked it up like maple syrup off a plate. One sunny spring afternoon he gave a public speech in front of Lincoln Center in New York claiming that he *supported all high technology drives and initiatives that would help bring the United States back to scientific prominence*. He finished the short address by holding up an enormous flag with a stylised graphic icon of Tantalus swimming in the lake of fire. The crowd - composed mostly of derelict Saturday shoppers, ageing punk stars, and smooth-collared stockbrokers - went bananas.

With success brimming over like champagne at a yacht launching, The Candidate became a household name across the nation. What made the Tantalus Project so popular, nobody really quite knew. The most obvious answer was simply that *nobody really quite knew* what it really was. Each day the American public would go to bed hoping to find out the next day what was really going on behind those locked vaults at Western Polytechnic and each morning they'd wake up to no more than a few web page updates on what the Tantalus Project *actually was*. Yes, the average American loved it for one simple reason: the suspense and colour it added to their otherwise drab existence.

With wedding plans looming, The Candidate was doubly busy. The date was set for June sixteenth and a small ocean liner docked at Long Beach was booked for the reception. Mini's father, broke from years of gambling on the rodeo circuit, hardly had the funds to back such a colossal affair, so Wexford generously donated enough to cover the rest - roughly ninety eight percent of the total bill. He didn't care. It was the beauty of the gesture that counted. Besides, it would indirectly bolster the already stellar image of the Tantalus Project.

One morning The Candidate was sitting in his office biting his fingernails in anticipation of the upcoming event. He looked out the window. The sky was bright and clear. The air hung like a layer of diamond between the cloudless blue sky and the forest green lawns of Western Polytechnic. The phone rang. A sweet, scratchy voice struggled to express itself on the other end.

"It's your long lost auntie."

"Auntie! How lovely. I'm sorry I didn't call you last Thanksgiving. Things are so different now."

"Tell me more, sonny."

"I'm getting married!"

"I heard. She must be wonderful. I can't wait to meet her."

"You'll love her. She was such a sweet surprise."

"Speaking of surprises, I have a letter for you."

"A letter?" The Candidate felt uneasy.

“Yes. From someone you haven’t seen in ages.”

“Not the tax office,” The Candidate said with sudden trepidation.

“No, silly. A personal letter.”

The Candidate paused and then his voice darkened. “It’s not...”

“Your mother. I had to contact her and tell her. You’d been getting so much press lately that I was sure she’d find out anyway.”

“My mother? After all this time?”

“Should I forward it to you?”

“I’ll book a flight immediately,” said The Candidate. Butterflies filled his stomach. He had no idea what to expect. It had been so long since he had seen his aunt he had almost learned to live without her. After a few platitudes he bade her well and booked a flight to Lincoln Nebraska.

The next day he raced out the door and was on the road in minutes. A few hours later he was at the door of his aunt’s house. She answered the door in a flowered dress, balancing holding up a warm rhubarb pie in the palm of her left hand. Her face betrayed the gentle grooves of age, calcined like dried mud yet still radiating a softness beyond all compare. Her eyes were flax blue.

“Come in!” she said.

The Candidate stepped in nervously. What news could the letter hold? Did she want to make up for all those years of neglect and somehow reinstate her position in his life? Or was it simply a cold congratulations from afar, a blip from a great black ocean of rejection? An apology for abandoning him was the least he could expect. His aunt took the pie back into the kitchen while The Candidate seated himself in the living room. A minute later she came out with a cup of Ovaltine holding a slim blue airmail envelope. She set the cup and the envelope in front of him and left the room. He opened the envelope, ripping off the end with the skill and patience of a baboon cracking open a coconut. He read the letter inside.

*My Dear Son,*

*I know I was never the best parent to you, but I did what I could in sending you to boarding school. I’m as sorry for abandoning you and running away to Argentina with Enrico. I haven’t seen him in six years and I wish I had never moved here. He was as unfaithful and self-centred as your father. All the women he’d fondle at the opera. I got so sick of it one day I surprised him by dumping a Tupperware container of potato salad on his head from a box seat overhead. We never spoke after that. Argentina is too hot and the men drink too much. I read about your upcoming wedding in the papers and I’d love to come and meet the lucky girl, size her up for my approval, but I haven’t the money. Please send me pictures.*

*Love,  
Mother.*

He set the letter down. He’d never been so insulted in all his life. The least she could do was to try and make it to his wedding. His anger turned to depression and suddenly he felt like a loser of hitherto unknown proportions. He was sure he had failed his mother. Why else would she have abandoned him as a child and toss him around from one

boarding school to the next with only a distant aunt to provide some semblance of his belonging to a family? He was a complete nobody as a child and that was why she had never loved him. That also explained why his father never made an attempt to meet him. Too far gone for sorrow, he threw the letter away and vowed never to think of her again. As he looked out the window it occurred to him that perhaps she was the real failure. In rejecting him hadn't she actually *failed* to love her own son? What had he done wrong? Nothing at all. So, ultimately she was the *failure*, and not him. She was one of those people that you read about but never wanted to meet. By some fluke of nature she was lucky enough to have him as a son but was too dim to realise how much of a blessing to her miserable life he really was. But, he didn't care. No. He had Mini now. He had the Tantalus Project. And with it he had more friends than he knew what to do with.

The next day he flew back home and asked Brown to be best man. After all it was Brown that first suggested he try to find a woman.

"Best man? By golly. I hope I don't have to wear a suit."

"No sir. You can wear whatever you like."

"Good. I'll wear my best coonskin hat and a buckskin jacket."

"I think that might be pushing it too far, sir."

"You're too serious, kid. I was just seeing what I could get away with. Of course I'll wear a suit. I've got one at home - an old confederate general's suit. It'll do fine."

The next day The Candidate made plans to go to Yellowstone with Mini and her parents. In the few times they'd met he was already starting to like them. Some weekends he would fly with Mini back to Idaho and spend whole days in her mom's pancake house drinking coffee and staring into her eyes amidst the almost impossibly large mounted trophy fish and wildlife oils, colours so bright and exaggerated they were almost psychedelic: turquoise mountainsides, puce sunsets spreading like pink honey across the amber horizon, and lakes, a smooth green enamel at the feet of majestic mountains enshrouded by purple and lime clouds. Mini's mother always made sure to stop at their table every ten minutes to top up their coffee. Her smile had the comforting assurance of a live-in housemaid from an early sixties sitcom. Come closing time they'd drive out to *the ranch*, a small bungalow in midtown with a quarter acre back yard - home to a crippled racehorse - where they'd drink a finger of rye whiskey with her dad and play black jack with Willie Nelson jangling away in the background.

At the end of these peaceful mountainside retreats The Candidate would return to Western Polytechnic totally rested, his face displaying the smug look of a Marxist intellectual who'd just spent an entire week at an East German sheet metal factory. He was not only a hit on the science circuit, but he was also blessed with the gift of humility and rapport with the common man, the average blue collar worker or urban cowboy to whom the Tantalus Project was just some crazy government scheme.

"I bet you'd like another helping of roast beef," her father said as they sat in the helm of their trailer a week later at Bryce Canyon.

"Sure thing, dad," said The Candidate.

"Aw, shucks Mom," Mini's father exclaimed to her mother. "I like this kid. He already calls me *Dad*."

"You started calling me Mom on our first date, so why not?" her mother replied.

"Throw another slab of cow on the stove, dear," he said.

"Gee whizz. You're all too kind," said The Candidate.

“And melt a marshmallow over it while you’re at it.”

Mini’s mother took out a marshmallow and set it on top of The Candidate’s half-cooked steak. She let it pucker and burn into a sizzling white gum before she took the steak off the grill.

The Candidate winced, but only slightly so as not to offend Mini’s parents.

“An old family recipe,” declared her father.

“I was thinking,” said her mother, “that we could have some kind of marshmallow-steak sandwich for the wedding.”

“Sounds great, dear,” said her father.

“What do you think, sonny boy?” Mini’s mother turned to The Candidate.

“Sounds...well...”

“I knew you’d like it,” Mini’s father interjected.

“What kind of paper bells are we having?” asked Mini, a look of jubilation on her face like every second was a new moment of wonder.

“Bells? Why we can have silver bells. Big, puffy silver bells. Paper bells. Silver puffy paper bells,” her mother enthused. “I’ve already picked some out in a *Walmart* wedding bell catalogue.

The Candidate was tickled with delight. “And I’ll buy you a diamond ring, honey dew.”

They sat together, the four of them - mother, father, daughter, and future son in law - in the comfortable confines of the trailer, watching the patterns made by the dark and hairy moths as they beat their wings against the mosquito screen. In the shadows of the late dusk the large clumsy insects took on the appearance of miniature sea monkeys vying for space on the rippling wire grid.

## 4. Wedding Bells

After months of anticipation, the wedding day finally came. The morning air was speckled with a light mist and sunlight streamed down from the deep blue sky like a river of flaming jewels. Clouds sauntered through the crisp clean air, spreading out their lily-white wings like cotton-baton patterns woven through the sky. The Candidate had never been happier in his life. He opened the window of his ocean side hotel room. Before him frothed the soft waters of the Pacific, its frills of white foam and green majestic waves sounding together in a symphony of water and joy. He watched the waves sway and churn, breaking into sharp white turrets just before crashing on the smooth wet beach. Directly below his window was a white strip of sand, stretching with geometrically flawless borders for what seemed like miles in either direction. He leaned his head out the window and took a breath of fresh air. His day had finally arrived. Many days, even big days, had arrived for him in the past, but no one would dispute that this was *his day alone*, his one and only biggest day. *His day*.

The service was held late in the afternoon in a large chapel in Beverly Hills. The Candidate's aunt was the first to arrive, dressed in a frumpy blue dress with an expression on her face like she was just about to endorse some time-honored brand of butter.

"Knock 'em dead, sonny," was all she said as he walked up to her and kissed her on the cheek.

"I will, auntie. Just for you," he said. A tear rolled down her soft white cheeks.

A few minutes later the entire science faculty of Western arrived in convoy. Zhitnik stepped out of a black limousine shrink-wrapped in a tight black suit that looked several sizes smaller than his body. He always felt most at home in skin-tight clothing and small cramped spaces. It was the way he grew up. His parents locked him in a dark cellar in Warsaw for five years before letting him to see the light of day. It was in the darkness that he learned to *see* with sounds. He developed bat-like sonar systems, bouncing the sound of his own breathing off of air born dust particles as they made their way to the cellar floor. Once he was even sure he could chart the boundaries of the room by letting his own body odour bounce off the walls, absorbing the smell of the chipping paint and plaster before reflecting it back to his nose with a host of new information that could be deconvoluted to reveal the shape of the room. It was during these days in the darkness of the cellar that he developed his first interests in science, often calculating where unseen dust particles should land on the basis of their mean velocity as determined by his aural and olfactory sonar system. It was also in the depths of this cellar that he first learned to distrust himself and everything around him.

Brown scrapped the Confederate theme and showed up dressed like a dapper Roy Rogers, a string tie and pearl buttons lining his two-tone silken cowboy shirt. He even wore a pair of white cowboy boots with a gold lasso inlay. Benson came alone, Theresa having a last-minute family emergency out on a remote farm in Vermont. Hedges arrived dressed like the classic professor – a less eccentric Sherlock Homes in classic brown and grey tweed with leather arm patches. He held an elegant pipe in his left hand, its stem smoothly bent like the neck of a flamingo. Lapoisse leapt out of a BMW with ten roles of film and an antique Leica camera apparently once used to photograph Marilyn Monroe. This was going to be one of the most famous weddings of the decade and there was no way he was going to miss a chance to etch its glowing wonder onto the timeless grid of photographic emulsion. The Candidate was going to be the Elvis Presley of science and Lapoisse wanted a piece of the action. Gables looked the sharpest of them all, even sharper than The Candidate, sporting a loose fitting Italian suit tailored from a breakthrough Milanese fabric that was so smooth and soft it was impossible for women to touch it without getting sexually aroused. Wexford climbed out of a 1953 Edsel in a three-button peak lapel charcoal grey suit, smoky arabesques of Chicago sophistication flowing upwards from his slick brown Du Mauriers with every elegant drag. Surprising no one, Della Casa showed up in the same leisure suit he always wore, dappled with ketchup stains and cigarette burns and drenched in so much sweat it seemed he was surrounded by an invisible shield of body odour. Nakahira and Monashi arrived in a sleek black Acura, posing as the King and Prime Minister of *Makashi*, an Asian country nobody had ever heard of, but was supposed to have the fastest growing economy in the world. The last of *The Tantalus Gang*, as the LA times had called them, was Heisman, who pulled up in a military jeep in full fatigues and decoration - the quintessential

American general at some *save-the-world* meeting in an apocalyptic Japanese monster flick.

“I always loved the army,” said Mini as Heisman marched through the doors of the church and saluted. She was the most beautiful of all, hovering like a ball of light above the lawn in her long white dress. Her parents bought it mail order from a place called *Wedding World* in Culver City as part of a package deal with paper bells and printed invitations, special typefaces on request. She had seen it advertised on the *Wedding Channel*, a new cable station that claimed to broadcast live weddings twenty-four hours a day. The dress was tight around the waist and bust line with tiny pearls sewed in festooning patterns down the arms, flaring out to her knees and then tightening up at the feet like an inverted tulip. The Candidate - dressed in a sea foam green tuxedo - couldn’t believe what his eyes were telling him.

“Mini, my candy girl. You look so lovely! I feel like I’m in the movies.”

“Maybe we are! Maybe we’re being filmed right this minute. Wouldn’t that be exciting?”

“Oh, Mini. Every day is going to be a movie for us from here on in.”

“I just love movies,” she said, throwing up her arms as if she was just about to launch into the theme song of some Hollywood musical. The Candidate lifted her off her feet and set her down on a bed of flowers beside the front door of the church.

The wedding ceremony was short and traditional. An organist played Chopin’s wedding march as the young couple walked down the aisle to the altar. The Candidate beamed with happiness as Brown took out the wedding ring and handed it to him.

“Now, don’t you ever go huntin’ no hog with this young lassie,” Brown whispered into The Candidate’s ear. “Keep her and polish her like an old flintlock.”

The Candidate was so happy he didn’t here a word. He just took the ring and shoved it on Mini’s finger so hard she let out a light scream. The guests, who’d been silent with reverent anticipation, broke out in a chorus of warm laughter. After the couple descended from the altar, the guests gathered in front of the church for pictures. Although they had hired a professional photographer, Lapoisse decided to run the show, elbowing the wiry Jewish man out of the way along with all his hundred pound tripods and three-foot zoom lenses.

“Move a little this way, darlings,” Lapoisse said to the party as he gestured vehemently with his hands. “No. That’s too far. Back the other way. There, there, there....THERE!” Snap. He took a shot and made a hand motion like an umpire signalling a strike. Then he motioned the crowd to move to another face of the church and did the whole thing all over again. The Jewish photographer was so insulted he packed his gear into his Chevy van and drove it directly across the lawn just as Lapoisse was taking his tenth shot. The crowd barely noticed, they were so drunk with glee. Even Zhitnik was laughing and waving as he stared off in space like the village idiot in a Dostoevsky novel.

When Lapoisse was finished, The Candidate’s aunt gave her beloved nephew a huge hug and walked off to her car.

“I’m too old for late-night parties now,” she said. The Candidate cried, but only briefly as he watched her car roll off in the distance.

The rest of the party – over a hundred strong - moved to Long Beach where the rental ocean liner was purring away, twenty odd waiters putting the last few cases of

champagne on ice. The sun was setting across the ever-placid Pacific as The Candidate and Mini drove up in their white Cadillac, all dressed up in streamers and balloons with Mini's favourite stuffed animals fixed to the radio antenna in poses made to look like they were climbing a tree. They were greeted by a black-suited Mexican maitre d' who escorted them graciously up the stairs to the main deck of the boat.

"I love you," said Mini.

"I love you, too."

"Not as much as I love you."

"Do you want to bet?"

"How much?"

"A hundred kisses."

"You're on."

The dining hall on the ocean liner was decorated with glittering crystal chandeliers. Smooth white cloths were draped over the twenty tables neatly arranged around the centre of the floor. At the front of the room directly under a giant coat of arms stood the bride and groom's table, elevated a foot or so off the main concourse. A name card was placed at each seat next to the water goblet.

When all the guests had arrived the cocktail bar opened for half an hour before the short session of speeches. Brown's was first. He stood up at the mike placed behind the head table and sputtered into it before starting.

"Would somebody get me a gad damn bourbon," he said. The waiters scurried around as if the last one to serve him would be forced to walk the plank. A minute later three waiters showed up, each with a glass of bourbon. He drank them in rapid sequence and cleared his throat. "That's better. First of all I'd like to thank every one here for a butt-kicker of a time." The crowd clapped. "When I first met this young man I took him for an ass greaser. Seriously. There was something about the way he dressed. Something about that smarmy *I want your dick in my mouth* smile. Something about the shape of his head. Something about the bulge in his pants when you weren't lookin'."

Half the crowd - mouths hanging wide open - looked on in uncomfortable shock and disgust, but The Candidate was too busy preening at his reflection in a full-length dolphin-shaped mirror beside his table to take notice. Mini sensed something was wrong but couldn't quite figure it out. There was some joke out there and she hadn't yet got it.

"I remember the night after we hired him," Brown continued. "I went home and sat on my porch. There were mosquitoes as big as coyotes buzzin' through the air. I heard a hyena howling in the distance. A giant fish with tusks as big as lampposts crawled out of the pond and slithered off into the rushes. Then some story came on the radio about a fugitive rape artist crawling through the swamplands. Yep, I thought. We just hired ourselves a real queer. I did my best to get used to him. What I'm getting at is that he's here right now. I mean, he wouldn't be if he was queer. Right? I would have taken him out in the woods and blown his head off and called it a hunting accident if he didn't turn out straight in the end."

Wexford cringed in his chair. Surely he was guilty by association. He stood up and rushed to the bathroom. On the way he passed Benson who was nodding his head in vacant bliss like a midnight stoner watching *Bugs Bunny* reruns on TV.

"I must say after all this," Brown went on. "I've come to like the boy. He's got a streak of that old saddle wax whistling through his veins. I told him to rush out and *get*

*some*, and he did. That proves he ain't queer. I'd also have to say that Mini meets up with all my expectations of what a man should have in his life. She's got it all. A man needs a little whiskey, but he also needs a little wine, *sweet old-fashioned honey wine*. I told the boy to go out searchin' for a little Fresno Fur and look what he brought back!" He paused for a moment and cleared his throat. "Now, thank you," he said. "Get back to whatever you were doing." He sat down.

The party began immediately. Gables sat in the back corner fixing his tie. A wall-size white sheet dropped revealing a Latin fusion pop group on a brightly-lit stage with a tropical backdrop and a small dancing area in front of it. The lead singer, a Richie Valens look-alike, two fuzzy black daggers for sideburns, bowed to the audience. He was dressed in a crimson tuxedo with white enamelled cowboy boots. After a few warm platitudes they opened with a jazzed-up version of *Oobladee Oobladah* before breaking into a softer set featuring the likes of Slim Whitman, Boz Skaggs, and *The Eagles*. The Candidate had never heard such fabulous music in all his life. The guitars lines were so crisp, the lyrics so deep and meaningful. Why hadn't modern rap bands devoted their time to stuff like this? Why didn't they just try to please the public instead of attacking them with that hate-filled nonsense they'd been peddling as music for years?

"A dance from the bride and groom," beckoned the lead singer in a sly accented voice. The Candidate and Mini took the centre stage under a bright pink spotlight. The band drifted into the first few chords of *Dust in the Wind* and Mini's mother burst into tears of joy. Della Casa nodded his head in approval. It was just like the old days on Miami Beach: the pink art deco buildings and parking lots filled with long, slim, convertibles sucking low to the pavement like rainbows on an oil slick. Ah, if only he could live through it all again!

"Miami mia!" he yelled out and rushed to the dance floor for a few huffs and puffs before he was too exhausted and sweaty to continue.

The bar reopened and Wexford went for the usual vodka Martini, shaken, not stirred, a trick he learned from the early Bond films. While your average philistine couldn't figure out what difference it made to the taste, Wexford knew better. After all, he was one of the last great doyens of the ballroom dance floor, a graduate of the *Silvertone* days, humming black and chrome amplifiers with a vibrato so smooth you could almost swallow it. Linoleum floors, yellowed walls - once pale pink, and ceiling-high mirrors were his moonlit home. In his early twenties women fainted on his looks alone. But he didn't stop there. If he was the ugliest man alive he could have still won them over with his charm. Women loved the gentle intelligence in his voice. They would phone him up just to hear him answer. *Do you love me?* they'd ask out loud in their bedrooms before he picked up on the other end. *Yes*, he'd always answer. Then the click and empty hum of a dead line would fill his ears. Yet he wasn't the type to take advantage of anyone. He loved but once in his life. A tiny French exchange student named Alisa who was inexplicably repulsed by him from the first day they met. He wrote her long and elegant love letters expressing his undying love as some sort of metaphysical law that only needed time and the right situation to blossom into being. The letters became so frequent that she eventually got so frustrated she told him to drop dead, but that only fuelled his love to greater heights. She was only afraid of her true feelings and refused to let them out. Eventually she moved back to France with a square-jawed football scholar she met at Northwestern. In hope that she would one day return he took up ballroom dancing - it

was the once thing he had missed the first time around and was sure to win her over. It was all a matter of mastering the right moves, the statuesque posture, the loose bellowed pants and suit that only gave hints of the perfect Olympian form hidden beneath. He learned the Fox-trot. The Charleston. The Samba. He even went wild for a few weeks in the Caribbean and returned with a tan and a certificate in Limbo. He danced lower and longer than whole beaches of slim Latin men with tight buttocks and cocoa-brown skin could ever dream of. The style he'd perfected the most however, but never once danced in public - as he was reserving it for that one magical reunion with Alisa - was the Tango. It was too sensual and sultry to just *try out* on the average ballroom partner. You could only properly mark a woman with whom you planned to spend the rest of your life. Like love or dropping an atom bomb, choosing a partner for the Tango was a thing you could do but once. Tonight, however, it was the Charleston. The partners he picked, to avoid any misconceptions lest they think he was making advances on to them, were all over seventy. A group of floral-patterned women waited in line for a chance to dance with *that smart looking boy with the River-Dance feet* as one of them called him.

The Candidate swept Mini off the floor and spun her in two full circles before letting her feet drop gently to the floor. Then he took her right hand with his left and raised them both high in the air. He folded his right arm around her waist and stepped backwards.

"You'd think they knew each other from a hundred years, the way they're going at it," whispered Heisman to Della Casa.

"She dances just like my mama!" Della Casa replied.

By eleven o'clock all but Zhitnik were engaged in conversation. The Pole sat alone in the corner with a look of tight-lipped horror spread across his face. What was it? The speed of the boat? The wattage of moonlight on its smooth white roof? Or the frequency of the motor? What was going to clue him into the date of the big apocalyptic merger? A newspaper article he'd read that very morning voiced shadows of disapproval concerning the merger from various rival telecommunications companies like Sprint and AT & T. Yet he knew. These press releases were just decoys set to confuse the public while they prepared for the great battle with UPS.

As the crowd began to visibly thin Della Casa and Hedges were arguing about the potential for mining precious metals on the moon as they shared a plate of oysters wrapped in shaved ham. Della Casa insisted that the moon was the next great mining frontier and that the person clever enough to exploit it would be the wealthiest man in history.

"I should claim a the moon," he said. "All the explorers, they came to the new world and took whatever they could. The world is a really no one's, but when a land is unoccupied, it's first come first served for mineral rights. Do you see anyone calling the moon *New Denmark*? No. The Moon, she will one day be called *Della Casa*."

Hedges replied dryly as he denuded an olive in his mouth. "I just don't see how you could make any money if you had to ship everything back in rockets before you could sell it. The cost of the fuel and the development of a leading space program to get a decent work force there would be too much."

"But isn't that what the Tantalus Project is all about?" Della Casa's eyes glimmered with a look of devious satisfaction that only knowledge of a switchblade in one's pocket could bring.

After a few milks, Heisman loosened up and started doing the twist to a calypso version of *My Sharona*, uniform fully buttoned and intact. Gables and Benson were locked in romantic rivalry with two of Mini's cousins from Texas, each taking turns trying to impress them, Gables with well-crafted stories of romance and intrigue set in the London theatre district and Benson with epic tales of dope - how much, scored from which ghetto-blaster-wielding spade in which alleyway and bleak mornings in empty hotel rooms recovering from a night of hallucination and too much sex.

"I remember some Oaxacan Red I scored one weekend in San Diego." Benson exclaimed. "Holly Jesus on a Harley!"

"Wow," said Mini's youngest cousin, her eyes big, blue and wild.

"It was so strong it only took one toke before I thought I was some ancient warrior fighting off a horde of demons. And when I came to I was in a prison cell somewhere in Miami."

"Miami?" asked the other cousin in disbelief.

"It's all rubbish," Gables interjected. "Devote yourself to the illusion of theatre and not the theatre of illusion."

"Well, it looks like Houdini here thinks he's got a better story," Benson countered.

"Why take drugs to alter reality when art is all that's required?"

"Are you an artist? How cool!" exclaimed the younger cousin. She turned sharply away from Benson. "I think I like *you* better. Your friend should just go back to Vietnam and drop acid with the Vietcong."

Benson arched his eyebrow in offence.

"Now, now Benson," said Gables pompously. "There's enough for both of us." He gestured over to the older cousin.

"Don't mind these snobs," she said. "I love dope stories. Art's for farts!"

Brown sat with Mini's father, exchanging rodeo stories and shots of bourbon while The Candidate and Mini moved in slow and tender waltzes across the starlit dance floor, now glimmering under the fully retracted ceiling.

But where was Lapousse in all this? Certainly he had to be somewhere recording this miraculous spectacle so people hundreds of years into the future could gape in awe as they pulled open the hulking metal door of some rusted old time capsule they'd just mined from the ground. But all one had to do to find him was venture out on the deck where he was photographing himself jumping up in the air in his bathing suit, the reception in full view through the window behind him. If he could just aim the flash just right so as not to wash out the party with glare off the glass it would be a prize-winner for sure: *Time* magazine cover page at the very worst. And he'd be in it. Right there for all of America to see. Chairman of Western Polytechnic? Bah! It would never get him up in lights. Not like this. He adjusted the string on his bathing suit one last time for the first take on the new roll. He'd jump up and down and keep clicking over and over without stopping until the roll was finished.

He took a deep breath and held out the camera, pointing it boldly back towards himself. He jumped a couple of times to warm up. Then he started clicking. One. Two. Three...by fifteen he was so into it he was going down into deep knee bends and springing up jack-in-the-box-like as high as he could go. In the middle of the twentieth snap he got a brilliant idea and went for it. He stopped for a moment and then hopped over to the side of the boat, realizing he was more drunk than he'd been in years. He

took a deep breath and dove square into the churning black ocean below, clicking and clicking as he sailed downwards towards the water's surface. If the flash were turned up just a little higher he might have seen the jutting rock the skipper had masterfully avoided on docking through advanced sonar and nautical know-how. But Lapoisse had no idea what he was about to hit as he took one last click, the camera aimed directly at his jubilant ecstatic face.

The next morning a few people were still drinking and flirting on the deck - sticky with wedding cake and dried-up champagne - when a Mexican waiter shouted out in horror. *Senior Lapoisse! Senior Lapoisse!* Lapoisse's body was stiff from rigor mortis, his head and arms lodged just below the water's surface in a crack between two rocks, the rest of his body jack-knifing straight up in the air. The camera was recovered and the photos he had taken the night before were in perfect condition. The image of him paralysed in the position of a diver just about to enter water was so macabre it made the front page of the LA Times.

The Candidate was horrified. Nothing like this had ever happened to him. He was just a nice boy from a small southern town. Things like this weren't supposed to happen to *nice boys*. He was so ruffled from the bizarre and tragic accident he and Mini took a full two weeks off in Cancun, instead of the two days he had originally planned for his honeymoon.

When The Candidate got back he was sluggish and bronzed from the Mexican sun. His first day back to Western he found a note on his door from Hedges. The Candidate went to the older professor's office immediately. Hedges sat behind his desk tapping a pencil on a piece of paper. He scratched his head and adjusted his glasses.

"I hope you had a nice honeymoon."

"Yes, sir. It was wonderful. They get all the best American TV stations down there."

"That's good," said Hedges. He was a man who neatly disposed of all platitudes to get down to the pith of the matter. "I just wanted to inform you that the department has made a decision."

"Yes," said The Candidate. His eyes were wide and expectant.

"Not only are we offering you early tenure - how could we deny it? - but we'd also like to offer you the job as our new chairman."

"But, sir," implored The Candidate. He was dumbfounded. "I haven't even been here for three years."

"Well, you can start again. Tomorrow. At your new job."

Hedges swivelled around in his leather chair, signalling the end of the conversation.

The next day, The Candidate expressed his deepest grief for Lapoisse and his family over the campus radio station and an hour later he accepted the job as new chairman.

## 5. The Vice Chancellor of Chancelloring

The Lapoisse incident was soon forgotten. Since he was rarely on campus anyway his loss did little to disrupt the day-to-day activities of Western Polytechnic. The deceased chairman became little more than a sentimental display item – a resplendent gold wreath nestled around a black and white photo hanging in a small glass trophy case outside The Candidate’s office. The photo showed him standing next to a Formula One car during a live pit stop smiling with his arms around Mario Andretti and Michael Schumacher. Students occasionally stopped to gaze with vacant curiosity at the trophy case display before rushing off to their next lecture at the sound of the hourly buzzer. The Candidate slipped into his new position without so much as a shoehorn. In just weeks he was perfectly adept at the job as if all his newfound leadership abilities had only been tucked away in some psychological closet since birth just waiting to see the light of day. He was a natural.

Promotion to chairman had numerous privileges. His salary was increased by thirty thousand dollars a year. He was given a special parking spot marked by a gold plaque - his name gloriously etched on its surface in Roman characters. He could eat for free at the Faculty Club. He was awarded a second office with a huge leather swivel chair and a desk so large you could almost play racquet sports on it. There, he would sit for long relaxing hours in deep thought, only occasionally signing an important form with his platinum-tipped fountain pen. In only his first month he quickly learned it was best to delegate the more trivial tasks, i.e. ninety percent of his workload, to one of his four secretaries in the office next door.

Life as a young husband was also treating him well. Now that he finally had a home base to ground his life and give him the strength to achieve even greater goals, there would be no more lonely Friday nights pouting in front of the television with only the hot swelling foil of a *Jiffy Pop* to keep him company. No more late dinners at *Dairy Queen* and no more Saturday morning cartoons. Every day he would come home at six with dinner already steaming on the table and after desert he would warm his feet by the electric log Mini had flicked on flick on while he poured himself an apéritif. Home sweet home, he’d think. He had never been so happy.

For the time being they decided to stay put in his penthouse suite. Although he was often too exhausted to satisfy Mini’s sexually, you could never say that they lived a life bereft of physical pleasure. Their sex life was as good as anyone’s. And that was exactly the way he wanted it. If his sex life was too vibrant, the other professors would resent him for his youthful vigour. If it wasn’t good enough, she’d start cheating on him and he’d be labelled a flaccid old goat and eventually get demoted to some low-end administrative position.

In a matter of months his life had settled to a comfortable routine involving work, exercise, and the occasional walk in the park with Mini, who took immediately to home decoration. She painted each room a different color. The kitchen was watermelon pink. The bathroom was sunflower gold. The bedroom was powder blue. His study was the

dignified brown of men's brief cases and cigar boxes, with an old wooden globe standing to the right of his oak desk.

During the first year of their marriage Mini had already become involved in several off-campus self-help groups sponsored by Community League organisations. She regularly invited wives of other faculty over to read and interpret popular psychology books with titles like *The Joy of being Joyous*, *The Perils of the Flat Soufflé*, and *How I Became Me*. Although she was not an unhappy person, she saw it as her duty to society to help those that were. Life was a big red balloon and she was chosen by God to teach people how to catch the string and ride with it. All you had to do was learn how to embellish the dull moments with your own imagination. When she was alone she liked to fantasize about sixties spy movies and science fiction marionette programs. Growing up on a farm had always left her secretly longing for something more exotic and public television reruns of old British cult programs were the perfect outlet. Sometimes she imagined she was Emma Peel from *The Avengers*, taking on armies of oriental assassins with their razor-rimmed bowler hats and smart black suits. They would corner her in alleyways while she was busy fixing her hair, they would leap out from behind her sports coupe while she was adjusting her scarf, flexing finely drawn muscles under their crisp white dinner shirts. Sometimes she would let them take her hostage up to secret hideouts in the centre of active volcanoes, other times she would take them all on with her vicious charm, tricking them into thinking she was in love with every last one of them for just long enough that they would turn on each other in jealousy. But playing temptress had its risks as sometimes they would figure her out, turn on her with redoubled strength by cornering her in an alley and demanding group sex. At the last minute, she'd pull out a forty-five and shoot them all dead. In other fantasies her opponents were Russians with huge fuzzy beards and Cossack hats racing through the Siberian outlands on a snowmobile. She would chase them over icy crevasses and jagged cliffs, finally cornering them against the walls of wooden ski chalets. There, she would take out her laser ski pole and one-by-one fry them into oblivion. In her most unusual fantasy she was Lady Penelope from *Thunderbirds*. Cruising in her elegant pink Bentley she would search the streets for the sexy likes of Joe Ninety or some other fellow mannequin. Once she found the right man, she would take him back to one of her secret bases, which was usually Thunderbird Two, because it was the biggest and had the most luxurious bedrooms. There, in taut upper class English, she would demand oral sex from her spellbound puppet slaves. How many wooden faced dolls had pinned her up against the wall in these almost daily fantasies? By now she'd lost count, once even taking Rupert the Bear back to Thunderbird Four for a leisurely duet with The Soup Dragon.

Although The Candidate didn't like to admit it, the job of chairman had a few obvious downsides. Not only did he have to manage the Tantalus Project on the side, but he also had to manage student issues and settle departmental disagreements, which more often than not took the form of childish disputes. If Brown and Hedges weren't arguing about research space, then Zhitnik was claiming that the secretaries were stealing glassware from his labs, or there was a line of students half a mile long complaining about their grades in one of Benson's surprise quizzes. One day, six months after The Candidate's promotion, Gables walked into his office dressed in Shakespearean pantaloons with a parrot squawking on his shoulder. With shadows looming in every corner of the office Gables felt like he was walking onto the set of the Orson Welles production of *Macbeth*.

“Knock before you enter,” The Candidate snapped. It was only noon and he was already two hours behind the day’s schedule. The last thing he needed was to be disturbed.

“I’m sorry?” said Gables. He’d never seen The Candidate act so rudely. Perhaps the new position was too much for him.

“Oh, I must not have made myself clear,” The Candidate said. “Knock before you enter.”

“No more *sir*?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m very busy.”

“Time. That’s exactly why I’ve always avoided the job. If I ever became chairman I wouldn’t have had the time to pursue my acting career.”

“Being chairman didn’t get in the way of Lapoisie gallivanting all over the globe in search of *fame*, did it?”

“Now, now. We shouldn’t let this new promotion go to our head. Why look at what happened to Othello when he let his new-found power take hold of him?”

“What was that?”

“He met his downfall by becoming too greedy. Or was that Banquo? Damn! I always get them confused.” He slammed his fist on the table. “Anyway, it was one of them. The point is that power corrupts.”

The Candidate was blank and expressionless. He was too busy thinking about a report he was preparing on the number of office desks in the science faculty to care. He could have been a monkey staring at a wall of hieroglyphics for all Gables’ comments had meant to him.

“I liked you better before you got tenure,” said Gables.

“I’m not going to take this job sitting down, you know.”

“I never said you were.”

“I’m going to shake things up. I’m not putting up with any of this.”

“Such as?”

“I’ll show you how serious I am. Just look at this!”

The Candidate stood up and walked around the left side of his desk to where Gables was standing. The parrot squawked out something that sounded like *take off your panties and I’ll give you an A*. Gables blushed with embarrassment.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that, Gables,” The Candidate said with a frown. He then held out a piece of paper to Gables. Gables took it and read it.

*I hereby promote the current chairman to the position of Vice Chancellor of Chancelloring.*

“What, may I ask, is *The Vice Chancellor of Chancelloring*?” asked Gables in a mock-English accent.

“I am *The Vice Chancellor of Chancelloring*.”

“Yes, I can see that from the form.”

“So, what’s the problem, then?”

“*Chancelloring* isn’t even a word.”

“Yes it is, sir.” The Candidate stopped for a moment and reflected on what he had just said. “Sorry. What I really meant was simply *yes it is*. Obscure Scottish derivation.”

“Rubbish. One look at English grammar would tell you that the “chancellor” is one who “chancells”, so what you really mean is the *Vice President of Chancelling*, assuming that chancelling is even a word, which it isn’t. But just for the sake of argument, we’ll assume that “chancelloring” is actually is a word. What then might be the wondrous duties of this honourable new position?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“So, why bother?”

The Candidate was incensed. In all his time at Western Polytechnic no one had ever questioned him. “There was no Vice Chancellor of Chancelloring, so I had to appoint someone. Who else would vice-chancellor the chancelloring? Consider yourself lucky that I didn’t appoint you instead. It’s such a tough position it doesn’t even have a function yet. That’s why it was so important that I make an appointment as soon as possible. If someone doesn’t dream up a list of duties soon the position will become redundant overnight. And I saw no person better suited...”

“How noble of you.”

Just then the parrot tore the appointment letter out of Gables’ hands and ripped it in half with its beak.

“I demand this animal be removed from my office immediately,” shouted The Candidate. “How dare it interfere with the appointment process.”

“It’s only exercising a little...”

“I don’t care how much time it spends in the gym,” barked The Candidate.

Gables smirked. “...old fashioned scepticism, if you would just allow me to finish.”

“Just get it away from me,” exclaimed The Candidate. He shrunk back in disgust. “What sort of filthy vulture is it, anyway?”

“I bought it down at *Pet World* for half price. I’ll have you know it’s protected by the SPCA.”

“Get it out of my office. Now.”

“If you insist, you old sour puss. What ever happened to that sweet back home southern kid?”

“He was *promoted*.”

The Candidate glared at Gables as he walked out of the room. The day was ruined. Because of Gables and his miserable parrot he’d have to cancel his mineral water tasting in the afternoon just so he could meet with his secretary and type up a new appointment letter.

Over the next six months The Candidate appointed himself as chair of several new boards. If something great and prodigious didn’t happen to him each and every week, his career would be perceived as stagnating and he’d soon be labelled as academic dead wood. And if he showed any sign of weakness in his dealings with the lower faculty he would certainly be taken as a failure. He didn’t like being hard-nosed, but sometimes the job demanded it. Every week new memos were deposited in the faculty mailboxes. He became Head Minister of President-in-Chiefs, Provost-Cardinal of Corporal Administering and even Staff Director of Staff Directions. When he ran out of positions,

he simply made up new ones or re-appointed himself to posts that were already his, hoping nobody would notice the redundancies.

With Nakahira and Monashi nominating him for industrial science awards several times a month, the Tantalus Project continued to expand. Fifty researchers were employed in total, each working on a completely unrelated piece of science. Only The Candidate knew exactly where each fragment fit into the larger whole. Some synthesized new chemicals. Some studied the effects of radiation on the forest habitat. Some fired lasers through unusual gasses and measured the frequency of the emitted energy. No one was allowed to utter a word of their results to anyone, even those working on the same experiment, the danger of intelligence leaks was so high. Heisman made extra sure that not a word was uttered during working hours as he paced back and forth through the labs like a submarine commander ten seconds before an attack on a German U-boat. Anyone caught breaching protocol was summarily docked on their next pay cheque.

A year after The Candidate's promotion to chairman, he took Mini to Europe to spend three weeks at Euro Disneyland. On their last night Mini had a dark look in her eye like she had something serious to say.

"I'm..."

"Overjoyed," said The Candidate. "I certainly am. If there's one thing I hate about France it's that it's just too French. The same holds true for the rest of Europe. And now there's all those Muslim terrorists to worry about. I'm so grateful to Walt Junior and the boys for setting up this quaint little oasis of hope. Just give it time and there'll be even more places like this and European vacations can be safe at last. No more communists. No more fascists. No more terrorists or waiters with funny accents demanding huge tips."

"That's not what I meant."

"You mean you don't agree with me?"

"No, you silly. Of course I do. How could I disagree with *you*?" Her wide trusting eyes grew one notch wider. The Candidate smiled proudly. He was so happy to have a wife like Mini. What would his life be like if he ended up with, well, one of *these* people? He gestured towards a few Gypsies who were gathered around a pile of old popcorn boxes. Mini put her hand on his shoulder. "We're going to have a baby," she said, her eyes exploding with excitement.

The Candidate was busy frowning at a group of Italian schoolgirls who were pointing their fingers in blatant ridicule at a statue of Goofy. "What was that you were saying? Something about ...*I love you baby*?"

"You silly. I said we're having a baby!"

"What?" The Candidate froze in mid-motion. He was so shocked he let his cotton candy slide down his face onto the lapels of his seersucker suit, leaving a sticky pink trail of spider veins in its wake. "You don't mean..."

"I certainly do."

"My goodness." He turned white and shuffled his fingers around frantically. "This is so special. I don't know what to do, honey bell. We can't just stand here staring at the ground. We have to celebrate."

They spent that night making love in front of the television in their five-star hotel taking short breaks to drink *Diet Sprite* mixed with Champagne while NCAA basketball played on the satellite network.

“I love you,” said Mini.

The Candidate touched her nose as though it were a magic button of joy. “What should we name him?”

“But we don’t even know if it’s a boy or a girl.”

“I’m so excited!”

The Candidate sprang off the bed and jumped for joy. He imagined a fully dressed miniature replica of himself - identical in every respect save for its size - kicking around in Mini’s stomach. His mind reeled with the countless possibilities. They spent the rest of the week in celebration touring the Rhine valley thinking about the future and how wonderful it was going to be.

Nine months later, the baby was born. It sprang out into that April morning so blue and screaming that The Candidate ran out of the operating room in blind panic, certain it was either hideously deformed or the offspring of some demonic vulture. A gentle old doctor of the country mold calmed him down and reassured him that it was perfectly normal to be born blue.

“Some people were blue all their lives,” the doctor explained. “Billy Holladay for instance. I consider myself lucky to be just born blue.” He laughed a wise and generous laugh that immediately soothed The Candidate. Fuelled with new confidence, he walked back into the operating room. It was a girl, a bright pulchritudinous blob with a sprig of tawny hair twirling upwards from her small round head. Her cheeks sagged like those of Winston Churchill, a sure sign that the baby was one day destined for greatness. But not only that, the baby was *already* great. The Candidate just knew it as she lay there in front of him whining in the incubator. Men could be great. Women could be great. Books and wine could also be great. So why not babies? Standing before him was one of the world’s great babies and not just a baby one day destined for greatness.

“Percilla. We have to call her Percilla.” The Candidate beamed with joy. “Percilla!” he repeated with glee.

“That’s exactly what I wanted to call her,” Mini pouted. “You always think of things first.” She buried her head in her pillow. For the first time in her life she felt genuinely unhappy and inferior. It seemed with the birth of a new happiness came also the birth of a new sadness.

“It’s every husband’s job to think of things first,” The Candidate said with a tenderness that instantly appeased her.

They took Percilla home in a bright fluffy bundle and set her on the bed between them. Like all truly great babies, Percilla slept through the night without so much as a peep. In the morning Mini went out to buy her first crate of baby formula. When she came back she found The Candidate bouncing Percilla on his knee singing Elvis Presley’s *In the Ghetto*. She opened the curtains to a bright flush of light and colour. The rays of sunlight took on a distinctly pinkish hue as they streamed through the window and across the room before settling on the glossy surface of The Candidate’s forehead. For a brief moment it was as if he was no longer chairman and all the innocent beauty of his early days at Western had risen to the surface and blossomed inside him once more.

## 6. The Hedges Effect

Enormous grey clouds swam through the sky like fleets of giant belugas on some vast and purposeless migration. The sun was nowhere to be seen. A thick ice fog hung over the cold damp streets. The lawns of Western Polytechnic had lost their midsummer green and heaps of freshly fallen maple leaves, some gathered around the trunks of the strong and heavy trees while others had been blown up against the walls of the ivy-covered buildings, formed random piles exuding the sweet autumnal perfumes of decay. The Candidate was sitting behind the oak desk of his office proof reading a last minute report on the Tantalus Project. Things were going smoothly at home and for the first time in his life he didn't have a worry in the world. Percilla was already six months old and sleeping soundly through the night and Mini had taken a course in origami so she could better decorate her crib and room. Just as The Candidate grabbed his coat and was about to go for lunch Gables rushed in.

"Guess what?" he blurted while flipping through a copy of Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*.

"What?" replied The Candidate with strained enthusiasm. He was hungry and all his energies were focused on procuring a fresh tuna sandwich.

"Hedges just won the Nobel Prize!"

"I thought he was in Spain lecturing on world peace."

"It's in all the newspapers."

The Candidate smiled wryly. Gables was obviously pulling his leg. "I thought that was only for old men with grey hair and pipes."

"Exactly!" said Gables. "You said it. Take one look at Hedges and that's what you see. A grey-haired man with a pipe. That's it. Nothing more. And what has he accomplished? Nothing. Or nothing of any real importance, at any rate. Yes, if only Lapousse were alive to savour the moment." Gables chuckled wickedly. "The silly old fool would probably have hired an entire film crew to capture the moment."

Gables set his book down just as Brown walked in. He was chewing on a piece of dried buffalo hide. "I just heard the news," he said. "I was sure the next Nobel Prize would be in sasparilla. Gosh darn it! I can't say I'm all that impressed."

"Neither am I," said Gables.

"It's all because of those faggy wire-frame glasses of his," said Brown. "If he dressed like a real man he never would have won nothin'. You might be able to fool those commie rug munchers at The Swedish Academy, but you can't fool me."

"No argument from this panel," said Gables.

"He ain't never done no real science either," said Brown.

"Don't we all know," echoed Gables. "Haven't we all had to suffer through it for the last ten years. The Hedges Effect. The Hedges Number. The Hedges Law..."

"What about The Hedges Dump?" Brown broke out laughing. "That scientific law that states that shit drops downwards from your arsehole till it hits pond water. And only then does it float!" He slapped his thighs with hilarity. "That's what I call *hole-istic* science. Because it has to do with your arse-*hole*!"

The Candidate picked up a copy of the first newspaper he could. On the front page was an article summarizing Hedges' academic career and his key scientific discoveries. His list of achievements seemed truly formidable. There was the *Hedges Effect*, a physical phenomenon involving the luminescence of metals, *The Hedges Number*, a numerical exactitude like  $e$  or  $\pi$  that kept coming up in physical calculations, especially those involving black holes on the fringes of the universe, and *The Hedges Law* which stated that things of equal mass, shape and composition must, by physical necessity be equal - although they might sell for a different price at Sears. To the layman's mind it sounded like a truism, but it took five three-hundred page volumes of high-powered mathematics to prove. Wading through this obscure mass of scientific scripture was said to be like deciphering the walls of an ancient Egyptian temple. After its first publication it was deemed controversial. Critics the world over argued that it was not clear that being *equal* was *the same* as being *the same* or even *equal* to being *the same*, or *the same* as being *equal*, for that matter, even though to an untrained mind it appeared that being *equal* was obviously *the same* as being *equal*, and even *equal* to being *equal*. On top of these step changing discoveries, the article went on to state that Hedges was the founder of three axioms and one postulate. In an age where virtually all axioms and postulates had already been attributed to the white-robed men of antiquity, it was almost inconceivable that a man who drove around in a second-hand Volkswagen Jetta wearing a worn out tweed suit could have the brains and pedigree to join this lofty club.

The next morning The Candidate sent out a memo declaring the previous day the most successful day in the history of Western Polytechnic. Not only was it a victory for science, but also a conquest of the new over the old, the small over the big, and the poor over the rich. A big win for the homeboys on every front possible! The Candidate ordered fifty cases of champagne and a hundred kilos of smoked salmon, all on the Wexford account. This was the beginning of a new era of glory and distinction at Western Polytechnic. A hundred years later groups of lauded historians, social luminaries, and wealthy businessmen would gather round a stack of yellowing photos showing Hedges and The Candidate clinking champagne glasses on a boating trip and think, *Man, if only I lived back then. Those were the times!*

The next day Della Casa and Heisman met in a conference room in the basement of The Heisman Centre. The room was lined in four feet of lead to avoid radioactive tracing and the ceiling was fitted with acoustic tiles to prevent echoing. The room was even equipped with a sonic scrambler such that communication was impossible unless one was wearing the appropriate sonic descrambling unit.

Heisman handed Della Casa a large grey helmet with a see-through visor identical to the one he was already wearing. A loud drone filled the room.

"What's this?" asked Della Casa. He squinted his eyes in confusion. He couldn't even hear himself speak. "Why can't we just have a talk over a Martini?"

"Security. The walls have ears."

"I don't see any ears."

"Invisible ears."

Heisman pointed instructively to the helmet in Della Casa's hands and then to Della Casa's head.

"Just put the damn thing on so we can get on with it."

Della Casa lifted the helmet to his head. With some trouble, he eventually worked the chinstrap under his jaw and flicked on the switch. A galaxy of clarity opened up before him. The world was suddenly the rim of a crystal glass, singing in choruses of rich and beautiful trebles. For a moment he thought he could hear the sound of a fresh hundred dollar bill crinkling in the pocket of some unknown pedestrian half a mile away. Hundreds always sounded different from the lesser bills, and it took a trained ear to know the difference.

“We have to act soon,” said Heisman.

“The Nobel Prize has created an adequate smoke screen.”

“Smoke has its seams. Its holes. All you need is an infrared sight on your gun and you can see through it.”

“What’s the current situation?” asked Della Casa.

“There’s trouble. Big trouble.”

“Our investments in Cuba are secure. We already have six new plantations under our control. The cocaine production promises to be massive.”

“Excellent.”

“We have more than enough resources at our finger tips.”

“There always will be,” said Heisman. “Wexford can always be relied upon to come up with more money.”

“Then what’s the complication?”

“The President’s men. We’re not free to act in Myanmar. The last shipment was raided by the US military. Luckily we disguised it as a Russian vessel.”

Heisman took a piece of folded newsprint out of his pocket and opened it up. *Weapons Shipment Intercepted, Russia Claims Innocence* was the headline.

“Eliminating the right men will ensure our success,” said Della Casa. He scratched his crotch. “He’s already been in office eight years so we’re due for a change. We have the money. We have the means.”

“It’s not so simple. Feds are like waves. There’s always a new one to take the place of the one before it. You can never get rid of them. For all we know Zhitnik could be a spy. He has all the right credentials. By posing as a crazy paranoid he might be just be trying to throw us off. And the way he had objections to my setting up security here. It makes you think.”

“Zhitnik is just a silly old fart,” said Della Casa.

“Perhaps. But I’m just trying to emphasise the point that we must be vigilant.”

“Is there any danger of the weapons shipment getting traced back to us?”

“With enough investigation...” Heisman paused.

“There must be records somewhere,” Della Casa interrupted. “They must be destroyed.”

“With enough money the papers can always be changed. No one needs to know exactly where they came from.”

“What about the cocaine?”

“Fortunately the drugs can’t be traced. They have no serial number and no manufacturer. The irony of drugs. Every molecule is the same, but every drug trip is different.”

“The beautiful irony,” said Della Casa, the tips of his smile reaching as far as the edges of his visor.

“I have a scheme,” said Heisman.

“Tell me more, my friend.”

“What one thing will always safeguard us from capture?”

“That’s impossible,” said Della Casa. “To do that we’d have to be above the law.”

“Is that so impossible?”

“What are you getting at?”

“Our friend,” said Heisman. “Our successful friend. He has it all.”

“He certainly does. For a man whose parents apparently abandoned him, he has certainly done well.”

“For a man with no brains, he’s done even better.”

“That goes without saying. Image is everything. An easily manipulated image is even more. He is power hungry and naive. A perfect combination. A perfect puppet.”

“How far do you think he can go?” asked Heisman.

“He’ll reach the top of all science.”

“Yes. But don’t you think he could go further?”

“I don’t understand,” said Della Casa.

“Let me put it this way. If the President were wrapped around our fingers, who would there be to contest us?”

“Nobody.”

“And with you and Wexford...”

“I haven’t invested a cent in this. Any successful businessman knows better than to use his own money.”

“With Wexford, then. With his money and our friend’s nose for victory, don’t you think he might one day be President?”

“Of the University?”

“You’re thinking too small. That is already in the cards.”

“Of the whole United States, then?”

“What other President is there?”

Della Casa took off his helmet and stared in wonderment at Heisman.

“You’re a genius,” said Della Casa. The drone was so loud he couldn’t hear a word.

Two days later the students and staff of Western Polytechnic gathered out in front of the science pavilion to greet Hedges and celebrate his Nobel Prize. Four rows of picnic tables were set up beneath a bright red canopy. Even the technicians and staff members employed by the Tantalus Project were allowed to take the day off and sit in the quad to celebrate the great moment. As the crowd gathered, the catering staff, decked out in crisp white suits and black bow ties, began to decorate the tables with elaborate displays of food and drink. The best French cheeses were cut in perfectly protracted triangles and wedged around mounds of rare shellfish and exotic vegetables. Breads, knotted and sculptured into complex Asiatic designs, dangled from thin strings from the inside of the red canopy. Champagne bottles were arranged in a neat square-based pyramid that rose out of a huge tub of ice. A brass band played Foxtrot tunes in a portable gazebo beside the main tent.

“I can’t believe it,” said Gables to Benson. “All this food and liquor and nothing for a low-fat diet. I should complain. What do they expect? Am I seriously supposed to inhale all those calories and cholesterol? I’m in a production next week and I have to be

as slender as I possibly can. Do you know what all these trans fats will do to my complexion?”

“Too gross for words,” said Benson. “I can’t even begin to imagine how many innocent cows suffered the abuses of greedy French farmers to get all that cheese. I bet this is just some plot by the meat lobbyists to reinforce animal abuse and fatten the profits of all the big slaughterhouses. I don’t think I can eat any of this without remorse. I’m a citizen of the universe, not a member of the *man against nature league*.”

Just then Hedges stepped out of a taxicab and walked over to the main tent.

“Something wicked this way comes!” Gables lifted his eyebrow trenchantly. “The Hedges Effect: that strange phenomenon occurring when everyone is suddenly bored by Hedges showing up on the scene and opening his fat mouth.”

Benson chuckled. Zhitnik approached them with a crab and Brie cracker in his hand.

“We have to be careful,” he whispered urgently.

“Yes. We might rupture the universal fabric by just standing here,” said Benson.

“It’s more than that.”

“Unhealthy to both mind and body,” added Gables.

“No. The radiation levels of the food have reached alarming highs.” He pulled a Geiger counter out of his pocket and held it up to the crab. The counter crackled with activity. “They’re just toying with us. There is just enough radiation in this food to turn our bodies into walking tracers. Then they will be able to monitor our every move. It’s ingenious.”

“Wait.” Gables pointed over to the stage erected twenty yards from the canopy. Hedges was already making his way up to the podium. He was wearing a tweed jacket with a hole in the elbow and a pair of baggy slacks that looked like they hadn’t been washed in a month. Like a modern day Socrates, he believed that material success and personal fame were things that only interfered with science and the pursuit of knowledge.

“Be quiet. We must listen,” said Zhitnik in a tone of hushed veneration like some prophet waiting for a divine utterance.

Hedges cleared his throat, untucked his shirt, and wiped his spectacles on the elastic of his underwear. The Candidate rose from the front of the crowd and took a snapshot. “My, what an awful flight back. This, as you know, is an occasion to be remembered,” Hedges began in the crusty voice of dignity. “I never dreamed it would happen to me...or at least so late in my life.”

People in the audience turned to one another and raised their eyebrows in anticipation.

Hedges continued. “Not that I criticise the Swedish Academy for not honouring me sooner. In fact it is to their credit that they forced me to make even more great discoveries before finally deciding to reward me. If I had won it fifteen years ago, I may never have discovered *The Hedges Effect*. You’ll have to excuse my arrogance, but it is a necessary element of all art and science. It is, in fact, the *Prometheus* - that rebellious pyromania - in us all, and not the *Tantalus* that keeps us pursuing pure knowledge with such fervour.” He looked over at The Candidate, a subdued but reckless grin cracking across his face.

Heisman turned to Wexford in astonishment. “The sheer audacity of the man,” said Heisman. “Who cares if he just won some lousy prize from Europe? He’d better watch what he says or the US Army might just have to *Tantal* his ass off!”

Wexford stared neutrally in the other direction, swirling a touch of tonic water in his Martini glass. The Candidate was too busy focusing his camera on the banner behind Hedges' head that read *Nobel Prize for Western* to listen.

"We have to beware of false results and outside political pressure that force science to bow down to causes other than itself," Hedges went on. "We have to let science improve the world on its own terms and not those of others who see it as a means to an end. The world is in the gravest of circumstances and as its citizens we all are responsible to bring to it only that which is best suited for its improvement. The travesty you see here is precisely the opposite..."

He pointed to *The Heisman Center*. The Candidate caught only the tail end of Hedges' gesture and mistakenly took it as an invitation to take the floor. He put the camera back into its bag and handed it to one of the security guards for safekeeping. Then he took his place at the base of the stairs up to the stage and waited for Hedges to finish. Taking pictures at such an event made The Candidate hungry for further conquests. He'd risen so high so quickly that he was already feeling the pressure of the ceiling banging into his head. Now that the Nobel Prize – the Superbowl of all science – had been won in his presence, all of science had suddenly lost its sheen and become commonplace. After you had actually *been there and got the T-shirt*, the Nobel Prize was really no more than a hunk of metal with a tiny amount of money and a few newspaper articles attached to it.

"Yes, it was on a day very much like this one that I first conceived of The Hedges Number. What beauty. What mystery! How such a number could vibrate at the heart of all knowledge and being. It makes the Tantalus Project look like a joke. It's like poetry. Like sculpture. I'm sure if Michelangelo were alive today he'd be painting enormous ceilings with interlocking patterns and arabesques derived from The Hedges Number. That's why science is so beautiful..."

The Candidate walked up to the podium and pointed to his watch. The gray-haired old fart was starting to bother him and needed a subtle reminder to wrap things up. After all, who was he to criticize the Tantalus Project?

"Wait a minute..." shouted Hedges in remonstrance. "I'm not finished yet."

The Candidate pushed Hedges aside and grabbed the microphone. "Thank you," he said. "It's so wonderful to have such a wonderful day in our pockets that we can polish up and put on our shelves to remember for the rest of our lives. This great achievement not only lifts Professor Hedges up to new heights, but makes us all several notches greater as a result. However now is not the time to rest on our laurels. We have to jettison the past so we can press on to further greatness." He pointed over to The Heisman Center. "*Tantalizing* greatness."

Hedges was outraged. He snatched the microphone back from The Candidate's hands. "Since when was Tantalus a scientist? The last thing I heard he was lip-high in a marsh trying to grab for a glass of water! Exactly where you were when you first joined us and exactly where you still are now!"

The Candidate grabbed back the microphone and butted Hedges in the knees with its iron base. Hedges fell off the stage and onto the ground. The crowd was suddenly silent. A few seconds later Hedges stood up.

"You'll pay for this," Hedges shouted. He marched off through the crowd, angrily shoving people aside as he made his way back to the science building.

Heisman cheered from the front row. Della Casa nodded his head with such satisfaction you'd think he'd just seen Dean Martin pull off his best performance ever.

"Tantalus *one*, Hedges *nothing*," The Candidate shouted into the microphone. He waved his hands around like a wide receiver having just scored a winning touchdown. The crowd went wild.

As the cheers simmered down The Candidate stepped down from the stage. People were laughing and throwing plastic glasses at each other. A couple was kissing underneath one of the food trays. Two professors were fighting over a book that each claimed to be his own, while a third insisted it was the property of the library and was three months overdue.

The party went on for another hour. When the crowd had finally thinned, a pack of wild dogs went to scavenge the trays for whatever scraps of food were still remaining. All that was left by sundown were a few tiny crumbs, too small, even, for the local birds. As The Candidate walked across the quad towards his car the sun began to set, filling the sky with a pool of pink and grey light. He had never felt better in all his life.

## 7. The Unprecedented President

There's something so lonely about a rocket homing in on its final destination. All those long empty miles of space with even the vapour trail now just a faint flickering from somewhere in the recesses of the mind - images that may just as well have been pictures in the newspapers of some distant generation. You can almost hear the theme music playing in the background as the credits start to roll. The journey is almost over. It's time to land. *Turn on the retro rockets, men*, the lonely voice from NASA crackles over the radio as odd-looking figures cocooned in plastic and metal eagerly await the next command.

The Candidate stretched back in his chair and took a long smug puff on his fifty-dollar cigar. He scanned the vast frontier of his two-storey office with its winding oak staircase and split level reading room. The scent of freshly padded leather wafted through the room. He was now President of the entire university. The *Unprecedented President*, the local newspaper had just called him in a front-page article. Unable to fill the void left by the last president in the Sonic Incorporated take-over, Western Polytechnic eventually decided to hire the internal candidate they thought best suited to take the reigns. Never before had such a young man risen so quickly through the ranks and with such incomparable grace and style to boot. Without question, he had something to be proud of. Very proud. In a mere four years he'd not only been granted tenure, but he'd been promoted to positions so high and specialized that nobody even had names for them yet. The Tantalus Project was bringing in twenty million dollars per year and employed a total of seventy-five service staff, technicians, secretaries, and researchers. His labs were so well equipped that people were flying over daily from the four corners

of the globe to use them. *Rev. Rev.* had become one of the most highly cited journals in science and now featured guest issues named after leading researchers at the peaks of their career or near retirement. Month after month people lined up in libraries on the day of its release often shoving others aside to get that precious first glimpse of the new cover page.

The Candidate's home life was a box-office hit. Percilla was consuming record quantities of pabulum - a true sign of the wonderful future that awaited her. Like all truly great babies, she passed all of her weight and reflex tests with flying colours. She responded properly to every image placed in front of her. Mini decorated the baby's room with origami and flowered wallpaper. She even hung an elaborate hummingbird mobile from the centre of the ceiling that reached down just far enough for Percilla to touch the tips of the bird's wings with her tiny pink fingers. For long hours she would lie there cooing and googling, saliva bubbling from her impossibly small mouth like honey from the depths of a magic comb.

With Percilla getting bigger and more active all the time, space at home was becoming a problem. There was no way they could go on living in The Candidate's apartment. In retrospect it was little more than a student dump with yellowed linoleum in the kitchen and a torn shower curtain in the bathroom. Sure, it was the penthouse suite, but why should a married man be associated with anything with the word *penthouse* in it? He'd never even read the magazine. The apartment may have once been romantic, but it was unbecoming of a man in his position to slum it in such obvious squalor. By the time Percilla was one, the fledgling family moved to a custom designed three-story condominium in the opulent west end of town. They had trees - even great drooping willows imported from the Far East by Wexford - in their front yard. They had flowers in their garden and vines on their garage. They bought a second car - exactly the same as the first, even in color and year - and had plans for three new bathrooms drawn up. They even bought a dog and named it Stu. He had a big sloppy tongue and huge cloying eyes. He was a classic pet in the Disney tradition, the type of dog that would steer a powerboat with its nose through miles of stormy sea to save a child's teddy bear as it sank to the ocean floor. They found him at The Pet World Liquidation Centre on five-for one iguana Sundays in a tiny cage placed beside a row of half-priced snakes. Mini loved the place for its miles of fluorescent lights and endless blocks of wire cages, filled with shredded newsprint and plastic water bottles. Stu looked so cute and loving in that sea of green scales, baggy eyes, and slithering tails that she couldn't resist. She paid in cash and brought him home immediately.

Their new home had every modern luxury. Magazines covered with scenes of idyllic blond housewives watering plants in carved golden urns seemed to be everywhere. Out went the generic grocery brands and in came the rainbow crates of gourmet food. Venetian salmon was the lowest they'd stoop. Goat's milk ice cream was a regular favourite. They had a button installed in the centre of the coffee table to control every electronic device in the house. *That's the way things were going*, thought The Candidate. Simplicity. You could see it everywhere. People didn't have time for multiple dials, buttons, gauges, and knobs anymore. All that went out with the biplane. In the modern household a single remote control unit was operating more and more devices every day. Their button was the size of a belly button and had a smooth glossy black finish. Depending on how you touched it - from which angle, how hard, in what coded sequence

- and the level of light in the room, you could do anything from change the temperature of the shower to burn three shows at once from television onto a DVD disk.

“How do you work this thing, sweetie,” The Candidate asked Mini the night after it was installed.

“I don’t know honey, where’s the manual?”

“I put it in the garage.” It was as thick as a phone book with more operating modes described than characters in the Chinese alphabet. “Damn!”

“You said a naughty word.”

“Sorry. It’s just that *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* is on and I can’t figure out how to turn on the television.”

“Read the manual.”

“That thing? It’ll take me hours to find the right section.”

“Let me try.” Mini leaned over The Candidate and poked her finger at the button. A sound like a supersonic jet taking off filled the room.

“What was that?”

She quickly poked at the button again. White fumes squirted out of the corners of the television. Then it exploded, filling the room with thousands of tiny circuit-board fragments.

“Now look what you did!” cried The Candidate. “I’m going to miss that little old lady from last week winning a million dollars all because of you!”

Mini looked sad for an instant. Then her eyes warmed up. Still leaning over The Candidate’s rigid form, she pulled her sweater and bra strap down her shoulder and pushed her breast into his face.

“I like it when you do that thing with your head,” she said seductively. “It really turns me on.”

*Sweet, sweet luxury*, thought The Candidate.

But in spite of all his success, he still wanted more. It was no longer enough to be on top, or was he even on top at all? Perhaps science was on the way down and even though he’d risen through its filo pastry ranks in record-smashing time, it was only a cruel illusion and he was actually sinking downwards relative to the rest of the world. What good was captaining a sinking ship, or climbing to the top floor of a skyscraper the moment before it was about to fall in flames? As the head of the entire university, the Tantalus Project at its peak and a Nobel Prize glimmering just across the hall, it suddenly seemed that there was nowhere to go, nothing new to achieve. He felt like an empty shell without even a snail to fill it floating aimlessly through a dark and lonely void. He felt like a missile with no target sputtering out its last drops of fuel as it plummeted from the evening sky. He felt like a man who had accomplished so much he had only proven how unimportant his achievements really were. What else could he do? Where there no challenges left in life? Was all the fun really over? Perhaps it was time to leave science altogether and go out into the real world to make his mark. With no new things at which to succeed, he was most certainly on the road to ultimate failure.

As the months wore on he started to stay late in his office with nothing but a candle to light his desk. There he would stare off into space imagining he was king of the world, king of the universe, and king of everything that ever was and ever will be. He saw himself dressed in purple robes at the head of some great procession, choruses of cherubic youths singing as they chimed huge brass bells and scantily clad women blew

on slender golden trumpets. He saw himself leading armies of a thousand across burning deserts and frozen lakes. He saw himself flicking away huge battalions like ants from the tip of his shoe.

One day he was sitting in his office perusing the latest *Rev. Rev.* when the phone rang. He yawned and picked it up.

“Yes,” the firm but jolly voice on the other end began. The Candidate imagined he was speaking to a Mounty on horseback with a smooth shaven square jaw line and a proud wholesome gaze. “I’ve been trying to get a hold of Professor Zhitnik.”

“Zhitnik? You’ve got the wrong number, sir.”

“We’ve tried to call all week. All we get is a strange answering service.”

“Who am I speaking to?”

“Bud McCoy, Virgin.”

“I don’t believe we’ve met. I’ve done some business with your company in the past.”

“Yes. The Tantalus Project. That’s with another division.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t mean to take up your time, but if you could have Professor Zhitnik call me, I’d be grateful. We’re interested, actually so is British Telecom for that matter, in doing a joint project with him. We’re thinking of getting together - a joint corporate venture if you like - to develop some of his work. We really liked his recent publication in *The Journal of Telecommunications*.”

Just then The Candidate saw Zhitnik walk past his open door.

“Hold on, sir. He just walked by.”

The Candidate ran out into the hall.

“Zhitnik!”

Zhitnik, who was now about half way down the corridor, turned. He was gripping a Geiger counter in his hand and was pointing it into a fat wad of chewing gum stuck to the wall.

“I’m very busy,” he said.

“It’s a phone call.”

“Who is it?”

“An industrial representative.”

“How dare they,” he said. He walked over to The Candidate, an expression on his face like a man asked to leave the cinema and move his car during the climax of a film. They stepped into his office.

“They have no dignity, these men,” he said as he picked up the phone. “Who is it?”

“Professor Zhitnik! What an honour. I’m Bud McCoy and I’d like to say I’ve admired your work for a long, long time.”

“Who do you work for?”

“Virgin.”

“What do you want? Can’t you just leave me alone?” His eyes widened like those of a blowfish about to fire its spikes into a perceived enemy.

“Sir, I assure you we come with the most honourable intentions.”

“When is it going to happen? Is that why you’re calling me? I’ve seen them on campus in their brown suits. They’re ready, you know. You’ll never win.”

“Professor Zhitnik, you’re such a wit! It’s just that British Telecom and ourselves have been talking about jointly funding your work on glass fibres for telecommunications.”

Zhitnik let the receiver drop to his thigh in horror. He looked at The Candidate, who was looking on with curious uncertainty.

“The situation is very grave, my son.”

“Sorry?” said The Candidate.

“They will be here soon. It is time to protect ourselves. Time to seek our godhead and find the inner truth.”

“I don’t understand, sir.”

“You are too young.” He placed the receiver calmly back on the phone. “You must leave this place. The earth is no longer ours.”

“Professor Zhitnik...” The Candidate set his hand on the man’s shoulder.

“It has begun!” He gargled out a violent scream like a man who’d just swallowed a beehive. Then he ran out of the office waving the Geiger counter through the air. “Save us from destruction!”

That afternoon The Candidate called up the local department store and asked them to send Zhitnik their best ceramic vase. He felt genuine sympathy for the man, who obviously suffering from some form of mental illness, and just wanted to do something kind for him.

“Just say it’s from the President,” he said to the UPS representative.

“You got it,” the man said.

“Of Western Polytechnic,” The Candidate added. But it was already too late. The representative had already hung up.

The next day Zhitnik peeked out his front window to see a man in a brown suit carrying an electronic signature device walk up to his door. The man knocked. Zhitnik answered holding a rifle in his hand.

“UPS, sir.” The man looked nervously down at the gun. “A package from *the President*.”

“Which president is that? You can’t fool me.”

“How the Hell should I know? President of The United States, I guess. Wouldn’t that be something?” Zhitnik’s face went white. The Great War had finally begun. The missiles were already in the air flying through the sky like shiny brown needles of truth. He looked at the dreaded figure before him and lifted the barrel of his gun to the man’s head. The man stepped back and lifted the electronic signature pad to his face like a shield. The trigger was so stiff on the old man’s fingers that he had to twist his entire body to shoot. But he missed entirely, hitting instead a red playground ball in the front yard.

“We’re all doomed!” He ran out into the street screaming as the UPS man scurried back to his truck. By the time Zhitnik was a block away he could already see the rotating blue light of a police car in the distance. As it came towards him he imagined it was a giant blue insect coming to take him away. He closed his eyes and fainted. When he awoke everything was white. The walls of the room were soft like pillows and there was a small window on a door that he couldn’t open.

The next weekend The Candidate hosted a small house warming dinner at his new house. Benson, Gables, and Della Casa were the only guests. As President he felt it was

more decent to entertain colleagues in small packages rather than larger groups where unavoidable personality conflicts were bound to dampen the mood and create controversy. Della Casa came alone, while Benson brought Theresa - who'd just come back from an aroma therapy retreat in Tibet - and Gables brought Ginger. They arrived at seven p.m. sharp and Mini escorted them to the living room.

"How do you like it?" she asked with a glittering smile on her face. The room was lined on four sides by a gigantic rectangular sofa with plush beige pillows and two entranceways, one that accessed the kitchen and the other the front hall doors, that kept it from being a closed box. In the centre of the room stood a coffee table, the all-powerful *master button* swelling ever so slightly from its the smooth mahogany surface.

Gables turned his head to Ginger and snickered at the four velvet art paintings on the wall.

"My latest acquisitions," The Candidate offered.

One showed three dogs drinking bourbon and playing dice. Another showed an artist's depiction of the seven deadly sins as tiny demons swirling around the head of a woman using a vacuum cleaner. The third was a mountain scene much like those hung in Mini's mother's pancake house - nightmarish swabs of gold comprised the horizon while gruesome globs of turquoise made up the tumbleweeds in the foreground. The mountains were painted in silver and had tiny souvenirs from the Midwest pasted on the surface of the velvet to give it a New York nineteen-fifties modernist flare. When it came to art The Candidate was no slouch and he knew that every household needed at least a hint of Raushenberg before it was truly a *home*. The fourth painting was a classic John Wayne portrait painted in muted hues and naturalistic brushstrokes that required no critical commentary or further explanation: it occupied an artistic universe all of its own.

"It's a beautiful," said Della Casa. And he meant it. He said it with such conviction that the sarcastic grin still hanging on Gable's face vanished into thin air. Everyone agreed it was wonderful.

"I consider its acquisition my latest success," added The Candidate.

"I don't mean to be rude or anything," said Theresa. "But what the hell are you doing propagating the fallacy of American heroism? Everyone knows that cowboys murdered the Indians."

"I'm not sure what you mean, ma'am."

"Don't start that again. It's sexist."

"I'm sorry, ma'am...or I mean miss."

"Theresa will do."

"Wow," said Benson who was watching them with impartial wonder. "It's so cool when people have a disagreement. It's like you can sit back and observe each person try to cope with the scene in their own unique way. You can almost see their auras flare up and change colour. Or when they kiss. That's even better." He looked over at Theresa and winked.

Theresa handed Benson a piece of compressed seaweed and kissed him. "I believe in expression," she said. "Health and expression."

"That's a great idea! Let's have a party at our house next week where everyone tries to *express* their truest inner being."

"Perhaps, my friends," Della Casa interrupted, voice as smooth and ingratiating as Ricardo Montalban on a coffee commercial, "It is not such a fantasy after all."

“What?” asked Gables. “Expressing ourselves?” He massaged Ginger’s leg.

“The President. You see, my friend.” He put his hand on Gable’s shoulder. “Our friend here has risen so high so quickly it’s not entirely inconceivable that he become President one day.”

“Of the whole universe?” asked Mini. She had just walked into the room carrying a tray of bright red cocktails in Batman tumblers.

“No, dear,” said The Candidate. “There is no president of the universe.”

“I know that! But maybe you will be the first, sweetheart.”

“No. I’m a serious my friends,” said Della Casa. “Wouldn’t it be an obvious next move? You have all the qualities to one day stand at the helm of our beautiful country. You would be a ringer. The first technological president. In this day when the US is feeling increasingly inferior about its position in the technology market beside Japan and the rest of Asia, it would be perfectly logical to have a presidential candidate who was once a great scientist. And be a honest, my dearest friend,” he looked directly into The Candidate’s eyes. “You no longer have your heart in science. You’ve a done it all. The Tantalus Project. Simply the most successful scientific venture of the modern epoch. What could you do to outmatch it? You don’t need a Nobel Prize. One of those lousy Scout badges is enough for this town. Hedges’ party would look like a balloon popping at a day care next to the celebration you’d have if you were ever elected into office. The other candidates already look weak and I just a heard this morning that Bill Clinton has been awarded the right to run for a third term after the Supreme Court ruled that the republicans ruined his a second term through illegal means. But the old fart has to run through the primaries like anyone else, so I doubt he’ll get anywhere.”

Just then the phone rang. Mini reached over to the button in the middle of the table. “Watch this. We have speakers set up all over the house so we can talk on the phone when we’re just walking around the house or doing a little *bouncy bouncy*.” She giggled and pressed the button, directing her finger down with a light tap from the appropriate azimuth and followed with a second, much longer and more meditative touch. The sound of a blender in the kitchen filled the room. The phone continued ringing.

“Look dear, you didn’t keep your finger on it long enough the second time. Why do I always have to be the one to correct your mistakes?”

The Candidate pressed the button in a seemingly identical way. A fully made bed sprang out of the wall and knocked him off his feet, directly into the tray of drinks on the table.

“Some technological candidate!” laughed Gables. “Let me try.”

“No, you fool,” said The Candidate, his suit wet with cocktails. It was too late. Gables had already pressed the button. Although his attempt to perfectly duplicate the motion was convincing, The Candidate didn’t dare think that Gables would do anything but worsen the situation. To the amazement of everyone in the room the blender shut off, the bed withdrew into the wall and a loud voice sounded through the air.

“This is Brown,” the voice said. “My truck’s stuck in a swamp outside of town and I need a few of you boys to come and help me. I heard you was havin’ a little shindig. What took you so long to answer anyway?”

“Problems with the line,” said The Candidate, “But Gables fixed it!”

“Beginner’s luck,” said Gables. He shrugged his shoulders. “Or maybe just artistic insight.”

“Yeah,” said Brown. “I never did find out how you won that darned triactor last year. Must’ve rigged it.”

“Ancient Chinese secret,” said Gables.

“I don’t learn nothing from no chinks,” Brown’s voice boomed through the room. “Now get off your asses and help me with my truck!”

“We’ll be there in twenty minutes,” said Benson.

At the end of the evening the guests left in two separate cars. That night The Candidate dreamed he was in the ring wrestling with Bill Clinton. Clinton was dressed like a farm boy with a straw hat, a fiddle, and chequered nylons so tight you could see the crease in his rear. The Candidate was wearing a space suit - shaded helmet intact - with the image of Tantalus on the front like a super hero’s logo. The referee - an even fatter Della Casa with an eye patch and a cigar - stepped between them and held up both their hands.

“The mighty *Space Boy* versus *Southern Slim*! Round One!”

### III

#### 1. The Early Days

It was a bright August day. Soft white clouds sifted through the powder blue ocean of the sky, only occasionally slipping in front of the sun to cast their thin shadows over the emerald strips of land below. Never had the staff of Western Polytechnic experienced such a perfect summer. They hadn’t had a drop of rain for at least three weeks, and even then it had only been a light drizzle. The trees in the central quad lavished in their translucent green splendour. The Candidate sunk into the depths of his new imported office chair. He smoothed back his hair and cleared his throat three times before breaking into a verse from *Heartbreak Hotel*.

*Since my baby left me  
I’ve found a new place to dwell  
It’s down at the end of lonely street...*

*My voice is as sweet as ever*, he thought. He hadn’t lost a thing. He picked up the day’s newspaper and pulled a gold lighter out of his suit pocket. He lit a slim cigar and made a few notes on a loose piece of paper.

In spite of the beautiful weather the last few weeks had made him weary. Running for President was a far more difficult task than he’d ever anticipated. Not only did you

have to look good every waking second and have all the best publicists working for you, but you also needed an unshakeable philosophy, a sound canon of political strategies on which to base your drive. It was this latter part that stumped him the most during the initial days of his campaign. After all, he was a scientist and not a political operator. But it was in this very realization that he finally shed his uncertainty and found his way, his true political image or voice. He stood for man's undying thirst for knowledge. That was what the Tantalus Project was all about and that was what *he* was all about. The world was on the brink of a new futurism and he was the man that was going to take it there.

In early preparation for his campaign, he often spent late nights away from Mini and Percilla studying the most obscure laws of the great confederation. He read thick white documents, bound in cherry-hued leather, or unbound alike, formulating a strategy for his impending assault on the White House. While he was immersed in reading, Mini would spend her time at home meticulously redecorating each room. It was of utmost importance that a budding presidential candidate not only have the finest furniture in his house but the most modern wallpaper patterns on his wall. Percilla, who was now almost three, spent her days in the back yard building intricate castles from mud and water. She'd already shown enormous strength for her age and, although a possible late-bloomer in arithmetic, had the reading skills of a seven year old. The Candidate was impressed and took these as sure signs of budding greatness.

"It's all in the genes," he said to Mini one afternoon. "One day you'll understand."

Percilla had also grown fatter. But she had a tiny golden smile hidden behind the pair of swollen ruby jowls on her face. This managed to offset her weight and make her cuter than ever. She paraded about the house wearing dresses in brilliant shades of pink as she sang songs from the children's bible and licked cotton candy off her fingers. Della Casa was her biggest fan. He loved to spend long afternoons with her seated on his lap reading tales of pirates lost in evil coves and elves so happy they laughed themselves to death. Then he'd cook her his best red clam sauce and watch her eating, the strings of spaghetti flicking little spots all over her face as she sucked them through her wide chubby lips.

The Candidate leaned back and flipped through the latest issue of *Rev. Rev.* Bored and uninspired by its contents, he quickly set it back on his desk. He picked up his phone and dialled. A weak and scratchy voice answered on the other end.

"Wexford," shouted The Candidate. "We need to have a meeting immediately. I need you, Della Casa, Heisman and maybe Gables and Benson over here to talk about my campaign. We need to set a strategy."

"I'm not sure I can make it for the next week or so. I'm attending a conference on dining etiquette in modern society."

"Look, Wexford. I don't mean to be pushy, but do you know how many millionaires there are out there that would gladly be in your shoes? Do you know how lucky you are to be able to back my research and political campaign? Before me all you had was money, now you have acclaim."

"You know I have nothing but respect for you. You gave me the chance to prove that I was more than just a plastics tycoon..."

"Exactly."

"But this conference is so important to me," Wexford stated as assertively as he could. "I was really looking forward to the three-day session on the cultural implications

of proper cutlery placement. If you ever entertain the Queen you will have to know where to place the forks.”

“Well, you have to make a choice. What’s more important, my campaign or a few cheap tricks to impress the ladies?”

“I think you’re being a little harsh. And if I might say, with all due respect, that you’ve changed for the worse and it’s starting to look like success has gone to your head.”

“I’m really sorry,” The Candidate said in a more disarming tone. “But success has its demands. It’s not easy being the best, you know. Everyone has it in for you and no matter what you do you end up offending someone.”

“I accept your apology,” Wexford said softly. “I’m sorry for being so insensitive.”

“So, what was your schedule like again?”

“I guess I can put off the etiquette conference until next year. Even though it’s been years since I’ve been able to attend.”

“That’s very kind of you. I think you just made the best choice. There’ll always be another time to learn more about silverware.”

Next, The Candidate called Gables. After ten rings without an answer, The Candidate gave up and set the phone down. He was concerned. Gables was always in his office at this time of day because that’s when they aired *Masterpiece Theatre* reruns on public television. The Candidate adjusted his white satin lapel and stood up. This obviously merited further investigation. He rushed over to Gables’ office immediately.

The door was closed.

The Candidate tried the handle. It turned freely in his grip. He heard some muffled footsteps behind the door. Then a squeal. He pushed open the door. Gables was standing in the middle of the room buck naked except for a conquistador’s helmet on his head. Nestled against his left breast was the shivering white figure of a woman. She turned her head and shrieked. The Candidate frowned in contempt.

“My goodness,” said The Candidate disparagingly. Ginger fell out of Gables’ arm like a wet leaf and collapsed on the floor.

“You made her faint!” said Gables. He knelt down to the floor.

The Candidate looked around the room. There was a video camera mounted on the far left wall. From the flickering red light above the lens, he judged it was still running. Gables stood up, holding a copy of *Measure for Measure* over his genitals.

“You’re a sick man,” decried The Candidate.

“I’m sorry, sir. I...really...we were...it was for a third year arts project. Yes. That was it. Ginger was doing a film for her European Cinema course. She wanted me to be in it. I was the only one with relevant acting experience.”

“Do you really expect me to believe this?”

“Ummm. Well. No. I guess I don’t.”

“You’ve really slipped, Gables. When I first came here to Western I was a bright, optimistic, and trusting young man. And now you show me *this!*”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“Do you know what this will do to my scientific career? Not to mention my chances of getting elected.”

“No one needs to know, sir.”

“How could I let something this atrocious go without a complete report?”

“Please, it would ruin my life. I’m so close to getting early retirement. A few more years and I’ll be free to paint and act for the rest of my life.”

“You actually expect me to go against university protocol and be implicated in this sordid affair?”

“Please, sir.” Gables dropped to his knees and started caressing The Candidate’s ankles. The gleaming white presidential hopeful stepped back in disgust.

“You disappoint me,” he said.

Just then Ginger came to. She opened her eyes and turned her head towards the two men. She burst into tears.

“Now my daddy won’t pay my school fees,” she cried.

“Please,” pleaded Gables. “I’ll do anything.”

“Anything?” The Candidate arched his eyebrow in sudden curiosity.

“Just name it.”

“You’re a good looking man.”

“He’s lovely!” shouted Ginger, still in tears. “Leave him be.”

“Popular with the students.”

“We love him,” cried Ginger.

“Good with people.”

“What are you getting at, sir?”

“I need a publicity officer for my campaign. I need someone to work with Heisman, Della Casa, and Wexford. Someone to write my speeches and help win me the election.”

“I’m a writer, sir,” Gables said, suddenly looking more proud and hopeful. “You can bank on that.”

“He writes beautiful poems,” added Ginger. Her tears had subsided to a series of tender irregular sniffles.

“Good,” said The Candidate. He walked over to the video camera and shut it off. He removed the cassette from the recorder and slipped it into the inner breast pocket of his jacket. “Insurance is always a plus these days. You start tomorrow. We’re having a meeting. I want a complete publicity campaign ready to present by morning.”

“Whatever you say, sir.”

“Just remember,” The Candidate said to Gables. “I’m the boss now. If it wasn’t for me your life would be in ruins.”

“Yes, sir,” said Gables obsequiously. “Whatever you say. Just promise you won’t...”

“I promise when *I* say so and only when *I* say so.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Candidate turned and closed the door. He’d never witnessed such deviant behaviour. But the situation had miraculously played in his favor yet again. Gables had the look of youth that would consolidate The Candidate’s platform as the young dynamic political team that was going to blow the old farts out of the White House and make way for his golden road to the future.

The next day the meeting was held. The Candidate waited alone in the Feinman Room powdering his cheeks as he waited for the others to show. Gables was the first to arrive. He walked in sheepishly wearing a double-breasted ice blue suit and a new pair of tortoise shell bifocals.

“You don’t wear glasses,” said The Candidate.

“I just thought it was best to look like a publicist. This is the age of the yuppie, sir and all successful yuppies have glasses just like this.” He took the glasses off and held them up to The Candidate. “Have you ever seen an ad for an Apple lap top without a pair of these babies?”

“I guess you have a point. You’re starting off well, Gables. With any luck you might even get a promotion.”

“That would be wonderful, sir.”

The Candidate looked at his watch and twisted his lips in aggravation. “Where are the others?”

Just then Benson walked in. He was dressed in a tie-dyed shirt and leather sandals.

“Man,” he said. “You should see this reviewer. It’s like he’s got some kind of heavy-assed attitude like he’s some kind of fed or something. I submitted a paper on the emotional impact of gallium arsenide and he just trashed it. But I know I’m right. Just listen to this. This’ll give you an idea of what sort of Nazi bureaucrat I’m dealing with. I wouldn’t be surprised if the FBI were reading copies right now.” He cleared his throat and assumed the tone of a police sergeant:

*“This paper reports that samples of materials rich in arsenic have a calming and almost euphoric effect on the researcher and because of this suggests they may one day see applications in therapy. Not only does the work fail to reference rivalling work on use of analogous phosphides in love potions, but attempts to repeat these experiments have failed. Researchers in our group have followed the same procedure exactly as written in this paper and experienced nothing but a profound sense of boredom on viewing the substances.”*

Benson threw the review on the table. “Now if this isn’t the biggest pile of shit I’ve ever seen...”

“What journal?” asked Gable, doing his best to hide the snicker on his face.

“Chemistry of Materials.”

“Pathetic,” said The Candidate. “Nobody respects good work anymore. I remember you showing me your results. How dare they. Who’s the editor?”

“Some jerk named Ilhan Aksay.”

“Sounds like some kind of foreigner,” said The Candidate. “If I make it into office, the first thing I’ll do is deport him.”

“Yeah. That’d be right fucking on.”

Just then Heisman walked in. He was decked out in badges and ribbons carrying a combat helmet under his right arm.

The Candidate looked at his watch. “Where’s Wexford?” he asked.

“Wexford,” said Heisman in disgust as if he were repeating the name of some rare venereal disease. “Probably off lawn bowling somewhere.”

“He’s not even married,” said Gables derisively. “You’d think with all that money he’d be able to land the best women in the world.”

There was a loud thumping outside and Della Casa walked in. He was wearing so much cologne that The Candidate winced as he passed.

“You smell like a Pledge factory after a blitzkrieg,” laughed Heisman.

Gables stepped quickly behind him and began fanning his hands like an Egyptian servant behind a pharaoh. The Candidate smiled with satisfaction. It was clear he had hired the right man.

“Ahh, my friends,” said Della Casa lavishly. “That’s a better. Nothing like a soft breeze to air out the pores. It’s such a pleasure to be amongst you all again. I have such a good feeling about today. I just know that something beautiful will come of it. I can just feel it.”

“Well, how should we start?” asked Heisman. “I can’t afford to wait all day for old Waxy-baby. I’ve got a military drill later this afternoon. We’re simulating a thermonuclear bombing of Tehran in our new VRA center in Nevada.”

“What’s VRA?” asked Gables.

“Virtual reality apocalypse,” stated Heisman proudly.

“Far out, man,” said Benson. “Sounds better than a laser light show.”

“Ther-mo-nuke-lee-ar!” Heisman exclaimed. “I only wish it was for real.” He cupped his hands over his mouth and made a muffled explosion sound. “

The Candidate cleared his throat and looked over at Heisman. “Shall we begin?” he asked.

Heisman straightened his uniform and saluted. Just as his hand was dropping from the visor of his helmet Wexford walked through the door. He stumbled over a chalkboard eraser on the floor.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, blushing. “I saw an old lady feeding pigeons on the way. Her hand got stuck in the birdseed bag so I had to stop and help her. Then I found out she was an expert in Victorian knitting and we ended up talking for almost half an hour about the pros and cons of different weaves. What a marvellous storyteller! She turns out to own a handicraft shop just a few blocks from where my aunt was born...”

“Just shut up and listen,” said Heisman. “We’re already way behind schedule.”

“Sorry,” said Wexford. He turned away in shame, lighting a perfumed black cigarette before sitting down.

“Cool,” said Benson. “Cambodian?”

“Shut up, Benson,” said The Candidate. “We only have an hour to go over my campaign strategy.”

The room fell silent. The Candidate picked up a piece of paper and studied it for a few seconds before continuing. “The first issue on our agenda is one that deals mostly with Gables.” Gables perked up. “We have to design a series of commercials to key the public into exactly what I’m all about. As I see it, I represent not only the technological future of America, but all those old back home ideals that have been lost in the shuffle over the Clinton and Bush years.”

“Sir,” interrupted Gables. “I’m no fan of mass bombings, but I think we shouldn’t forget the military angle.” He cast a complimentary look in Heisman’s direction. If he wanted to keep his job he had to get the General on his side. Heisman nodded his head in approval. “We need to let people know that you’re not only technology, not only youth and purity - the quintessence of an opening guitar riff in a Buddy Holly song, for example - but also a solid military strong arm. You don’t want the public to think you’re leaning too far in the direction of scientific development and social charity or they’ll label you as a weak liberal.”

“I think we should stress his position on the arts,” interrupted Wexford. “We need to forge a new Babel out of the ashes of modern America.”

“I disagree,” said Della Casa. “It’s his position on a crime that needs to be addressed. Society is spending far too much a money on jails by imprisoning people for petty

offences. Open up the prisons and use all the extra money on a the military and the police.”

“Exactly,” said Heisman.

“Where do we put all the murderers though?” asked Benson.

“Bring back the chain gang. Bring back the firing squad. Bring back public hangings. Who needs prisons? Just kill everyone and there won’t be an unemployment problem anymore.”

“These ideas are all very thought provoking, gentlemen,” said The Candidate. “But they don’t address how I’m going to come across on my commercials. As I see it I need to be shown in a futuristic setting with a little gun smoke in the background and maybe some sign of youth and prosperity hovering on the horizon.”

“Brilliant!” Gables banged his hand on the table so hard that Wexford’s cigarette fell out of his mouth and onto Della Casa’s lap. In an instant a brilliant orange blaze came spouting forth from around the fly of his rayon pants. Della Casa leapt up.

“Help me someone, help!” shouted Della Casa. “Don’t just a sit there!”

Heisman broke out laughing as Della Casa dropped to his knees and rolled around on the floor in a cloud of acrid smoke.

“Do something,” cried Wexford frantically. “Have you people no soul?”

“This is really cool,” said Benson. “Like the time I lit my hair on fire hot-knifing STP.”

“As I was saying,” said The Candidate once Della Casa had settled down. “We have to decide exactly how I’m going to look. What suit I’m going to wear and how my hair will be done up...”

The meeting ended with no firm resolve on a sound campaign strategy or public face. Later that afternoon The Candidate went home early to check on Mini and Percilla. It had been months since he’d had the time to pay an afternoon visit to his family - something every budding President should do, and often. After spending the morning in nebulous conversation, it was indeed time to stoke the home fires. But when he walked into his living room, it was empty. He felt a breeze on his face, a sign that the back door was open and Percilla was probably playing in the backyard. He walked upstairs to the bedroom. The door was closed. He heard the faint sound of something like music from a spy film coming from inside. He tried the handle.

“Percilla?” he heard from inside. “Mommy’s busy. Don’t come in or a big green monster will bite your head off.”

“Sorry, honey, it’s me,” said The Candidate as he swung open the door. There, to his surprise, was Mini standing on the bed totally naked except for a black plastic maxi coat and a toy machine gun. Life-sized pin ups of what looked like Russian mobsters were hanging on the walls. A sleek black lapel covered her left breast.

“What’s all this about?” asked The Candidate. He was genuinely perplexed, if not disturbed by his wife’s sudden display of eccentricity.

“I’m The Sugar Plumb Fairy,” she said. She pranced across the room waving the machine gun around like a magic wand. “Don’t you remember? Back in that hotel in Anaheim?”

“Since when does The Sugar Plumb Fairy wear black plastic and carry a machine gun?”

Mini stopped and thought for an instant. Then her face lit up. “Peter Pan died and she had to wear black for his funeral.”

“What about the gun and the posters?”

“Those men are agents sent by Cruella de Ville. The Sugar Plumb Fairy had to protect herself.”

“You can’t fool me. Even *I* know she’s from *Aristocats*.” He frowned and shook his head back and forth. Just as he was about to lose his temper and holler at her, a sudden feeling of empathy came over him. He stepped forward to kiss her. It was something about the combination of her innocent beauty and the excitement of her holding a gun. Innocence and power were the themes of his postage stamp and all she was doing was showing him. She fell back on the bed, her maxi coat open and fully revealing the soft pink and white universe of her naked body.

Just then Percilla walked in holding a plastic shovel in her hand. She stopped and stared at her naked mother on the bed. Then she turned to her father and started licking the blade of the shovel as she stared at him. The Candidate turned away in embarrassment. What if a reporter walked in that very instant and took a photo of what he saw? What would the public think? It was hardly the way to kick off a presidential campaign. Nobody would vote for someone with a wife that dressed up like a spy. He ran out of the room to his office and locked the door. After this he was certain he was going to lose the election. No doubt he’d finish last - or even further behind than that. He stayed up all night thinking about his grim uncertain future until he realized he was looking out the window staring into the great dark blue of dawn.

## 2. The Campaign Trail

Life on the campaign trail was tough. The Candidate and Gables spent long days analyzing videotapes of opposition speeches hoping to find some chink in their armour, as even the slightest advantage could make the difference between absolute victory and losing in a landslide. Clinton was caught up in the primaries against a Harvard graduate named Damon Chesterfield. Chesterfield played the oboe and walked like a penguin. He was so kind and gentle that people found it difficult to ask him serious political questions out of a fear they might hurt his feelings. *Perhaps you might want to, if it’s not too much trouble for me to even suggest you might dare comment on*, people would often say as they mustered up the courage to ask him a question about his political philosophy, always risking the possibility that he might pull out his chequered handkerchief and burst into tears. As for the Republicans, it was down to Robert Franklin and Hank Jackson. Franklin was a charismatic evangelist with a deep stentorian voice and a balding head. He appeared on television every Sunday morning packaged in a powder-blue tuxedo shouting out sections from the *Gospel of the Fading Angel*, a lost section of the Bible torn out of earlier versions by some sort of satanic subterfuge and delivered to him by

telepathy from Jesus Christ himself. One night, while he was sitting alone in front of an empty tequila bottle in the middle of a St. Louis trailer park, the Lamb of God came down from above and guided Franklin's hand over the keys of a typewriter leant to him personally by The Holy Ghost. Only because of this miracle, was *The Gospel of The Fading Angel* allowed to resurface into the world. The long-lost piece of scripture preached temperance when it came to the urge to withhold money from his church and supported oppression of anyone obstructing the road to Apocalypse. After ten years on television, Franklin had amassed a fortune of two hundred million dollars and owned twelve mansions and a fleet of luxury yachts. And with this almost insurmountable leverage he was making a formidable charge on the White House.

Jackson, on the other hand, was a true American, a slab of triple-A beef hauled from the summer cabin deep freeze. He claimed to be as honest as a square of Kentucky Blue Grass and was the self-professed ally of the *little guy*. He supported cutbacks of any kind because social programs were veiled White House plots to screw over the common man. Men in suits were the arch-enemy and liberals were anathema. He was backed by Johnny Walker and five major breweries and swore he'd reverse all drinking and driving laws if he ever got into office. After all, there was no proof that alcohol impaired driving any more than lack of sleep. If you were going to arrest a drunk on the highway, why not throw half the country in jail for yawning at the wheel?

"What are we going to do about Jackson?" Gables asked The Candidate as he pressed the rewind button on the VCR during a meeting at the campaign headquarters, located in the basement of the Heisman Center. "He'll get ninety percent of the redneck vote without breaking a sweat. And that's a formidable chunk of the population."

"Well then, paint their necks blue," replied The Candidate. "Then there won't be any more rednecks to vote!"

"Clever idea," sir said Gables fulsomely. He scribbled something on a piece of paper, pretending to make a note of it.

"Whatever the case, I'm sure you'll have the answer, Gables. I have a hundred percent confidence in you." The Candidate stood up and looked at his watch. "I have to be home soon," he said. "Mini is cooking something special tonight. I can't wait." He walked out of the room.

After only a month of campaigning Gables was already producing television commercials. He'd always wanted to make it in Hollywood and directing a TV ad was an obvious first step. The Candidate was already a public figure because of the Tantalus Project, but there was always the risk that he might be considered a freak by the middle-American voter for his scientific accomplishments or even his tall sloping forehead. It was Gables' task to bend public opinion away from this perception. While the Republicans were busy slinging mud at the Democrats with commercials depicting them as demonic Sodomites - The Whore of Babylon, they even nicknamed Clinton - dragging the country through the burning lakes of taxation and the eternal damnation of social programs, and the Democrats were too scared to defend themselves lest they appear too aggressive and alienate their left wing voting base, Gables was determined to give The Candidate a positive, back home image that would simply melt the public's heart and give them no other choice but to vote for him.

The first commercial depicted The Candidate as a young Elvis circa *GI Blues* singing *Love Me Tender* wearing a space suit at the helm of a big orange rocket ship. It took five

blissful days of hot lights, powder rooms, and crane shots to put together. Gables always knew he had more than just a bit of Billy Wilder in him. With the right lighting and makeup he had no trouble making The Candidate's head look less columnar. It was a true piece of cinematic genius, a tromp l'oeil with the best of them. In the background Heisman, dressed in a combat uniform with a bazooka on his shoulders and a pair of binoculars, led a team of eager multi-racial school children in a round of callisthenics. At the end the camera pulled back into outer space and the rocket ship spelled out *The Future is Now* against the shimmering starlit background.

"What do you think?" asked Gables the first time he showed it to The Candidate.

"Fantastic," he replied. "But maybe a little more powder on my face next time."

"I love it!" said Heisman as he spit a shotgun shell out of his mouth.

"I think it's too aggressive," said Wexford. "I think the children should be shown singing in front of a convent."

"I disagree," said Della Casa. "It was...how should I say? Perfecto!"

On the strength of Gables' speech writing, The Candidate roared across the nation. People came in droves just to witness his spectacular white form towering above them on the podium. *Was his head really so tall and pointy? Could he sing as well as they had heard? What colour was his suit?* they would ask themselves as they lined up for hours to get into his speeches. Yes, that nearly mythological figure, who had hovered in the public eye for so long behind the starlit clouds of media hype surrounding the Tantalus Project, would finally appear before them. But some were sceptical. Who was this southern slick that was taking the nation by storm? What the hell would a university professor know about running a country? It was bad enough that he had an education and a singing voice - a sure sign of communist sympathies and sexual impotence - but to be a professor on top of that? The hard-core right was not about to stand for what they saw as an obvious priming for a nation wide ass-fucking.

His first stop was Massachusetts. "I'll labour for the labourer. I'll wage the war for higher wages. I promise a land of promise," were his last words as a soft trickle of rain fell over Harvard Lawn. The crowd went wild. A tear came to his eye. This was the new America. People could feel it tingling from their toes all the way up their spines to the centre of their brains like some wild new elixir of life. This was the election that was going to change everything.

His early speeches were a fountain of optimism. Under his direction the US would be a place where cars would once again be candy apple red parking in long pristine rows at drive in movie theaters of hope. Emerald green lawns would be fertilised, watered, and mowed by teams of smiling workers with hulking chests and steaming thermoses of coffee in their backpacks. Children would skip and jump in playground fountains while teams of happy youths would patrol the alleyways for stolen goods and crack. Crime would be a relic of the past and the world would glitter in a newfound purity.

The Candidate's tour moved southwards through Pennsylvania and the Carolinas before eventually wending its way into the heart of Dixie. People lined up in Baltimore to offer their unconditional support for his noble charge against the big political machine. *The New York Times* headlines read *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* the morning of his visit to the mighty capital. He was the true little guy fighting against corrupt politicians from left and right alike. The Republicans had dragged us into meaningless wars and the Democrats turned the White House into the bathroom of a discotheque. Outside of his

sordid personal life, nobody had anything on Clinton yet, but they didn't have to. He had to be corrupt. All presidents were. The fact that he hadn't been caught yet meant he was either too smart - and hence even more untrustworthy - or had eliminated those who were on to him by some kind of wicked conspiracy. The fact that he was allowed to make a come back and run for a third term was all the evidence needed to accuse him of rigging the justice system.

In Pensacola he encountered the first hint of opposition. A fat biker, head of long grey hair and a belt buckle the size of a watermelon, came up to the microphone after The Candidate had brought the crowd to tears with a version of Bobby Vinton's *Blue Velvet*.

"If you think you're a rocker let's hear a little ZZ Top. I can't stand all that jukebox shit. You keep sayin' you're for the future, but all you do is march around singing that wimpy Elvis shit."

A group of old hippies raised their fists and jeered in support of the biker. The Candidate was shocked. He didn't know what to do. The only ZZ Top song he knew was *Tush* and without a beard he couldn't get away with singing even half a bar. He looked in the crowd for a few moments and stuttered. It was the first time the public had seen his confidence falter. He wiped a bead of sweat off his forehead and looked down into the first row of the crowd. A little girl stood there licking a big bush of cotton candy.

"I can't do it alone, sir. I'll need some help. Maybe this young missy in the front row would like to come up and join me." He held out his hand to the little girl and pulled her up on stage."

"What's your name, young lady?"

"Mildred."

"Isn't that sweet. Mildred, I want you to help me out here. This gentleman in the audience wants to here some ZZ Top and I can't pull it off without a little help."

Mildred blushed in shyness and buried her face in the pleats of his striped pants.

"Can I have a taste of your cotton Candy, Millie?"

She held out the bright pink bush, her head still hidden in his pants. Her mother was enthusiastically taking pictures from the front row. The Candidate took the cotton candy and ripped off a huge wad. He licked along a three-inch ridge and fixed it to his chin. The crowd burst into laughter. He leaned into the microphone and, in a voice at least two octaves lower than the voice he used when scolding Percilla, began to sing. The first words flowed out with no conviction or melody, but by the middle of the first verse he was swaggering along in a voice so deep and threatening it sounded like he'd just climbed out of the Louisiana swamplands brandishing a chainsaw and a crowbar. By the time he reached the chorus the whole crowd was already singing along:

*Lord, I ain't asking for much...just goin downtown for a little tush...*

The footage made prime time television in twenty different countries. Not only was The Candidate a scientific genius and a back home southern boy not afraid to lock horns with a gang of bikers, but he also had style and true humour, something desperately lacking in North American politicians since the days of Betsy Ross.

Other great moments followed. In Dallas he came up against a shrewd Texas accountant garbed in white leather chaps and a ten-gallon hat.

"What do you think about taxes?" the man asked.

At first The Candidate was confused and didn't quite know what to say. In all his months of preparation, he'd never really thought about how he'd fund the social programs he was proposing. He always assumed that Wexford would be there to pay for whatever the country needed once he got into office. He paused and looked skyward as if on the verge of a great and timeless philosophical insight. The crowd hung on his every blink. Finally he looked out at the man and raised his hands in the air.

"Taxes are...well, they're just, well...*taxes*."

The crowd was baffled at first, but in no time the irony and penetrating wisdom of the answer hit them. All at once they roared in approval. Taxes *were* just taxes. How brilliant. How honest. Why didn't *they* think of it first? While Clinton and the other candidates were lying through their teeth about what they were going to do about taxes, it was only *The Candidate* that saw through the perennial question to formulate that cogent truism. The one axiom that Hedges left undiscovered. It was so true. Taxes were just taxes. No matter how simplistic the statement was, nobody had yet said it. It was poignant, resonating with knowledge, and totally unpretentious, hiding nothing while at the same time making no false promises.

Three weeks later he gave a homecoming speech on the grounds of Western Polytechnic. Mini had stayed up all night to prepare over a hundred pounds of complimentary cabbage puffs for the occasion. Gables felt it was time to avoid catering companies and go for a little *home cooking* to convince the public that The Candidate wasn't just a futurist. He had a firm sense of family values and could even entertain the neighbours if he had to. Backed by fifty cases of free wine at the refreshments booth, The Candidate took the podium. He was promptly greeted by the loudest cheer yet of the tour. Everything was a blur of red pompoms and brilliant white bouquets.

"Today," he began. "Today. Perhaps just a word to most of you, but not to me. Today is special to me. Very special. Today is the day that I have chosen to come and speak to you. Today is the day I can thank all the men and women who've helped make Western Polytechnic the fortress of knowledge it's become. Today is the day I can thank all those that supported the Tantalus Project in its early going. The Wexfords and the Della Casas are just the tip of the iceberg. It could never have become what it is without the little boys at the park around the corner playing softball or the little girls braiding the hair of their favourite dollies as they watch their brothers score a home run. Success is relative to those who are unsuccessful and those who create the groundwork for another person's success. And those others are the forgotten faces out there that have never had the chance to see their names up in lights."

The crowd cheered. The Candidate assumed a more ominous tone as he continued to recite Gable's latest masterpiece.

"Today I'd also like to address the grave situation that confronts us. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about, for there is but one truly grave situation. The situation that has led to the downfall of a once great nation. The situation that's corrupted Saturday shopper and NFL linebacker alike. The situation that swings like a chimpanzee through the halls of respectability, rudely throwing banana skins and coconuts at the ushers of propriety and honesty. What is it that can be done to solve this horror of horrors, this catastrophe of common sense and cataclysm of conviviality? It is for this reason, and this reason alone, that I campaign to win this election. Out of the corners of my heart I sweep the tears of sympathy for the men and women of tomorrow. We strive for a future where

the children of today will be the police officers and firemen of tomorrow. Yet, how can they bloom into their full beauty if this situation continues to whisper dangerous plots at cocktail parties, jump from chandeliers with masked piquant faces and flintlock pistols, conspiring to seduce the unwary wives of our nation? It is only through an application of science and technology that we can nip this situation in the bud so it will cease to infest our crops of truth with the unwanted weeds of pestilence. We strive for a future where the technology of the Tantalus Project becomes one with the hope of our nation!”

The Candidate looked out at the audience. The crowd was in tears. They hated *the situation*. They were all its helpless victims, its whimpering leftovers. Only The Candidate knew how to solve it. Only The Candidate could help them.

The first in line for questions was Hedges. He looked unconvinced and spoke with a rumble of blithe scepticism in his voice.

“What are you planning to do about the Middle East?”

The Candidate was stumped, but only for an instant.

“Let it stay there. It’s been there for thousands of years. Why should I buck the trend?”

“That’s a facetious answer. What about the Persian Gulf?”

“Do they really play Golf? I didn’t know that. With all those deserts there must be a lot of sand traps out there. Places like Assyria.”

“You must mean Syria. There isn’t an Assyria anymore.”

“Well, that’s just because they got rid of all the terrorist *Asses!*”

“What about social programs?”

“Just get a satellite dish and you’ll have more programs than you’ll ever need.”

“What about the third world?”

“Isn’t two enough? Let’s just get rid of it and then there will be no more poverty!”

“Thank you,” said Hedges in disgust. The next in line was a crying housewife.

“My son was just killed in a drug-related shoot-out. What are you going to do about gun laws?”

“The same thing I do with my *in-laws*.”

The crowd laughed hysterically. Even Hedges cracked a smile. He had to admit, the young man had style.

“What’s that?” The woman asked. She was the only one not laughing.

“Seriously, I’m a family man and I love my in-laws. I’d do anything to help them. To answer your question, I’d strengthen them.”

“Thank you.” The woman was smugly satisfied with the answer.

Next came Brown.

“Are you implyin’, son, that you’d take away my gun collection?”

“Not at all.”

The woman came back and grabbed the microphone. “Make up your mind,” she said.

“I’d tighten up the gun laws by allowing this gentleman to have all the guns he wanted. I’ve known him for years and I think they’d be safe in his hands.”

Brown and the woman looked at each other for a moment. After a few wrinkled eyebrows they turned away and went to sit down. Brown had always wanted a gun museum, but under The Candidate’s rule he might even get his own arsenal, his own garrison, or maybe even his own army to sweep the south and purge it of all the hippies, queens, and liberals. He smiled in satisfaction.

After the speech, Gables rushed up to congratulate The Candidate.

"They loved it, sir," he said. "A little bit of old Ben Franklin must have rubbed off on me when I wrote it."

"What about Washington?" said The Candidate, a huge jocular grin spread across his face. "He could sure *wash a ton*. Wasn't that a good one? Or Rockafeller. He was one *rocking feller*, wasn't he! Now wasn't that funny!" The Candidate chuckled.

Gables looked blankly off into space.

"And then there was Eisenhower, boy did he have his *eyes on power*."

"Yes, he certainly did, sir."

"And Jefferson, he could sure..." He paused for a moment and suddenly put up his finger and grinned with satisfaction. "*Jeff his son!*"

"Sir, *jeff* isn't even a word."

"What are you talking about?"

"Sorry, sir," said Gables obsequiously. "Now I remember. Obscure Scottish derivation. To jeff, to have jeffed...if I would have jeffed I most certainly..."

"That's better. Now, how did I look?"

"You looked great. Julius Caesar in front of the hordes. Aeneas sowing the seeds of the Roman Empire. Alexander the Great. There was even a little of old Attila the Hun in there to stir up the red blood in everybody's veins. You were beautiful."

"Excellent."

"I think we might have a chance."

"What do you mean, think? How dare you be so negative after such a great showing. Of course we'll make it. Just think of the future. Me and Mini sitting in The White House with a presto log burning in the fireplace. Percilla and Stu playing in the back yard with the neighbours' kids. The sound of Heisman's armies crushing deviant terrorist nations echoing across the waters. Della Casa and Wexford funding bigger and bigger military budgets every year. I can't wait."

"Of course, sir. Neither can I."

The primaries dragged on for what seemed like an eternity. Endless speeches and interviews were punctuated by equally endless television appearances and campaign meetings. The Candidate often went weeks without seeing Mini and Percilla. He had no idea what was going on in his labs at Western anymore. For all he knew they could have been engulfed by a giant blob from Venus. Days passed. Weeks passed. Months passed. He gradually became tired and weary. His face sagged and he started going to bed before nine. He was so busy he skipped most meals and took to eating only Mars bars. He lost weight. He even stopped watching television.

One morning in San Francisco, when he was sure he'd had enough and for the first time in his life was ready to quit, he heard the thump of a newspaper dropping outside his hotel door. He dragged himself out of bed to open the door and collect the paper. There, on the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle was what he'd been hoping for all along, but somehow seemed would never come. He gasped with delight. *Franklin and Chesterfield were out while Jackson and Clinton were in!* He was so overworked that he had forgotten that the primaries had ended the night before. The editorials said it all. There was something about Franklin the public didn't trust. They sensed a lascivious old man with cold money-grubbing hands beneath the pious put-on. And Chesterfield?...pfugh! He might as well be doing mime in Harvard square for a charity

organisation for all they cared. The editorial claimed that Jackson had the whiskey breath and bushy beard that characterised all the great generals – like Custer and Sheridan - of the past, however he frightened the electorate with his talk of “concentration ranches” to put illegal immigrants and convicts to work. Clinton had a sound head, good looks, and even played the saxophone – but would the public vote him in for an unprecedented third term? The Candidate, however, had something totally new. He was the first true scientist to ever hit the international election scene. Although Thatcher did an undergraduate degree at Cambridge in chemistry, she’d never come close to something as magnificent as the Tantalus Project.

The Candidate read no further. The polls had Clinton at around sixty percent with The Candidate and Jackson at twenty each. A new ad from the Jackson campaign that showed Clinton in the oval office wearing nothing but pink panties covered in black and red swastikas as he goosed stepped around the desk followed by a group of naked men giggling and flagellating each other with peacock feathers could only erode Clinton’s lead over the crucial months ahead, giving The Candidate the chance he needed to make ground. Although he was far from the top, he’d already made it to round two! That was the important thing. With Clinton and Jackson locked in a death struggle, the whole race suddenly seemed a lot more *winnable*. He leapt out of bed and threw the curtains open. Failure looked more and more distant as he stretched his arms outward and embraced the dawning light of the new day. *White House here I come!* he hollered.

### 3. The Reverend Rev

It was a quiet sunny day at Western Polytechnic, almost dream-like in its quilted beds of humidity and rich azure skies. A shiny red fire engine rolled quietly past the fragrant green lawns and chequered patios that lined the streets on the way to this now-famous center of knowledge and excellence. The Candidate and Gables sat on the grass in front of the science block confidently planning their next major campaign triumph.

The polls were rapidly shifting in The Candidate’s favor. In the last month he had climbed to a whopping thirty three percent, still seventeen behind Clinton, after a knock out performance in Seattle after which he was caught in a candid photo sharing a coffee with the drummer from a local grunge band. They’d just recorded a new single *That Thing You Do With Your Head*, said to be inspired by one of his recent speeches. The picture made it to the front page of *Time* with a big question mark superimposed over The Candidate’s head, asking without so much as a word if this was to be our next great President. With ZZ Top planning a video re-release of *Tush* featuring a pink-bearded Candidate flying around Memphis in a space ship fixed with nineteen-fifties style automobile fins, victory seemed imminent. His only worry was the upcoming presidential debate.

“We’ll blow them out of the water, Gables.”

“I sure hope we do.”

“But, first we need to do more research. See where they’re coming from. See what sort of tricks they have up their sleeves.”

“I’m sure they’ll have nothing to match us.”

“Research, Gables. We can’t afford to lose.”

“No, sir.”

“We have to take some photos of their campaign headquarters. Get an idea of where they’ll be attacking us from next.”

“I’ll get someone right on it,” said Gables. “I’ll hire that photographer who came to your wedding.”

“After Lapoisse elbowed him onto the ground? He’d never take the job. Get Nakahira and that other Japanese guy to do it. What are they doing for us now anyway?”

“I sent them to Japan to paste posters of you all over the Tokyo subway system.”

“Excellent. Everyone has to get big in Japan before they make it back home. Call them back and get them on this photo job immediately. Have them pretend they’re from a Japanese newspaper.”

Yes, everything was rolling along smoothly.

As The Candidate leaned back in his chair he heard the sound of an engine rumbling through the window from somewhere off in the distance. Slithering like a hungry python through these tranquil streets in all their joy of garden hoses and backyard barbecue stalls came forth a stark purple nemesis of chrome and white-walled tires, its engine contemplating every stroke and its roof reflecting every ray of the brilliant midday sun. Tiny rockets cupping the headlights, white-walled tires oozing closer every minute, the ‘62 Cadillac Toronado pressed further towards its final destination: the Heisman Center, that lofty tower of reason that made Western Polytechnic - loser in football and *Front Page Challenge*, yet winner in so many other things far more important – what it is today.

Enter *The Reverend Rev.* Lodged behind the wheel of the great grape marauder like a brown and purple sea slug nestled inside a brightly-coloured conch, sweat beading on his black forehead crowned by a laurel of fuzzy grey hair, garbed in myriad cloaks, wild and fantastic in their black-flecked sable linings, white silk shirt decorated with patches of dragsters and funny cars alike with two Negroid vampirellas gyrating their hips into the polypropylene upholstery of the back seat, he stared angrily ahead. Hailing from a dank basement in squalid North Oakland, the name of some forgotten Guru etched inside the refrigerator with a knife, father of at least five branches of modern Gospel Funk fusion, squadron leader of at least a thousand raving groupies, and employer of two dozen Wiltshire Boulevard lawyers - their blow-dried hair parted in exactly the same place, a third of the way up from their left ears - he was the very image of funk and destruction.

The Toronado pulled up to the curb in front of the science quad and eased to a halt. The back door opened and the two vampirellas stepped out of the driver side: breasts as large as those of caged woman in circus side shows, plastic boots climbing three-quarters up their legs, and their hair a pair of showpiece afros shaved in perfect spheres like ornamental evergreens in a public garden. They opened the door and helped the Reverend get out. He huffed and puffed himself into a standing position with the seeming effort of a man hauling a trunk out of quicksand. He held a stack of official papers in his hand.

“So,” the Reverend boomed in a voice of holy damnation. “Is this the valley of darkness, the house of the soulless perpetrator?”

“The same,” exclaimed the two women in unison.

“On these very grounds have trodden the very feet of those that hath dared defile the most sacred name of his holiness?”

“The same.”

“Let the fires of Hell consumeth the mortal flesh of he who dare besmirch my name. I am the Holy Headlight in the Rolls Royce of Rhythm, the Viscount of Vibe, the Keiser of Cool, the Duke of Drag Racing, the mighty Reverend Rev.!”

“The Reverend Rev. has spoken,” said the women.

The purple leather entourage walked into the Heisman Center, the two women holding the Reverend’s cape from behind. They stood in the front foyer until a UPS agent passed by.

“Excuse me,” said the Reverend in a polite Dixie accent. “Could you direct us to the President of this fine institution.” He plucked a raisin skin out of his teeth with a toothpick.

“Oh, yes, sir.” The man offered directions and in a matter of minutes the three bizarre figures were standing at the door of The Candidate. The Reverend caught his breath and wiped another bead of sweat off his head before the two women knocked in unison.

The Candidate answered the door. The Reverend and his entourage filed in like a procession of executioners.

“Excuse me, sir,” protested The Candidate. “You don’t have an appointment.” He retreated to his desk, a good forty feet away from the door. The threesome marched into the centre of the room.

“Perhaps you need some clarification,” stated The Reverend. “It is in fact *you* that have no appointment with *The Reverend Rev.*. It is only by an act of grace and divine providence that his Reverendship has granted you the privilege to stand before *His Mightiness.*”

The Candidate was dumbfounded. Who was this sweat-covered freak, this giant wad of grape bubble gum stuck to the floor of his room?

“Do you even know who *I* am?” The Candidate countered, his chest expanding imperiously.

“You are the violator,” The Reverend Rev. shouted.

“Violator?”

“You are the arch perpetrator, the grandiose contrafabulator of everything that ever was and ever will be!

“*Contra- what - ulator?*”

“*Contrafabulator,*” repeated The Reverend Rev., his eyes red with anger and exhaustion.

The Candidate pulled out a dictionary and leafed through it. “Contra...” He paused. “Contrafusc...contra...feb...hmmm. I can’t seem to find it. Are you sure it’s even a word?”

“It sure will be when I’m finished with you, because I’m *contra* your ass in a way that’s truly *fabulous!*” The Reverend Rev. narrowed his eyes in disgust. “Show him, girls,” he shouted imperiously. He divided the stack of papers in his hands in two and

handed one pile each to his two servants. They strutted up to the desk, rear ends gyrating in perfect circles, and slammed the two stacks down in front of The Candidate.

In one pile stood the last twelve issues of *Rev. Rev.* starting from the watershed *Stephan Translations* and spanning through three years of publication all the way to the most recent edition, the eponymous *Dutton Citations*. The other pile consisted of comic books, also by the name of *Rev. Rev.*, each showing on the cover a cartoon version of that selfsame purple anathema that now stood before him driving a flame-snorting hot rod with the two big-busted vampirellas flanking him on either side, mounted on a pair of shining chrome choppers.

“You have defied the Reverend Rev. and have no choice but to face the consequences. As heat burns flesh and cold freezes water, you must be punished. You have used The Reverend’s name in vain, and so you must pay.” He rolled out a long sheet of parchment and read it: “You have been found guilty on several counts of fraud. Not only have you used the Reverend Rev’s name to forward your own career, but you have used it in complete neglect of what it truly stands for.”

He glared at The Candidate. The Reverend’s eyes were hard and black, cast with the fires of the burning lake, beaming eternal damnation through the room with every opal blink. He snapped his fingers and the door opened. Six men - all with the same suit, sunglasses, briefcase, and level of facial tanning - marched into the office in single file and made a line parallel to The Candidate’s desk. They opened their briefcases in the same motion and pulled out what appeared to be copies of the same document.

“You are being sued,” The Reverend said flatly.

“Sued?” cried The Candidate. “You can’t...”

“No. It is you that *can’t*. You are powerless in my presence. I am the Godhead of Groove, Harbinger of House, the Lord of Locomotion, and the Baron of Boogie! With but one mighty blow, I will crush everything you are and everything you will ever be.”

“Listen,” said The Candidate, regaining his senses and assuming a more composed tone. “I’ve had enough of this contra - *fribulation* or whatever you call it. Get out of my office before I call the police.”

“You be careful I don’t just *fribulate* your ass.”

“You don’t scare me.”

“You have lost your chance to shrive. So now with but one mighty blow, The Reverend Rev. shall smote thee. *The Reverend Rev has spoken.*”

The Candidate gulped so hard he choked on his own saliva. He rubbed the sweating white priapus of his head and reached for the phone. Staring directly at the Reverend’s fat rubbery lips, pink only on the inner ridge, he dialled for Gables. There was no answer. The fat marauder stood before him like some totemic deity: expressionless and vengeful, awaiting his final moment of vengeance and destruction.

“The Reverend Rev has spoken,” the purple-garbed nemesis repeated.

The Candidate trembled at his desk. Something had suddenly gone wrong. For the first time in his life he felt truly lost and vulnerable. The retro rockets had sputtered out their last ounce of propulsion. Radio contact to Cape Canaveral was down. The white projectile hurtled chaotically through the empty black expanse as all America sat in horror by their televisions awaiting the next report of the ailing mission.

Suddenly he remembered. A week earlier he had a new defence system installed. Why hadn’t he thought of it before? He pressed a button under his desk and in less than

thirty seconds a mob of ten men in blue uniforms equipped with riot clubs and gas masks barged into the room. The Candidate grinned smugly and pointed to the door. Three men grabbed the Reverend while the others shepherded the rest of his entourage out of the room.

“You’re going to pay,” shouted The Reverend as they dragged him through the door. “Every newspaper in the nation is going to hear about this...this carnival of corruption, this festival of fraud.”

“Get lost, you low down *contrafabulator!*” shouted The Candidate victoriously. “When I’m done with you all the grape juice in the world won’t be enough to dye your ass purple!”

“My lawyers will never let you get away with this!” The Reverend screamed as the men dragged him into the elevator at the end of the corridor.

Every morning for the next three weeks The Candidate’s mailbox was stuffed with legal documents, affidavits, summonses, and random accusatory notes, all from *Henderson, Henderson, and Sons*, 12001 Wiltshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, California.

“What are we going to do?” The Candidate asked Gables in despair. With all these legal problems he would never win the election and he would be seen as the biggest failure ever.

“We have to nip it in the bud,” said Gables.

“You’re right. We can’t let it grow out of proportion.” The Candidate leaned back in his seat and thought long and hard about what he could do to avoid the negative repercussions on his campaign. After trolling through miles of dark and murky notions, a dim light finally appeared. He trolled further. The dim light grew in size until it became the figure of a man wearing a suit with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. A radiant, beautiful man. Wexford had never looked so good as he did that day he hovered like a fantastical grail vision in the mind of The Candidate.

The Candidate called the Wiltshire office immediately. A woman answered.

“Get me a lawyer,” said The Candidate.

“We have many lawyers here, sir. Do you have a preference?”

“Anyone who deals with the Reverend Rev.”

The woman giggled. “Just a minute, sir.”

In moments a male voice appeared at the other end. It was deep, smooth and authoritative, seemingly unfettered by the vicissitudes of life. “Yes, can I help you?” it asked.

“Name a price,” pleaded The Candidate.

“Who is this?”

“You know who it is.”

“The Reverend takes no bribes,” came the answer.

“We can settle out of court.”

“The Reverend is suing for ten million, but also demands that justice be conducted through the proper channels.”

“How about twenty million?”

“I wouldn’t be optimistic. The Reverend isn’t wanting for money. You’ve injured his pride, insulted him. Don’t you understand?”

“Certainly we can strike a deal.”

“Don’t bet on it.”

The Candidate hung up without saying goodbye and immediately called Chicago. The fat purple stooge would certainly change his tune as soon as the greenbacks started flowing his way.

“Hello, Wexford?”

“I’m afraid you disturbed my reading.”

“Oh, my. What were you reading?” asked The Candidate, feigning interest as he lubricated the wheels for the big favour.

“I’m glad you asked. It’s a deconstructive analysis of Assyrian pottery from a feminist perspective. A reinterpretation, if you like.”

The Candidate stopped for a second. Maybe Assyria was still a country after all. It showed how much Hedges knew. “I see. Is it...um...well...Feminine?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“The feminist reinterpretation. The pottery.”

“I’m afraid we don’t seem to be communicating. So let me educate you. The Feminists borrow their world view from Lacan and the concept of knowledge being seated in the phallus...”

Two minutes later, after numerous yawns directed strategically away from the receiver, The Candidate made his play. He’d pretended to be interested for long enough.

“Wexford. This is all very fascinating, but we go way back. What would you do to help a friend?”

“You’re in trouble? My goodness, why didn’t you just say so? How much do you need?”

Good old Wexford. The Man could fund an all-out invasion of the Sun if he had to. What was twenty million to *him*?

“Twenty million,” said The Candidate.

“In your bank account tomorrow.”

“Thanks. What a great friend you are. We’ll have to talk about Syrian pottery again sometime.”

“That’s *Assyrian*.”

“Sure, but those *Syrians* are all *asses* anyway!” joked The Candidate.

Wexford forced a dry laugh. The Candidate had done it again. The Reverend Rev. was surely finished. The Candidate imagined a metallic cloud of cannon smoke filling the light dawn air as he stood atop a great summit thrusting his flag into the soft wet grass. Victory was near.

## 4. Hiawatha

The next day Gables was sitting in the campaign office grooming his hair. He had a date with Ginger that evening and was doing his best to hide the light dusting of grey that

had recently appeared around the lower tips of his ears. Piles of leaflets and campaign posters were scattered all around the floor. Leaning against the wall were a few rolled-up billboard sized spreads of The Candidate riding on the back of a rocket ship outfitted with a giant leather saddle. In the background hovered an ominous space station constructed in the form of Heisman's head.

A knock came at the door.

"UPS!"

"Come in."

A man in brown uniform stepped in.

"Package for Gables."

"From?"

"Photoworld."

Gables signed the electronic pad and thanked the man. The pictures had finally arrived. The secret photos of the Clinton campaign headquarters were now irrevocably in his hands. He smoothed the package against his face thinking of Ginger's soft tanned buttocks. His imagination took hold. He closed his eyes and started licking the bulging beige envelope. The bitter taste of ink wasn't enough to divert his mind from the countless sweet memories of long afternoons camping out on his office floor, now just a blizzard of naked flesh and red lipstick. Soon, the words *Wang Chung Kung Fu Studio* were so completely smudged they were no longer recognisable. At about the same time in another part of the world an eager Asian man with dark intense eyes opened his much-awaited package. To his disappointment he found a series of photos showing men dressed in drab blue suits playing canasta beneath an American flag. It looked like a convention of some sort, certainly not the prints of his black belt examination he had ordered last week. In anger he threw the photos into the garbage can - how could they possibly be of any interest to anybody? - and immediately called the UPS complaints line. A cool British voice answered at the other end. "Hello, Virgin Media..."

The next day The Candidate walked into the campaign office and saw the photos spread out on the table.

"What are these?" he asked.

"The Clinton headquarters, sir," said Gables ominously.

"What?"

"That's right. Don't ask me what they're up to."

The Candidate gasped in horror. The photos showed whole legions of men dressed in baggy white pants and white toga-like tops fastened about the waist with black belts kicking and karate chopping at each other in a room padded on the floor with thick blue mats.

"My God!" The Candidate threw the pictures down on his desk. He was shocked. It was an obvious ploy to undermine his platform of futurism. Clinton was training a secret army of Ninja warriors so he could surprise everybody at the upcoming debate and be seen as bringing back the beauty of antiquity in one furious drop kick to The Candidate's campaign of futurism. The potential repercussions were terrifying. The tides would certainly turn in the wake of such an attack. The commercials would soon be out. He could see them already: Clinton garbed in a long silk robe, an ancient master of the East, surrounded by kickboxing acolytes with tight, banded torsos and long catfish moustaches.

How could a Democrat be so devious and underhanded? These were obviously strange and different times.

The Candidate stormed out of the room and drove home immediately. He was so unnerved he almost ran over a little old lady by a fire hydrant. As he walked in the front door of his house he tripped over a pile of rubber snakes. Percilla - who was watching from the window - burst into tears.

She ran up to The Candidate and grabbed a loose fold of material on his pants.

"You made the snakes mad, daddy," she cried.

"Let your mommy handle that," he said as he stepped around the dumbfounded child and ran upstairs to his bedroom. Mini was lying on the bed wearing a headdress and a long robe.

"My goodness, not this again," he yelled.

"It's not what you think, sweetie. I'm only getting ready for a Tupperware costume party. I just found out one of my distant uncles was Sioux. So I thought I'd go as a warrior chief."

"This is absurd. If the public finds out I'm married to a half breed I'll never get elected."

"Come on, honey. This is the modern world. I just saw a TV show talking about how minority groups are actually favoured for some things."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. *Things.*"

"Not *things* like a position in the White House."

"Why not? Just because it's called the White House doesn't mean you have to be white to get in, does it?"

"This is ridiculous. I'm in big trouble. We just got a series of photos from Clinton's campaign headquarters."

"Isn't that cheating?"

"What? Why?"

"Okay. Whatever you say, dear."

"Do you know what they showed?"

"A bunch of people in suits?"

The Candidate nodded. "But you'd never guess what kind of suits. That's the dastardly thing."

"Dragon suits?" asked Mini.

"Close! Closer than you'd ever guess. He's training his men as Ninjas to undermine my campaign. He wants to resurrect some sort of feudal value system to attack my platform of futurism."

"Calm down, sweetie. You need to rest. You take yourself too seriously. Here..." She took off her headdress and put it on The Candidate's head. He looked at himself in the mirror. Something stirred inside him. The towering ridge of feathers imparted a new dignity on his already noble face. A dignity of endless wars and wandering tribes. A dignity of hunted buffalo and windswept prairies, the sound of deerskin drums beating in the distance.

"You look wonderful," she said. "Why don't you pretend you're a descendant of a lost Indian tribe? That'll show him. And you'll be a shoe-in for the minority vote."

“I just got an idea,” he suddenly proclaimed. “I can pretend I have Indian blood in me! Then Clinton won’t have a leg to stand on with all that Japanese nonsense!”

The Candidate threw the headdress on the bed and rushed out of the house immediately. When he got back to the campaign headquarters he found Gables sitting down listening to a radio drama in what sounded like Swedish or German.

“Gables!” The Candidate shouted. “We need a new commercial. I want to be shown dressed as an Indian warrior chief at the helm of a spaceship painted on the side with war paint! Get Heisman in it too. Have him building a tee pee with a bunch of kids in the back of the ship.”

The phone rang and The Candidate answered it. It was the Reverend Rev.’s lawyer.

“So what about my proposal?” asked The Candidate. He had almost forgotten about the impending lawsuit in the wake of Clinton’s latest ploy.

“No go. Like I said before, The Reverend is going to make you hurt for this. He drives more than just a purple Toronado. He drives a fucking hard bargain, too. Good luck on the election, buddy. You’re going to need it.”

The man snickered and hung up. The Candidate slammed down the phone.

“Gables! Take Wexford’s money and bribe every newspaper in the country. If any word of this Reverend business gets out, I’ll have you fired!”

“Yes, sir,” said Gables obsequiously. “Where should I start?”

“The National Enquirer, The Washington Post. Who cares! Just get on it ASAP!”

Gables rushed out of the room in a state of panic.

The Candidate wasted no time. That very afternoon he combed the city for anything vaguely resembling an Indian relic. He stopped at souvenir shops in Holiday Inns, buying every miniature totem pole key chain and seal skin belt he could find. He perused chic art galleries for native lithographs. He even enrolled in a soapstone carving class at a local community hall. On his way home he stopped at a giant toy warehouse. If he claimed to have an Indian heritage nobody would believe him unless they saw some evidence in his home life. After rummaging through stacks of Disney dolls and tiny figurines he settled on an archery set and a backyard tee pee. Yes, if reporters came over, there’d be no doubt at all that he had true Indian warrior blood in him. They’d see him standing there wearing his headdress while reading the evening news. They’d see Percilla in the back yard making obscure birdcalls while drawing her bow to take a shot at the magpie flying overhead. They’d watch her pluck the dead bird’s feathers and present the naked carcass to her mother. Then they’d watch in utter amazement as Mini would build a fire in front of the backyard tee pee and cook the fresh kill. Yes, there was nothing like a little Iroquois magpie stew to win over the press.

When he got home Percilla was busy in the front yard, throwing matches at a dog. It was tied to a tree by a few loops of pink plastic skip rope cord. Beside the tree stood a small canister of kerosene.

“Hi, honey. You’re daddy’s home.”

Percilla didn’t answer. She was too engrossed in watching the animal yelp and squirm around as it tried to put out the fire on its back with its mouth.

“Guess what daddy’s got for his angel doll?”

Percilla turned and grinned. Her eyes were alive with anticipation. “What did you get me?” she asked as she turned away from the smouldering animal, which had worked

itself free and was now leaping about wildly, barring its teeth as though threatening an invisible intruder.

“I hope that’s not Stu, dear.” While normally he would have scolded her, he was too busy thinking of the smoke signals that must now have been rising from his lawn to bother. If only Gables were around to take a picture.

“No, daddy. It’s the bad dog from across the street. It wouldn’t play my game so I had to punish it.”

The dog limped across the street and collapsed.

The Candidate smiled and patted her head. Her hair was long and gold like a princess from a fairy tale.

“What did you get me?” Percilla suddenly snarled.

“Something big. But we have to set it up first, honey.”

“I hate things I have to set up.”

“Well I got you something else, too. I’ll go assemble the first present while you play with this.”

He walked back to the car and returned with the bow and arrow set. It was still laminated against a cardboard backing piece. She ran over and tore off the plastic coat. By the time she’d pulled out the bow and all the accessories, including the plastic buckskin quiver and a miniature headdress, The Candidate was already in the backyard setting up the tee pee.

Mini came out to join him.

“You know,” said The Candidate. “I haven’t felt better in years. I can almost feel the blood of the wild jackal pulsing through my veins. I can hear the screaming of the white eagle as it circles the mighty canyons of Hiawatha...”

“Dear, I think the skin goes on the outside.”

“Sorry? Since when are you such an expert in Indian culture?”

She handed him a book. *The Golden Guide to Tee Pee Building*. The Candidate grabbed it and flipped through its small glossy pages.

“Hmphh,” he huffed. “I’m just following these instructions here provided by *Whammo*. If they can make a Frisbee, they can sure tell you how to set up a tee-pee.”

“Dear. *Whammo* is a toy company. What would they know about Aboriginal culture?”

“Since when are you so smart? Ever since I caught you upstairs in that spy suit you’ve been walking around like you have some sort of university degree or something.”

“I’m just trying to help. Besides, it’s important for a president’s wife to at least have *some* opinions.”

The Candidate stopped and thought. It was a new angle he’d never considered. A good angle, at that. Anything that could guarantee success and prevent the painful humiliation of failure was inherently good.

“Well, now that you put it that way, dear, why don’t you show me how you might build the tee pee.”

Mini ushered The Candidate aside and dismantled the tangled mess that he had erected. In a matter of minutes a proud beige tee pee was standing in their back yard. The Candidate stepped back and gasped in awe. Mini walked inside and an arrow whistled over his head, making a loud pluck as it landed in the centre of a birdhouse hanging from the neighbour’s tree.

“Pow wow,” shouted Percilla.

“This is so wonderful!” The Candidate exclaimed to Mini, who was now in the kitchen cooking pine needle stew, a time-honoured Blackfoot recipe. She’d learned it that very afternoon from a satellite TV programme on ethnic cooking. “Maybe I have Indian blood in me after all.”

Later that evening The Candidate took the whole family to the movies to see Disney’s *Pocahontas*. As the closing credits rolled upwards on the screen he felt he was possessed by the spirit of an ancient Navajo warrior. A primordial wind rushed through the reeds of his soul. He was at one with the moose and buffalo. He understood the language of the grass and rain. The sky was already teaching him its secrets and the stars would soon be singing the music of eternity. He thought he heard a snowy owl screeching in the back row of the movie theatre, only to turn and find it was just a group of teenagers arguing over a package of *Nibs*. He knew that victory was near. His ultimate victory.

## 5. The Debate

In what seemed like no time at all, the day of the debate had already arrived. The Candidate stood outside a great grey building built from tinted glass windows and smoothly polished marble panels. The vast edifice was surrounded by police escorts and cameramen from every major network in the world. He pushed through a dense cluster of journalists, making sure not to sully his freshly pressed blue suit, tall fanned headdress reaching upwards to the sky and bright red war paint in full display on his recently tanned cheeks. This was the beginning of his ultimate victory. Clinton, no matter how clever his secret ploy of showing up for the debate in the guise of a Shinto warrior, had finally met his match. Important critics on the right and left alike were already starting to doubt that he was deserving of a third term. The Candidate could already feel the tingle of impending success. It was a sure sign that hadn’t sat at home for the last ten days smoking yarrow and reading up on the lives of Chief Dan George and Sitting Bull for nothing. Although he obviously represented the technological future of the US, the public could already sense he might also be a long-lost link to its native past. His last ads showed him clothed in buffalo hide singing songs of Hiawatha with a peace pipe dangling from his mouth as he boarded a space cruiser. As for Jackson, people had almost forgotten his name, The Candidate’s recent television ads were so popular. Who was this intriguing man of intellect and reason who had surprised everyone by revealing his distant native roots at the peak of his first ever run at president?

The Candidate waited with Gables under the hot rays of a back stage light for his call. In five minutes he’d walk out onto the arena of international television to face the two greatest rivals of his life.

“Have you seen him?” The Candidate asked Gables.

“Clinton?”

“Yes.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“What if he tries to drop kick me?”

“He won’t, sir.”

“What if I embarrass him and he commits seppuku in front of the nation and I get blamed for it?”

“You’ll do fine, sir.”

“What if he gets kamikaze pilots to crash through the roof and ruin my head dress?”

“I’m sure he won’t, sir. Just stay in character and say as little as possible. That way you give them less ammo.”

The Candidate looked at Gables. What were once the eyes of scrutiny examining every potential flaw in the unproven academic, were now the cloying eyes of a loyal dog or maidservant.

“I know,” The Candidate said, suddenly regaining his confidence.

They sat in silence until a knock came on the door.

“One minute,” a voice yelled from the other side.

Almost exactly a minute later - he timed every last tick of his watch - another knock came on the door. The Candidate rose to a proud standing position and saluted Gables.

“From Tantalus to Tonto in a single bound,” Gables proclaimed.

The Candidate walked out of the room and followed a short fat man down a dimly lit corridor. At the end of the corridor was a door. The man opened the door and stepped aside, gesturing for The Candidate to continue on through. The Candidate closed his eyes and stepped out into the blinding light. His ears almost went deaf from the eruption of cheers and clapping. When he opened his eyes the light suddenly seemed softer than it was before. In front of him were three chairs laid out in a triangle, two of them occupied, one by a man with a young face and grey hair, the other by a man sporting cowboy boots and a ten-gallon hat. Where was the Shinto warlord he was expecting? Where were the Samurai legions all decked out in black brandishing their vicious swords and six-blade knives? It was obviously a trick. Clinton wasn’t that stupid. No doubt he was planning to tear off his suit in mid-debate and reveal the ancient Japanese armour clinging so tightly to his skin. It was Clinton’s ace in the hole, but the Candidate would be ready for it.

The Candidate shook both their hands and sat in the unoccupied chair. The clapping quickly subsided.

“Well,” said Clinton. He tried hard not to look at the headdress. His eyes betrayed more fear and respect than ridicule. This man was the driving force behind the Tantalus Project, friend of Nobel laureates and multi-billionaires alike. The headdress and paint were no doubt just a ploy to make him overconfident, opening up a hole through which The Candidate could make his most lethal thrust.

“Indeed,” said The Candidate. “Er...*how*, I mean.” He bowed his head.

“How now brown cow?” Jackson blurted out. “Actually I could use a Brown Cow – *right now* in fact - or actually I mean a JD! Everyone knows Brown Cows are just for girls. You look more red than brown anyway. So maybe I should have said *better dead than red!*” Jackson slapped his thigh and started yelping like a coyote.

“Well...” said Clinton. Then he paused.

“How about wells?” Jackson interjected. “Is that what you want to argue about? I know oil wells better than any of you. I was raised beside one. I even *drank* out of one once.”

“What about *welfare*?” Clinton asked Jackson. The Candidate nodded slowly like a proud Sioux chief about to sign a watershed peace treaty.

“Christ almighty,” exclaimed Jackson. “Getting dumped in a *well* is bad enough, so why the hell should you have to pay a *fare* on top of it?” He looked to the audience in anticipation of a great explosion of laughter. The auditorium was silent.

“OK,” said Clinton. “If you want to argue about wells I’d rather argue about H.G. Wells.” He paused. “War of the Worlds. In other words, what are we going to do to avoid the next world war?”

“War is bad,” The Candidate interrupted. “The white man massacred my people.”

“That was a truly deplorable episode in our history, but in some cases war is a necessary evil,” said Clinton.

“That’s for sure! There’s nothing like a good war to clear up a hangover,” said Jackson.

“War is a serious problem, but perhaps we should start with something smaller, like the drinking issue,” said Clinton.

“I’d rather just start drinking,” howled Jackson.

“Firewater killed my people,” said The Candidate.

“Drinking never killed a soul,” barked Jackson. “Women. That’s the problem. This country’s hurt more by the woman who ignores her children and goes out to work than it is by the young teenaged football star going out in his pickup for a six pack and little bit of *tush*. I’m sure you’d agree with me there.” He turned to The Candidate and winked.

“I’d like to challenge that point,” said Clinton. “Alcohol wipes out thousands of teenagers every year in auto accidents.”

“No it doesn’t. Nope! Not a soul,” Jackson protested. “In fact forcing people to name a designated driver every time they want to go out with the boys and get smashed leads to loss of revenue at bars and that leads to unemployment. Just shows how much you care about job creation.”

“Where do you get your statistics?”

“I’ve never seen a dead man in a bar. All deaths occur outside of bars. It’s that touch of evil. That sly prostitute that flashes her tits at the drunken teenager. That’s what causes the deaths. I don’t know how many times I’ve been drunk at the wheel and almost drove into a post because of some hooker winking at me as she pointed down to her red hot pussy.”

“Yet you can’t deny that alcohol decreases motor co-ordination and increases sexual inhibitions. The same teenager would no doubt ignore the woman’s glance or at least be able to look at her without swerving into a post if he wasn’t drunk.”

“All lies. Left wing pinko lies.”

“Alcohol killed my people,” repeated The Candidate as if in a trance. The crowd laughed uproariously in their support. Never before had anyone taken such a brilliantly ironic approach to a presidential debate. By wearing aboriginal ceremonial accoutrements he was undermining the concept of the formal debate and making fun of the traditional election process. This was a man with new ideas who had both feet planted firmly in the history of his country. This was no Washington insider or Texas

redneck. This was a scientific genius with a grass roots vision of America forgotten since the times of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. His future was a new Eden, where dark skinned women would wash their clothes in sparkling rivers flowing through golden cornfields, all as a salute to *the beauty of the action*. Sure, they could buy their own laser operated laundry facilities - this was a given in The Candidate's world - but they'd shun their use in accordance with *the new naturalism*, choosing instead to wash their garments by pounding them with smooth, rounded stones on the shores of the great surging rivers of America.

"I don't know what you're so worried about, *Big Chief Malt Liquor Bull*." Jackson broke out laughing. "People have died for centuries. What do you think? If I become president all of a sudden people are going to stop dying altogether? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. If I'm president lots of people will die. Especially Arab terrorists. Any country that doesn't serve liquor should be bombed. I like a country where people can get drunk and get drunk fast. And a few deaths, alcohol related or not, aren't going to get in my way."

"So, you admit that drinking causes deaths?" asked Clinton.

"I never said that."

"Yes you did."

"No I didn't."

"You have lied to my people," The Candidate condemned Jackson.

"Nope." Jackson leaned back and crossed his arms in a gesture of finality.

"Yes," countered Clinton.

Jackson gazed out into the audience. All he saw was hatred and contempt. He might as well have been locked in a pillory in the middle of Time Square for raping a nun. He started to grow faint. He felt his head swimming. He couldn't give in. He needed something big. Some big line to turn the tides against these two clowns. Texans weren't supposed to lose. Only low down peanut farmers like Jimmy Carter lost. But that was just it. That was the secret! Suddenly it came to him as if hanging from the gun rack of a golden pick up truck flying through the sky. Why didn't he think of it before? It was so brilliant, yet so devious. He straightened his posture and righted his ten-gallon hat. He cleared his throat as The Candidate and Clinton patiently awaited his response.

"There you go again," he said as though he had just forced check mate.

Clinton looked baffled. "Who, me?"

"Both of you."

"I'm not going anywhere," said Clinton.

"There you go again," Jackson repeated, firing the second slug into the enemy's ailing body. It had worked for Reagan, so why not him?

"I'm not sure what you mean," said Clinton. "It's a total non sequitur. What you just said has no relevance to anything. Neither of us are going anywhere."

"There you go again! There you go again! There you go again," Jackson cried like a little kid going *boom boom boom* with his new plastic bazooka.

"This is absurd," said Clinton. "This is a debate, not a school yard."

"Now I know why they call you *The Whore of Babylon*, 'cause you just keep babbling on! *There - you - go - again!* Just admit it, you've already lost. Just pack it in. You might as well walk off stage right now Clinty-boy, 'cause you ain't going to be winning

this time around. *This is not a threat, it's not a boast, it's simply the way it's going to be.*" Jackson pulled the rim of his ten-gallon hat a few degrees lower towards his eyes.

"The spirits are angry," said The Candidate.

Clinton looked at The Candidate with a strange mixture of respect and dignity. No doubt The Candidate had done his homework and had anticipated such antics from Jackson. By dressing like a great Indian chief he was obviously making a complete joke of Jackson's political stance. Nothing Clinton could possibly say would have a fraction of the impact of even the slightest wince of The Candidate's brightly painted face.

"*There you go again,*" Jackson shouted, smiling idiotically like a man off six hours of bourbon." He started waving his arms around like a windmill. "There you go again," he repeated. "Blowing your taxoscope or spendaphone, or whatever the hell you call it, into the public's ear as help yourself to yet another term in the White House as though it were just another serving of mashed potatoes. *There you go again!*" He stood up and backed up into a stage light, knocking it with his hand as he continued to flail his arms around. It wobbled for an instant before it fell down and burst into flames. A man in a bright orange protective jacket ran onto the stage with a fire blanket. The crowd went wild.

"I'm leaving," said Clinton with disgust. "This is ridiculous."

Clinton stood up and left the stage. The Candidate rushed behind him, still expecting some final trick from the former President. Perhaps the halls were creeping with masked Ninjas that very moment just waiting to swipe their swords into his soft and tender belly.

The next day the New York Times headlines read *Shortest Debate in History Ends a Landslide*. In the lower left hand corner was a photo of The Candidate, touched up in sepia toned bronzed black and white to look like it came from some kind of South Dakota interpretative centre for the pioneering of the west, seated beside his two rivals complete with headdress and war paint. The debate was a smashing success! Not even The Reverend Rev. with his miles of purple leather cloaks and armies of Wiltshire Boulevard lawyers could stop him now. The Candidate was in the clear. The sputtering rocket had regained its poise. Engines were already roaring in the stratosphere as the brilliant white streak started to pen a victory story in the sky with its spectacular orange after burn.

## IV

### 1. The Wexford Affair

It was two days before the election. The Candidate had never felt better in his life. The most recent polls had him ahead of Clinton by a whopping five percent with Jackson fading away in the background - a highway mirage vanishing in the exhaust clouds of

The Candidate's latest success. Such stellar results were an occasion for celebration that couldn't be missed. He turned to Mini who was sitting in the corner sewing red felt heart onto a pink cowboy hat for Percilla.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you, too."

"What's the first thing you're going to do after I win?"

"I want to paint the white house blue. I hate white. It's so boring. What about you, dear?"

"No time for complacency. I think I'll start planning my next move. President of the World, perhaps. I was talking to Heisman and he thinks if I use Wexford's money to stage an alien invasion and then claim to make a deal with them to run the planet to their specifications, I might be the first."

"That's so wonderful, dear. But maybe you should work on running the USA first."

"I'm sure Heisman was just joking, but you never know." The Candidate paused and changed the subject. "Is everything ready? The guests should be here any minute."

"Don't worry. The buffalo with wild sage will be ready when they get here."

The door swung open and Percilla charged into the room.

"Mommy, look!" she shouted as she thrust her hand into the black button in the centre of the coffee table. The wooden panels on the wall folded downwards to reveal a picture window view of the houses across the street. By this time she'd mastered the *hideous black thing*, as The Candidate had started to call it. With its power the three-year old now ruled the house, demanding candy and late night stories in exchange for simple favours like turning on the garage light and setting the alarm clocks.

"Yes, Percilla. The Wilsons do have a nice yard."

"Just look." She pressed the button again and a car across the street exploded in a great orange and black plume. At first The Candidate thought it was terrorists, maybe even Assyrian in origin, rebelling against the bad conditions in their pottery factories.

"My Goodness. You horrible child," Mini shouted.

"Whose car was that anyway?" The Candidate asked, suddenly realizing what had happened. All he could do was crack a smile. The fact that his daughter had figured out how to use *the hideous black thing* against the neighbours was just one more sign that she, too, would one day be great.

"It was the Wilsons'."

"Just tell them it was terrorism, dear."

There was a knock on the door. Della Casa hobbled in followed by Gables, Wexford, and Benson. Della Casa was smiling like the lone man in a Mexican whorehouse, but Wexford looked more nervous than usual as he thumbed through the pages of a paperback before stuffing it in his back pocket.

"That explosion was far fucking out," said Benson. "It looks like the terrorists really are coming to our shores."

"Magnifico!" cried Della Casa. "It's not the terrorists, it's the drug cartels. Just like the old days in Granada."

"Even better," exclaimed Benson.

"Where are Heisman and Brown?"

"They went hunting, sir," said Gables, who was kneeling down polishing The Candidate's white patent leather shoe.

“I’ll get dinner ready,” said Mini. She walked out into the kitchen.

Della Casa pressed the black button and the television set turned on. Then he made a wobbling moth-like motion with his hand over the button and the channels began to flick by, each showing exactly the same thing, a dragster rolling up to a pit stop where a large busted, leather-booted black woman stood waiting to change its tires. The rockabilly track *I walk with the Zombies* played in the background.

“Oh no, not this joker!” Della Casa exclaimed.

The other guests gathered around the television. The Reverend Rev. stepped out of the dragster after it had come to a complete stop in the pits. Two women busily changed the tires with all sorts of shining chrome tools and gauges. The camera zoomed in on the driver’s face revealing its swollen red lips and bulging angry eyes. A picture of The Candidate flashed in perfect rhythm with the music on and off the screen.

“Do not vote for this man,” shouted The Reverend. “He is the supreme contrafabulator, an arch necrofribulator! Not only is he a liar and a cheat, but he tried to use bribe and political subterfuge to suppress a lawsuit levied against him for fraud.” An image of The Candidate’s face continued to flash on and off the screen with a big black X marked through it.

“Do not vote for this man. I repeat, do not vote for this man,” The Reverend repeated without so much as a blink.

The Candidate looked on in utter confusion and despair. Della Casa frantically started changing the channel but each one aired exactly the same ad. The Candidate pounded his fist on the table in fury. A second car exploded across the street. This time nobody noticed but Percilla, who was staring out the window with hungry curiosity.

“Somebody stop him!” shouted The Candidate. “His eyes are...they’re...that’s it...they’re *opalling* at me.”

“Opalling isn’t even a word, sir,” said Gables.

“Shut up. It is now. Like contrafabulator and tantaloid.”

“Yes, sir. Now I remember,” he said. “To opal. To have opalled.” He gesticulated with his hands as if delivering the pivotal soliloquy of a great play.

“Shut up, I said. What are we going to do now? He can’t get away with this. I thought I told you to use all of Wexford’s money to bribe the newspapers and television stations.”

“I’m sorry,” said Wexford to The Candidate. “It’s time to end it all.”

“This is no time for jokes,” The Candidate snarled.

“It’s no joke. I’m a failure.”

The others were still staring at the television set, eyes frozen in a mixture of fascination and disbelief.

“Please,” Wexford pleaded. “Leave me alone.”

“Listen, Wexford. I’m the boss of this project. Your job is to keep your mouth shut and keep the cash flowing. With a little help we can think of a way to get around this!”

Wexford grabbed his stomach as though he was about to vomit and ran out of the room. “My God,” he said. “My blessed God.” But nobody heard, they were too engrossed in the television ad. A tear fell from his eye. One dry tear. His life was one of utter humiliation from his love for Alisa and the miles of plastic wasteland spread across the globe to his role in this farcical venture into fraudulent science and sham politics.

“Sir,” Gables said in a deeply apologetic tone. “I think I have to own up that I forgot to bribe the television stations.”

“You *forgot?*” The Candidate shook his head in disgust. Benson was sitting back in the couch watching the scene as if it were a laser light show.

“Cool,” he said. “This Reverend character is one heavy dude. I should pick up a few of his albums.”

“He’s a gonna’ be a lot heavier when he’s a wearing cement shoes at the bottom of the river,” said Della Casa.

A moment later a shot rang out in the back room. There was a thud and then the sound of Mini’s frantic footsteps followed by a scream. The Candidate ran in the direction of the scream, which had died down into a trembling series of sobs and moans by the time he found Mini kneeling over Wexford’s body in their bedroom. A pool of blood surrounded the pistol in Wexford’s hand. There was a note on the table beside his body and a pen next to it. When Mini finally stopped sniffing, the sound of Roy Orbison’s voice could be heard coming from a miniature tape recorder playing in Wexford’s suit pocket.

*I really learned a lot  
Love is like a fire  
It burns you when it’s hot*

“My goodness,” shrieked The Candidate. “What are we going to do? I’ll never win the election if anyone finds out about this.”

“He’s dying!” screamed Mini.

Della Casa stepped into the room and knelt over Wexford’s body with the strange equanimity of a surgeon in a waiting room.

“No. He’s a dead already. Can’t you tell by a the stillness of his fingers?”

“What’s this?” The Candidate picked up the note. The characters were written in shaky blue lines. It read:

*Dear Alisa,*

*I can no longer stand the humiliation. My life was a farce only worsened by the mockery of its apparent success. Everything I ever did was a failure. Yesterday I found that most of the money I invested was being used by a U.S. General to fund a civil war in the Far East. I leave you my entire remaining fortune sweet Alisa in hope that one day you will realise that I was the man for you. In your last letter when you said you’d sleep with anyone to convince me that there would never be anything between us, I felt such a great sadness inside. It only made me realise how much of a delicate and misguided woman you were and how my love could have healed you, saved you from yourself. But then I was overcome by an even greater sadness. One that convinced me I could never be truly yours unless we could start all over again in a different world altogether. Only on the fresh sheet of new love could we ever realise the true potential between us. Perhaps we will meet in Death’s pale ballroom where I can show you once and for all that it is possible to dance the Tango to Mel Tormé. Please use my money well. Maybe you will be the one that finally reverses the damage that plastic has wreaked on our sad and bitter world.*

*Money. Cold gray money. I always thought it would bring me closer to people and make them like me. Instead it pushed me away. What sickness is the world. In life I failed, so perhaps only in death will I succeed. I am so sick, so weak, so deserving of nothing but eternal suffering and punishment. Yet in my own cowardice I avoid my well-earned punishment by ending it all. Goodbye.*

*Forever yours,  
Thomas*

“How could he?” The Candidate threw the letter on the bed. His entire presidential campaign fizzled before him.

“This is too heavy, man,” said Benson. “I’m going to call the police.”

“You can’t!” shouted The Candidate. “Gables! Stop him.” Gables ran into the room and stopped Benson from picking up the phone, every one forgetting in all the confusion that you couldn’t even use it without the button in the living room.

“If you call the cops, my friend, you will a deeply regret it,” said Della Casa. Then he ran out of the house and hailed the first cab to the airport.

“Listen, man,” said Benson, forcing Gables backward with the weight of his body. He turned to The Candidate. “We’re not talking about some presidential game anymore. We’re talking about someone’s life. This man bent over backwards to help you get to where you are, and you won’t even let me call an ambulance. That’s just bad Karma, man.”

Gables looked nervous. His eyes widened with conviction. “Sir,” he said to The Candidate. “He’s right. We have to call an ambulance.”

“I won’t allow it. Who are you all anyway? Just a bunch of no-good sycophants. You’d be nothing without me. My science made Western what it is today! And you, Gables, would be out on the street begging with that tart Ginger if I didn’t give you a break and take you on as my campaign manager.”

Gables stepped back towards Benson as if to mark his changed affiliations.

“I appreciate what you’ve done, but this has gone too far. Western could have made it on Hedges alone, you know that. And as far as I can see the Tantalus Project has not published a single paper or patent.”

“That’s a lie.”

“I’m sure they’ll publish the stats when this all come out.”

“Why can’t we strike a deal? We can hide the body until after the election and then have it show up in the river somewhere after I’ve comfortably settled into The White House.”

“I can’t believe you just said that,” said Gables. Benson was looking on with morbid curiosity, studying the sudden change of loyalty and working out its relation to the cosmos and the *inner Godhead*.

“If I win we’ll all be so powerful. We can run the whole country together.” He raised his fist in the air. “Tantalum will rain from the skies.”

Mini, who had been reading the letter with quiet tears in her eyes, dropped it and looked over at The Candidate. “I don’t love you any more,” she said as she stared blankly into his eyes.

“Don’t look at me that way,” he said. There was something cold and reptilian in her gaze. It was a Mini he’d never seen before.

“Mumpsy,” he said with an awkward smile, praying he could somehow break her expression and usher back the Mini he had fallen in love with that magic day in Pasadena.

Her gaze hardened even more until it could do nothing more but crack. She pulled at her hair and let out a scream so blood-curdling it was as though she had woken up to find Frankenstein sleeping in the bed beside her.

“Honey,” he ran over to comfort her.

“Stay away,” she flew into hysterics, flailing her arms about and punching The Candidate in the face. Percilla walked into the room carrying a plastic hammer and started hitting The Candidate on the knee with it.

The dog ran in, but stopped in confusion. It whimpered. It wagged its tail. It barked. Then it piddled on the floor. Who was its true master?

“That’s right, sweetie,” said Mini. “Daddy is a monster.”

“You can’t turn my sweetheart on me.” He picked up Percilla, but she burst out crying and struggled to get away like a cat about to be thrown into a bathtub.

“Daddy is bad!”

The dog lunged at The Candidate and bit his suit.

“Stop this nonsense. I’m a good man. A fair man. You can’t just abandon me when things are going so well. I just don’t know how to lose. You have to help me.”

“Get out of this house and never come back,” she said. “Never. Never. Never.”

The Candidate collapsed on the floor in tears. Percilla knelt down beside him and started hitting him in twice as hard as before.

“Daddy is bad,” said Mini. “So bad there’s no punishment big enough.”

Gables and Benson ran downstairs and out of the house. Gables ran to the nearest telephone booth and dialled emergency.

“UPS, sir,” came the answer.

He hung up and tried again. This time he got through.

By the time an ambulance arrived The Candidate was sitting in the living room drunk off six scotches. He was staring down at *the hideous black thing* as he punched his finger into it over and over again. All about the house was utter chaos. The showers were turning on and off. The air was filled with the sound of some opera, deep, passionate, and mad. The hide-a-bed swung in and out of the living room wall. Kettles whistled and ice cream makers churned. When the ambulance drivers walked in they looked at each other in mutual embarrassment as if they were seeing something no man had the right to witness. The Candidate pushed the black button one more time and the sound of a telephone ringing came across the intercom system. Then a voice.

“Hello?” It was Brown. “I said hello.” He repeated. “Could someone answer the cotton-pickin’ phone?” His voice became inaudible as the opera reached its crescendo.

The next day The Candidate hid out in the basements of Western Polytechnic watching a miniature television while reporters hoping for a lucky interview swarmed his office like wasps around a jam jar. Gables and Benson were nowhere to be found. News stories about Wexford’s death were already cluttering the airwaves. Never before had a scandal of such proportions rocked an election so close to the wire. The New York Times headlines read *Tantalus Fools’ Gold*, displaying a diptych of photos with The

Candidate on one panel wearing a headdress and Wexford dead on the floor in the other. The Washington Post featured a cover page cartoon of Mini, The Candidate, and Stu leaning over Wexford's dead body beneath the caption *It's a Family Affair!* The Los Angeles Times was even more daring with a full-page photo of Heisman and Della Casa sampling what appeared to be cocaine with the current leader of Myanmar.

The Candidate felt hopeless and crushed, yet somewhere in the depths of his heart he clutched to the belief that everything would somehow work out and that all this was just one big nightmare. The Candidate always landed on all fours, no matter how bad the situation. But most of all, he always won. He was the undisputed heavyweight champion of success, TKO-ing his way past one opponent after another like Mike Tyson in a ring of featherweights. Public opinion would sway. People would eventually see Wexford as a suicidal depressive and The Reverend Rev as a malicious phoney and everything would go back to normal.

Later that night The Candidate disguised himself as a UPS agent and chanced a run across the science quad to Brown's office. If anyone could help him it was Brown. But before he was even half way across the lawn a flock of reporters ran him down. The most aggressive of the lot, a strawberry blond with a Boston accent, stuffed the bulb of a microphone in his face.

"That ugly brown suit doesn't fool me!" she said.

"Owch, my lip!" he cried.

"Is it true the money from the Tantalus Project came from drug sales?"

"No comment," he said, face turned away from a television camera that was hovering six inches from his head.

"Is it true that Heisman was involved in cocaine dealings in the mid-eighties?"

"No."

"What about Wexford? I heard he's gay."

"No comment."

"My dad's gay, too. It's not a problem. Just face up to it and live with it."

"No comment."

"I heard you would have been nothing if Wexford hadn't shovelled half his bank account your way. Is this true?"

"No comment."

He struggled to push through the amorphous mass, but a hulking Samoan cameraman held fort like an NFL linebacker. There was no way he was going to let The Candidate through the press blockade. Footage like this was more than just CNN promotion material, it was a lifelong meal ticket that would secure him a position as head cinematographer on the best game shows in television.

"Leave me alone," The Candidate shouted. He tucked his head down and charged past the strawberry blonde with the microphone.

"Don't let him get away," the cameraman shouted.

A reporter took a dive and tackled him.

"Now we've got you."

"Pin him down," yelled another voice.

The Candidate struggled on the ground as four men restrained him. The blonde knelt down beside him on the left while the cameraman zeroed in from the right. The Candidate was trapped.

“The Tantalus Project was a gag after all. Would you like to comment?” she asked with a broad elastic smile, her lips shining with fresh lipstick.

The Candidate took a deep breath and screamed at the top of his lungs. A shot rang out in the background. Suddenly the frenzied pack was still. Another shot rang out and the cameraman turned to the blonde. “It’s the cops. Lets get out of here while we still have the footage.”

The crowd parted and in the distance The Candidate could see a slightly bent figure wearing a Daniel Boone hat approaching with a rifle on the shoulder. It was Brown.

“Clear out you all. You should be ashamed of yourselves. Go home. Leave him alone.”

The reporters quickly dissipated except for one, a small Hasidic man with large black-rimmed glasses balanced on his nose. He looked young, like a student. The Candidate stood up and brushed himself off as Brown came closer.

“Excuse me,” said the reporter. “Do you think we could meet for coffee?”

“Please just go away.”

“It’s just...” said the man. Brown walked up from behind him and raised the barrel of his Winchester to the man’s neck.

“You must be deaf there, son. Or mighty thick. No one would have the balls to take me in a shoot-out. Choose your weapon.”

“All right, I’m going,” howled the man. He ran off as though he had to take the worst piss of his life and tried to catch up with the others, who’d since slowed their pace and were viewing the scene from about one hundred yards away.

Brown turned to The Candidate and raised the gun to his face.

“I guess I was wrong,” Brown said.

“Wrong?”

“No friend of mine dresses like an Injun, ‘specially on television. I’m voting for Jackson.”

“All this was for you. Just to please you.”

“You know what? You’re worse than a queer. You’re a no good liar. Go home to your woman and never come back.”

“She kicked me out.”

“Then stay in a hotel.”

“Why is everyone blaming me? It was all Wexford’s fault!”

“He was one sorry lump of coon shit. But you ain’t much better. It’s only a coward that blames his problems on a dead man.”

“I thought you came to save me.”

“I couldn’t see a man outnumbered. Now get out.”

“But...”

“I’m warning you.”

“You were my best man.”

“I was. But now I’m telling you to clear out why you still can. Years from now you’ll say I did you a favor.”

“A favor?”

“Just get yer sweet ass outa here.”

“I can’t believe you.”

“Believe it. One last thing.” He handed The Candidate a fax from Hedges. The Candidate grabbed it and read it.

*Dear Sir,  
I hope things are fine.  
Best wishes,  
Hedges.*

The Candidate collapsed in defeat. It was his worst blow yet. That’s how it worked in academia. The shorter and more cordial the letter, the nastier the intentions.

“Now get lost.”

The Candidate wiped the dirt off his suit and walked slowly away. Away from Brown. Away from the reporters. And away from Western. He heard another gunshot. It was Brown warning the reporters to stay away. It was the southern gentleman in him that couldn’t see the enemy treated unfairly. A hush dropped over Western Polytechnic. The Candidate looked skyward and for a moment imagined he was watching a shooting star. But then he snapped out of it. A renegade fragment of an asteroid had ripped a hole in the fuselage of that great rocket ship and it was streaking downwards in a brilliant ball of white light to meet its doom.

## 2. Failure

The Candidate surveyed the abandoned grounds of Western Polytechnic. A few streetlights towered like luminous sentries outside The Heisman Centre, obscuring the moonlight that sifted through the midnight clouds. A clap of thunder filled the air and a delicate rain shower hissed over the surface of the parking lot. The Candidate stumbled as he stood up, looking down at his feet as he struggled to regain his balance. His shoes were so wet he decided to throw them off and walk barefoot instead. He was ruined. He was beaten. He was a failure. For the first time in his life he was a failure. All because of Wexford and his stupid Roy Orbison forty fives. Wexford. The dead man’s image lingered in his mind like smoke from a perfumed cigarette in some nineteen fifties ballroom. If it wasn’t for the suicide, The Candidate would probably be ordering military strikes on renegade nations like Assyria as he happily nibbled on shrimp cocktail on a sandy beach in the Caribbean.

He crossed the parking lot and followed the sidewalk towards the main campus. Every moment was pregnant with failure, looming before him like a dark chasm at the base of an icy peak. In the past, failure was something that always happened to someone else, and even then, someone else far, far away. It was an outbreak of cholera in an obscure African village on the other side of the world, something you’d only see on television while you shuddered in your arm chair safely sipping your soda and lime.

Failure was only supposed to happen to *those* people. But now everything was different. He raised his head and looked across the street. Yes, he couldn't deny it: failure was everywhere. His three-foot stride was a failure because it wasn't a four-foot stride. The blue Chevrolet across the street was a failure because it wasn't a green Corvette, and a green Corvette failed because it wasn't a blue Chevrolet. He watched a few elms swaying gently in the wind. The pathetic overgrown weeds failed because they weren't pine trees. And even worse, who could deny that wood was a failure? It failed because it wasn't marble or gold. He looked down at his gold watch as he continued down the sidewalk. But even gold was a failure. At least silver had the dignity not to be yellow and so expensive that only Queens and Sultans could afford it. Yes, indeed, it was a genuine failure of a metal. An absolute embarrassment. Ultimately, no metal failed as much as gold did.

Eventually he found himself in front of The Heisman Centre. Surrounded by the looming shadows of the science quad, it looked like an abandoned medieval fortress. He walked up to the main door and looked through the window, hoping to see one of his old students slaving away on some aspect of the Tantalus Project. The building was empty. He heard a sudden jangling behind him. He turned. It was a security guard carrying a flashlight.

"Only authorised personnel, sir."

"Authorised for what?" asked The Candidate.

"The Tantalus Project."

"Of course I am."

"Listen, buddy. If you're some spy you'd better high tail it outa here. That UPS uniform ain't fooling nobody."

"Spy? How dare you. I'm the inventor of the Tantalus Project!"

"Sure, buddy. And I'm Lou Costello."

The guard picked up his walkie talkie and punched a few buttons on its sleek black control panel.

"Looks like we've got a 768 out on a 325 for a 926."

After a long pause a deep voice diffused through the static on the receiver.

*This is an 821, for sure. An 8 fucking 2 fucking 1. No mistake!*

"All right," said the guard sternly to The Candidate. "I'm going to have to ask you to vacate the premises."

"Just tell me, what exactly is an 821?"

"It's top secret. Part of the Tantalus code laid down by General Heisman."

"Heisman's my friend."

"Step back or I'm going to have to shoot." The guard drew his gun.

The Candidate backed away into the darkness. If only they knew the truth. He took a few steps and tripped over a branch, twisting his ankle.

"Get your bony ass off the premises!" the security guard shouted from a distance.

The Candidate brushed off his brown pants and limped off into the night. After what seemed like an eternity of walking through endless cold wet streets and barren fields he was finally standing in front of his house. He made his way up the sidewalk. A light was

shining from the living room. He knocked on the door. Nobody answered. He turned the handle and softly opened the door.

"Honey," he cried.

Gables stepped from around the corner. He was totally naked. "Sir," he said.

"What, may I ask, are you doing running around my house naked?"

"You lost. Clinton won in a landslide. They're even calling him The Unprecedented President because it's his third term."

The Candidate shook his head in disbelief. Not only had Clinton cheated his way into a third term, but he stole his favourite nickname.

There was a rapid thumping noise as Mini ran down the stairs in her bathrobe. As soon as she saw The Candidate she screamed.

"Call the police!" she shouted.

"I should have guessed," said The Candidate, holding back his tears.

"At least he doesn't treat me like I'm stupid. He even watches *Thunderbirds* with me," she hollered. She grabbed Gables' arm.

"Yes, I do. And what a joy! I never would have guessed, but Thunderbird 4 owes everything to Hemmingway."

"Listen, can't you give me one last chance," The Candidate pleaded.

"I think you should go, sir," Gables said as he inserted himself between Mini and The Candidate. "No. Forget the *sir*. I think you should go, *period*."

Just then Stu leapt out from around the corner and barred his teeth at The Candidate.

"Hey, puppy," The Candidate said in playful voice as he held out his hand to the dog. It was his final peace offering.

Stu growled once before jumping up to bite The Candidate's face. The Candidate ran out of the house and didn't stop to look back until he reached the main sidewalk. Gables was standing in the open doorway.

"You'll pay for this, you contra...contrafasc...contrafab...CONTRAFABULATOR!" The Candidate yelled.

"Contrafabulator isn't even a word! Just face it, your *jeffing* days are over." Gables slammed the door.

The Candidate escaped into the darkness. A few minutes later he found himself in the middle of a large park. He knelt down beneath a tree and cried. Life was never supposed to be this cruel. The way things were going he wouldn't be surprised if he was suddenly attacked by a gang of crack-smoking babies cruising the causeways of the night looking for some poor bastard to roll for their next score. His spirits were crushed. He had to get away. Become a Buddhist. Find the true meaning of life. He had to probe the depths of his soul and search for a new key to happiness. All life long he'd been possessed by the demons of success and finally he'd been exorcised with one great punch to the gut. How much worse could it get? Even his wife and dog were set against him. Leaves, flowers, butterflies - everything was a new terror waiting to lash out at him in punishment for his shallow ways.

Eventually he closed his eyes and fell asleep. Several times that night he awoke, each time his mind fresh and clean. Then reality would slowly fade back into consciousness. He would look around, wondering where he was and how he ended up lying under a tree like some kind of drunk. He belonged in a king-sized brass bed sleeping under a down filled duvet. When it all came back his heart would sting with pain and he'd clutch at the

wet grass wishing it were Mini's apron. Thoughts would rattle through his head like lottery balls at a dark satanic draw. Then he'd close his eyes, hoping that sleep would deliver him once and for all from life's humiliation and pain. After what seemed like an eternity he would fall back asleep only to wake up sometime later to the same series of torments as if they were totally fresh and he had never experienced them before.

In the morning he awoke to a bird pecking at the lobes of his ear. He brushed it away and stood up. The bird squawked and circled around his head, apparently waiting for the right moment for a counterattack.

"Go away! What did I do to deserve this?"

He ran into a nest of bushes. His clothes were caked with mud. He searched his pockets for money. All he had left was a twenty-dollar bill and some change. He walked to the nearest street, hoping to find someone to direct him to the closest bus stop. Eventually he came upon an old woman.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said. As the words came out she smiled and he felt a new purity surge through him. He imagined his lips were the bell of a French horn. Maybe there was hope.

"Where's that parcel I was expecting?" she asked him.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm a traveller from the deep South. I've lost my way and need to find a bus stop. I don't have much money and I have to find a bank."

"I was expecting a new blender. UPS promised it would arrive this morning."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. This is just a costume." He pointed to the UPS badge on his shoulder. "Could you please show me the way to the closest bus stop?"

"What's the matter? Are you running from the law?"

In frustration The Candidate turned and walked away. The last thing he needed was to be exposed. A few minutes later he came across a park he had never seen before. It was a few acres in total and a small hill rose from the centre. On the top of the hill stood a tall oak tree surrounded by a ring of red flowers. He walked half way up the slope and sat down on a dry patch of grass. A few minutes later a group of high school students passed by. One of them, a young girl with long ginger hair and a pink hairpin, approached him and offered him a handful of jellybeans.

"Oh, no thank you, miss. I don't eat candies."

"They're not candies," she said. "Boy are you square." The other students broke out laughing.

"He looks like some kind of banker who just lost his job and ended up on the skids," said a boy in a baseball cap.

"If that's the case we should just let him rot," said the girl. "I hate banks."

"Me, too," said a third boy. He spit in the direction of the oak tree.

The Candidate stood up and walked away. He continued down the road, barefoot in his soiled brown uniform until he finally reached the downtown core.

He stopped in front of a parked school bus. Just then he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around to see a strange old man staring at him with wide expectant eyes as though they had somehow met before. He had an odd little goatee that suggested years of study in the highest places. His eyes were hidden behind a tiny pair of wire-rimmed spectacles and there was a stethoscope protruding from his forehead. He was wearing an operating apron and a pair of *Uniroyal* racing gloves.

“Dr. Swirl,” he said as he stuck out his hand to introduce himself. “I’ve heard so much about you. When I heard what happened I knew I had to come and meet you.”

“Who are you? And how did you find me?”

“Save your questions for later. Follow me back to my office and I can get you a shower and a decent meal. We have a lot of talking to do my good man!” Dr. Swirl gestured over to a pink Lada that was parked beside a fire hydrant. “We have no time to lose!”

He walked, almost ostrich like, over to the side of the car and opened the door on the passenger side. The Candidate followed in earnest and stepped inside. Whatever the man’s intentions, it seemed like The Candidate had no other choice but to accept his kind overture.

### 3. Dr. Swirl

The Candidate adjusted his collar as he sank into the pink leatherette sofa in Dr. Swirl’s spacious downtown office. Hanging on the walls were photos of men with electrodes attached to their heads, laboratory mice, framed degrees from over a dozen academic institutions, and a few op art posters from the nineteen sixties. Dr. Swirl took a coin out of his pocket and tossed it on his desk.

“So, there you are,” said Dr. Swirl. He reached into his pocket a second time and pulled out a slice of cheese. “Would you like some? It’s Jarlesburg.”

The Candidate shook his head. Dr. Swirl put the piece of cheese back into his pocket.

“I was trying to hunt you down for so long you naughty little thing.” He shook his index finger in rebuke.

“What do you want from me?” asked The Candidate. “Where did you come from?”

“I want to introduce you to yourself. I want to take you on that magic journey into the person you call yourself. I want to make you realise what it is that you want to realise.”

“I’ve already realised. I realised that I was all wrong and that I am a bad person.”

Dr. Swirl held up the silver coin.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“It’s a coin.”

“You see. It shows how lost you really are.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Let me introduce you to the fascinating world of Dr. Swirl, mesmeric healer, metapsychotic, and hypnotist extraordinaire. Owner of at least a dozen puce naugahide sofas and driver of an even more puce 1958 Edsel. Look again at what you think is the coin. What do you see?”

The Candidate squinted his eyes and looked at the small silver object. All he saw was the coin.

“All I see is the coin,” he said. “No wait. I know what you’re getting at. It’s not a coin. It’s a concept. That’s it.” He took a deep proud breath.

“A concept? How atrocious. That’s the worst answer I’ve ever heard. What do you take me for, a five and dime Timothy Leary?”

“What is it then?”

“Open your mind to the world of Dr. Swirl. Look deep into its yawning crevices and far into its open skies. What you see before you is a bird. A dove with clean white wings and hard grey eyes.”

“This is absurd!” shouted The Candidate. What was he trying to prove with his circus sideshow psychological games? He was probably in cahoots with The Reverend Rev. The Candidate refused to be made a fool of. “If you say so,” he said. Then he pointed to his watch. “So, what’s this?”

“A watch.”

“No. It’s a dove, in fact. A dove *with clean white wings and hard grey eyes.*”

“I’m sorry, my most gracious man,” said Dr. Swirl. “What you have around your wrist is little more than a watch and not a dove at all. You have completely misunderstood my point.”

“What is your point then? I don’t see the dove anywhere.”

“You fascinate me. Only a man who can see the *tantaloid* in everything would say something like that.”

“Tantaloid isn’t even a word.”

“What do you mean? It was you and you alone that popularised its usage. Before the Tantalus Project came along...”

“I don’t want to hear about all that. The Tantalus Project was a gag and nothing more. A plot by Heisman and Della Casa to ruin me.”

“Oh, no. Don’t ever say that, my good man. The Tantalus Project was your greatest achievement. How can a few drag racing ads sway your mind so easily?”

“I was a fake and a phoney...”

“Think of the dove.”

“Who are you anyway?”

“Think of its clean white wings.”

“Why don’t you answer me?”

“I am the amazing Dr. Swirl. I’ve come to save you from yourself.”

“I bet you think you’re like that fat angel in that movie about the guy who has the invisible rabbit friend and wants to kill himself.”

“Not only are you confusing two completely different films, my friend, but you’re dead wrong. Sit back. Let me tell you the amazing story of Dr. Swirl. Relax and let your thoughts flow through your mind like warm honey on a dark summer night. I am Dr. Swirl...Dr. Swirl...Dr. Swirl...” His voice continued like a Mantra in an incense parlour.

The geometries of the room began to bend and wiggle before The Candidate’s eyes. Everything had a bright blue halo around it. The room assumed a logic of its own, seemingly free of the world’s physical laws. In this new realm even the Hedges number had no validity. He let go his body and closed his eyes, allowing himself to sink into the puce sofa as it started to engulf him. He felt a pleasant sensation as though he were swimming through a pool of warm oil. Pinkish hues danced before his eyes as Dr.

Swirl's soft words guided him further and further from the reality of his office. Sentient world upon sentient world blossomed and collapsed before his mind's eye like a magical flower whose petals progressively become buds for newer and even more beautiful flowers.

"You are Dr. Swirl," mumbled The Candidate.

"I am Dr. Swirl."

"The coin you hold is a white dove."

"I hold a white dove."

Dr. Swirl paused and blinked several times as though there was a particle of dust in his eye. Then he waved the fingers of his right hand in front of The Candidate's face. "Let your mind ride the tides of consciousness. Let your thoughts bellow like a mystic wind through the lacy white curtains of reality."

"I am in a room and the curtains are filled with soft winds like sails in clear water."

"There is no need to wax poetic about your hypnotic state, my good man."

"My mind is a warehouse room, empty, waiting for deliveries of bland cardboard boxes containing even blander objects with yet blander uses."

"Tell me, my good man, what was it you learned these last few days?"

"People made me think I was a nobody unless I could impress everyone - even if it meant lying and cheating. Pretending to be stupid and naïve early on so that people would like me. Pretending to be powerful so that people would fear me. Everyone abused me."

"You were abused by no one."

"My mother never loved me. She abandoned me."

"Your mother was loving and tender. She needed you as you needed her."

"My father hated me. He never even bothered to meet me."

"You were the apple of his eye."

"People tortured me into becoming the awful person I grew into. They made me."

"Nobody made you do anything. Everyone loves you. There is no one that dislikes you. Not even the most heinous psychopath could feel anything but empathy for you."

The Candidate was suddenly frightened. He felt like a baby lost in a primeval forest. "I'm lost," he said. "I don't like the way my brain feels."

"I am Dr. Swirl. I came to you for a reason. In my youth I was fascinated by Greek mythology and reincarnation. I wanted to be a magician. I read everything from Ovid to Houdini in an attempt to spiritualise my life. I soaked up mythology like a sponge. I found new and brilliant interpretations of myths that no scholar could have ever dreamed of. I imagined I was spiritually attached through time to the Delphic oracle. All myths lived inside me. Yet the most powerful of these was the myth of Tantalus..."

The Candidate's body started shaking wildly in the sofa like a victim of a demonic possession during an exorcism. "Wexford," he hollered.

"Settle down, my good man."

When the paroxysms subsided Dr. Swirl continued. "The moment I first heard of your Tantalus project I was amazed that someone so scientific in his leanings could have such a broad grasp of the future of humanity through the resurrection of myth. I saw in us kindred spirits who'd yet to meet and share fascinating tales of spiritual renewal."

"The Tantalus Project was a hoax I made up to get tenure."

“The Tantalus Project was no hoax. It was sent to you as a mission by higher spiritual beings. You have simply managed to convince yourself of that because you are afraid to take your seat as President.”

“I lost the election.”

“You lost nothing.”

“Wexford shot himself.”

“An unidentified assailant shot Wexford.”

“My wife is cheating on me.”

“She is the most loyal woman on the planet. How could you imagine such a thing?”

“I want to see my mother. I don’t like you.”

“I can’t get your mother.”

“She hates me. She never came to my wedding.”

“Yes she did. Don’t you remember her all lovely in a pink garden dress?”

“How do you know? I never saw you there.”

“I posed as an usher. I was so fascinated by your tantaloïd wedding I just had to be there.”

“I’m afraid.”

“Do not be afraid. You are under my protection.”

“The Reverend Rev. is coming to get me.”

“The Reverend Rev. was a construct of your imagination invented to make an excuse for losing the election which, in fact, you never lost.”

“You’re a liar. You only want to hurt me.”

“You are under a deeply suggestive state of hypnosis. You are safe from all harm as long as you let me be your guide. You must trust me or the consequences could be dangerous.”

“My wife hates me.”

“No she doesn’t. She loves you more than anything. It was all part of a self-imposed hallucination. She’s wearing a bright red dress in the white house just waiting to celebrate your victory.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Believe me. I am Dr. Swirl. Reality is the mind’s catapult.”

“What about Heisman?”

“Heisman is happily flying a jet across the Atlantic to Islamabad to celebrate your victory with his friends on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region.”

“And Della Casa?”

“He’s in Havana smoking a big fat cigar readying himself for your new regime. The world of Tantalus. You invented your defeat to cover up your fear of ultimate achievement. When become President of the United States it will be quite frightening as there is little you can do to better such an achievement. And someone as highly motivated as yourself always needs a new challenge to send you through life.”

“I could always become king of the solar system. There was already a Sun King in France.”

“Oh, you are very amusing my friend. We all know that there’s no such thing. But if anyone’s going to do it, I’m sure you’d be the first.”

Dr. Swirl took out a pink plastic pendant watch and let it swing back and forth on its chain. The Candidate suddenly felt as if he were cloaked in a white cloud dancing with a chorus of angels.

“You must claim your victory as president. You must infuse the spirit of Tantalus into the world of men. You can’t let yourself believe that you didn’t win the election. It is only your sudden fear of ultimate success that has flung you into this state of temporary madness. You must regain your strength. Stop trying to convince yourself of non truths to avoid the fact that you have actually won.”

“What do you want out of me?”

“Don’t worry. I want to get you back on your feet where you belong. It has taken me months of preparation packed into just the last two days to tackle this problem. My fees are high but I’m sure there’s money left over from the Wexford account.”

“Why are you being so generous?”

“Shhhh. I hear the sound of an evil spirit shuddering in our midst. We must not lose hold of our purpose. It is forbidden to talk of day to day affairs like money when we are wandering through the depths of the unconscious.”

The Candidate suddenly felt dizzy. The room shrank in proportions. The floor wobbled and rocked beneath him. Dr. Swirl receded in space as if he had fallen down a long black well and was looking at him through the lens of a high-powered microscope. The Candidate felt vulnerable. He wrapped his arms around his chest in an attempt to protect himself.

“You are Dr. Swirl.”

“I am Dr. Swirl.”

“You have won the election.”

“I have won the election,” The Candidate echoed. His mind was now a mirror, reflecting Dr. Swirl’s every suggestion.

“If it wasn’t for me, you would have made a fool of yourself by walking through the streets like some sort of beggar-come-Christian-missionary. You would have been the laughing stock of the country. Another election would have had to be called after your rapid impeachment.”

“Impeachment...” The Candidate repeated. Dr. Swirl’s words were a warm river of honey.

“You owe me your life.”

“My life.”

“Yet because of my generosity, I will only ask you to pay me every penny remaining from the Tantalus Project, so your personal finances are not touched.”

“Tantalus.”

“Tantalus. I have striven like you, to bring the fruits of this great myth into the world. All about will be death and ruination without the forces of Tantalus.”

“Tantalus.”

“When you snap out of my power you will feel strong. Your confidence will be renewed. You will accede to your rightful position. You will sign a cheque for the entire sum remaining in your research accounts. It will be payable to *Dr. Swirl*. You will then take the first bus to Washington. When you get there you will go directly to your new home, The White House, and move in. Your family will be waiting for you. Your wife will look as beautiful as she did on your wedding night. Your daughter will have a pink

ribbon in her hair. Your dog will greet you with a show of affectionate devotion like you have never seen before.”

“I will go to Washington.”

“Your orders are clear. When I snap my fingers you will awaken and remember none of this. You will see me as a physician who just saved your life from an almost fatal drowning and to repay me you will donate every cent remaining to me. You will tell the university accountants that you are buying specialised scientific equipment from *Dr. Swirl Incorporated* and that will allow you to make the payment. You will send the cheque to the address of this office. Then you will go directly to the bus station and take the first bus to Washington.”

“I will do as you say.”

Dr. Swirl snapped his fingers and the room popped open like a jack in the box. Sun poured like sparkling wine through the window. Edges were sharp and colours deep and rich. The Candidate was seized by a new energy. He stood up.

“I owe you my life,” said The Candidate.

“Oh. Don’t be silly. Just another day at the office for Dr. Swirl.”

“And about that equipment deal,” said The Candidate. “I’ll fill out a purchase order immediately.”

“Excellent. It’s always so nice to do business with one of my patients. It’s so rare that I get an opportunity to save my business clients from drowning.”

“How long have you been in business? Equipment, I mean.”

“At least ten years. I started it on money made from my medical practise.”

“That’s what I like. A good red-blooded capitalist.”

“I’m flattered.”

“Well,” said The Candidate. “I really have to go. I have to get out of these soiled clothes and get into something more suitable for my inauguration ceremony.”

The Candidate stretched his arms and walked towards the door.

“So good to do business with such a charming and humble man as yourself,” said Dr. Swirl.

“The pleasure’s all mine.” The Candidate shook his hand and walked out into the clear blue yonder of the day. He’d never felt better in all his life. To think he was so traumatised as to construct a defeat fantasy to protect his deepest insecurities.

His arms tingled as he walked passed a newspaper stand. He wasn’t a failure after all. He was the new President. What great privileges he’d have once he claimed his new position! He could fly over riots in a helicopter and frown. He could throw up at international meetings and get front-page coverage. He could sell arms to nasty little dictatorships until they bought enough to become a minor threat. Then he could charge in like some kind of white-clad sheriff of truth and nuke them into oblivion for disturbing the world order. Yes, the presidency was going to be his biggest success yet. He could hardly wait.

## 4. The White House

The Candidate walked out onto the street. His street. As the new President, he could say with utmost certainty that it was *his* street. He stopped in front of a perfume display window and looked at his reflection in the lightly smoked glass. He adjusted the part in his hair and saluted to himself. A bus went by and honked its horn. No doubt the driver was congratulating him for his landslide victory. He watched as crowds of people walked by. Some rich, some poor. Some young, some old. regardless of their age or social position, they were all his supporters. A few days earlier, each and every one of them must have walked into the voting booth and cast a ballot in his favour. Americans were such a great bunch of people. The Candidate walked on for a few blocks, marvelling at the possibilities of his new position. With a mere signature he could make decisions that could alter the lives of every man and woman in each and every economic subclass in the country. He could raise taxes or lower them at will. He could cut back on social programs when people were socialising too much. He could cut back the military when they were being too militant. Yes, today was a brand new day. A crisp white sun sparkled in his heart.

The Candidate walked through the streets of his empire until he reached the grounds of Western Polytechnic. His first order of affairs as the new President was to make out a purchase order to *Dr. Swirl*. He walked into the science quad. The pronounced lack of students suggested classes were over. He opened the door to the Heisman Center. The halls were quiet. He walked down to the purchase office. The window was open. He rang the bell. Nakahira came to the service window.

“Yes, sir.”

“You!” The Candidate exclaimed. “Since when do you work here?”

“After you lost the election...”

“Lost? You always had a sense of humour. My landslide victory, you mean.”

“Yes, sir.” A look of pathos spread across Nakahira’s face. “That’s what I meant. Your victory.”

“Let me guess. They were so happy for me they promoted everyone who used to work for me.”

“Indeed,” said Nakahira.

“I knew it. What a fine institution this is.” The Candidate looked in admiration at the woodwork framing of the purchasing window as if it were part of a delicately carved antique hutch. “Craftsmanship.”

“You shouldn’t stay here long, sir.”

“Ah, yes. I might be mobbed by my fans. Good thinking. I’ll make it quick. Being President is a busy job, you know.”

“Yes,” said Nakahira. “I’m sure it is.” The Candidate detected a note of sadness in the man’s face. Obviously he wasn’t being paid enough. Maybe his first order of business as the new President should be to give his once loyal servant a raise.

“I need to fill out a purchase order to *Dr. Swirl Incorporated*,” said The Candidate. “We’re buying some equipment on a blockbuster equipment sale. Just clear out all the

accounts and make out an order for *general equipment*. It's a clearance sale. Get it? Clearance sale. Clear out the accounts? I want to buy them out."

Nakahira went to the back and came back with a big blue binder filled with the most current accounting details. He flipped through the pages.

"It says you have twenty two million three hundred thousand and eight dollars left."

"Give it all to *Swirl Incorporated*. They deserve it!"

"Are you OK, sir?" Nakahira asked with concern.

"Why, of course. Never felt better in my life."

"Does *Swirl Incorporated* have an address?" Nakahira raised his eyebrow suspiciously.

"Just send it to Dr. Swirl himself. He's somewhere downtown. He owns the whole company."

"Yes, sir."

"You should be able to find him in the phone book."

"Yes."

"By the way. Where's the old gang? Why is this place so dead?"

"There's a conference on rocket launchers in honour of Heisman."

"Ah. How could I forget. Bright guy, that Heisman."

"Yes, sir."

"Keep your head up, Nakahira. You're going places."

"Thank you, sir."

The Candidate turned and walked down the hall one last time, stopping to admire the picture of Lapoisse by the front office. Yes, he certainly had fond memories of this place. He was going to miss it. The early days of the Tantalus Project. And even further back to his successful interview. A tear came to his eye as he walked out onto the grassy square of the science quad. Washington was such a long way away. A truck from a mattress company drove by and he wondered what the beds in the White House were like. He imagined they were as big as several banquet halls combined with a huge brass head rail like the Gateway to the West in St. Louis. Being President was so important and stressful a job that you needed the biggest bed possible to make sure you got enough rest. He started whistling as he waited by the bus platform in his UPS suit. He couldn't wait to get to Washington. Mini and Percilla would be waiting with big juicy smiles like cantaloupe melons. He was moving on up!

The Candidate arrived in Washington three days later, on a Tuesday morning. He stepped out of the Greyhound bus, still in the same soiled brown uniform as before. Changing into better clothes would have to wait until he got to The White House. Maybe there was even a special presidential suit waiting for him. As his feet met the pavement he was greeted by a thick wall of humidity almost tropical in its intensity, making him wonder if Mini and Percilla were planning a victory cruise for them in the Caribbean. If so, maybe a huge celebratory pot roast was waiting for him at their new dinner table in the White House. He thought of hailing a cab, but decided against it. The bus ticket and three days of truck stop dining had him down to his last twenty dollars. But he had no need to worry, as he was surely already on the presidential payroll and a massive paycheque, too large to fit in even the widest of all mailboxes, awaited him in the Oval Office. He could hardly wait to drag it into the bank to cash it.

He left the bus station with a fat triumphant smile on his face. A woman passed by carrying a shopping bag. No doubt she recognised him but was too shy to introduce herself.

“Excuse me, miss,” he said with the coyest southern accent he could muster.

The woman stopped and turned to him.

“Yes,” she said abruptly.

“I was wondering...”

“You’d better make it quick,” she interrupted. “I’m supposed to meet my son. He’s in trouble with his in-laws. I keep telling him, but oh, no, does he listen? Of course not.”

Interesting, The Candidate thought. She was so shy that she was pretending she didn’t even know who he was. Perhaps it was the UPS suit that confused her. Or maybe he didn’t look exactly the same as he did in his campaign posters. Whatever the case, he decided to be nice and play along. As President he had that luxury. When you were at the top there was no reason to be mean to anyone, although those who were afraid of losing their power were often so. But with only upwards to go, he had no use of such petty insecurities.

“I’m from the south. Can you show me the way to Capitol Hill?”

“Just take a cab.”

The woman turned and walked away.

The Candidate was mildly stunned, but quickly convinced himself that she was really just looking after his safety. There were probably hundreds of terrorists waiting to get a crack at him. But would a simple street cab protect him that much from the onslaught of a machine gun? What he really needed an armoured limousine with bulletproof windows. But how could she have known what safety precautions were necessary to safeguard him against criminals? So it was still kind of the woman to be so considerate.

He found a map on the wall of a bus shelter and in an hour was on Capitol Hill. He took a deep breath and sat down on the grass to contemplate the beauty of his newfound empire. All those white-pillared buildings erected centuries ago by packs of dirty Frenchmen shined brightly in the late morning sun. The Washington monument was standing in all its glory like an art-deco rocket ship. How appropriate, he thought. The very symbol of everything he stood for had already been erected, as though presaging his arrival. Yes, he was going to love this job. He stood up and walked past the long alleyway of buskers, kiosks and jugglers that stood between him and the White House. Crowds of wonderful people, gleeful and smiling with their candy apple faces flooded in and out of The Smithsonian Institute.

When he stepped up to the gates of The White House he was stopped by a guard.

“Sorry, only authorised personnel.”

How quaint. Even the guards were too shy to admit they knew who he was. What a cosy little love nest this place was going to be. “You don’t have to be shy,” he said. “I know you know who I am.”

“Sorry?”

“Oh, come on.”

The guard squinted confusedly. Then he pulled out his walkie talkie and muttered something into it. A reply came almost instantly. The Candidate was too busy admiring the lush emerald lawns surrounding his new palace to notice. He wondered how many

dogs Percilla could tie up on the dozen or so trees that lined the walkway to the front door.

*I've got him trained on video. It's that guy from the election. Can't you tell by the head? That UPS uniform doesn't fool me. He smells like a zoo. I'd just let him in before he makes trouble.*

"All right," said the guard. "You can go on through. Just knock on the door and a servant will escort you to the waiting room."

"Thank you," said The Candidate.

He walked proudly down the front walk towards the front door. This was the biggest day of his life. All those toilsome years at Western Polytechnic evaporated before his eyes as he knocked on the front door. He wondered what Mini had bought him for a victory present and which of the brilliantly painted Easter basket rooms she'd hid it in. Was there a turquoise room? Or how about burgundy? If there wasn't, there'd certainly be some redecoration to do.

A butler came to the door. He looked almost intimidating in his pressed black suit with black satin lapels and a bow tie.

"Yes," he said coldly. The Candidate watched the lump in the man's throat move up and down like a ping-pong ball as he spoke.

"It's me," he said. "I've come all the way from the mid west and I'm beat. How about some pot roast and a glass of cranberry juice to start things off?"

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"Oh, you're not going to play shy too?" The Candidate grimaced. He was getting fed up with all of this overly demure behaviour. He'd never met so many insecure people in his entire life as he had today.

"I'm sorry, sir," said the man.

"I guess I understand how you might be afraid to confront someone like me. I mean, it's not often that you meet someone so successful."

"Sir?" the man raised his eyebrow.

"Just let me in." The Candidate pushed the man aside and walked into the front hall of the White House. He'd never seen such marbled splendour in all his life. He felt like Dorothy come to Oz.

"Boy, do I need a bath."

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Leave?" The Candidate was confused. "Oh. Leave of absence. So soon after I start? Golly, nobody ever told me how cushy life at the top really was. Where should I go? I haven't been to Disneyland in a while."

"I'm afraid you don't understand. I'm going to have to call the guards."

"That's very kind of you to offer your protection. There must be so many terrorists out there just waiting for a chance to take a shot at me. Thank God I've got a good man like you to look after me. Now, where's Mini and Percilla?"

"Who, sir?"

"My wife. Oh, perhaps she has spent so much time gardening that you haven't met her yet. She's so wonderful. I'm sure you'll get on fine. The first thing she'll want you

to do is paint all the walls. Just a guess, but I probably know my wife better than anyone. There's too much white in here. She won't go for it."

"Is the President expecting you?"

The Candidate curled his eyebrow in disbelief. Then he broke out laughing. "The President. Ha. That's a funny one." He laughed under his breath and walked up the broad coiled staircase. The man followed him nervously, seemingly fearful that The Candidate might dirty the walls with his hands. "Is the President expecting you? Ha. You've got quite a sense of humour."

"Sir, if you take one more step..."

The Candidate had already accelerated into a light jog.

"Where's the bathroom in this place? I can't wait to see it. I bet it has gold leaf toilet paper."

Just then The Candidate saw something coming out of the corner of his eye, but it was too late to stop. A middle-sized man with silvery hair wearing a casual blue suit lunged from around the corner. The two figures collided, sending both men downwards to the smooth polished floor.

The world went up in a shower of red and white stars and The Candidate felt a numb pulsing in his head as if he were being hit repeatedly by a bag of sand. His mind reeled. Dizziness set in. Then complete blackness.

When The Candidate awoke he was chained to a hospital bed in the middle of a huge white room, empty except for a cart carrying boxes of plastic syringes and Q-Tips. An intense white light buzzed directly overhead.

"This is an outrage," he screamed. "Get me out of here!"

"You must be careful," a voice said from behind.

The Candidate turned. In the bed beside him was Zhitnik. His face was powder white and there was a scar on his forehead. He stared into The Candidate's eyes as would one at a test pattern on a television set, with blank impersonal interest.

"What are *you* doing here?" asked The Candidate.

"My lord! Zorton! We meet at last! Just a few blocks from the Western campus. How bitterly ironic..."

"Zhitnik, don't you remember me?"

"How clever of you to show up in a UPS uniform! No doubt you have a special fate ready for me. What? No...I know...let me guess. You want to turn me into a newer, even better Zorton. That's why you were sending me those bills all along. You wanted me to think I was you. You're so selfish you want everyone to think they are you. One of you isn't enough to feed your massive ego. You want everyone to be created in your image. You want to create an entire army of Zortons to infiltrate the world and undermine *the revolution*."

"My God! I can't let them do to me what they did to you."

Zhitnik started laughing uproariously. "You're so evil and all-powerful, you've become little more than a mockery of yourself. I have nothing left to do but laugh!"

Just then a nurse rushed in. She started cleaning a metal scalpel with a piece of cotton. She turned to The Candidate

"You're disturbing Mr. Zorton!" she said with a shrill note in her voice.

"His name is Zhitnik," said The Candidate.

"Of course," she said, obviously humoring him.

Zhitnik turned to The Candidate. “Even the hospital workers think I’m you. So, don’t try to pretend you’re not behind it all, old Zorty-Boy.”

The Candidate gathered himself together. What was he, the President, doing in this nuthouse? “Where am I?” he hollered at the nurse. “How dare you do this to the President! I’ll have you fired. I’ll have your boss fired. I’ll have the entire building strategically bombed by the pentagon!”

“Calm down, sir. You’re suffering from delusional behaviour.”

“This has got to be some kind of nightmare. How did I get here?”

“Don’t you remember, sir? You ran rampant through the White House and collided with the President. You’re lucky he only has a mild concussion or you would’ve been in even deeper trouble.”

“President?”

The Candidate’s memory stirred. He remembered running down a great hall looking for a bathroom. Then the sudden image of black shoes and a blue suit. He must have run into a mirror. That’s what she meant by colliding with the President.

“It’s all coming back. I was wearing a blue suit when I hit the mirror, wasn’t I?”

“You were in that same brown suit when you were arrested.”

A doctor walked in and the nurse turned to him obediently.

“He’s still suffering from delusions. He thinks he’s the President.”

“Give him a shot of thorazine,” whispered the doctor.

The nurse left the room. Five minutes later she was back with a syringe full of a colourless liquid.

“This isn’t going to hurt at all,” she said.

“What is it? What are you doing to me?”

“Don’t worry.”

A miniature fountain of droplets squirted from the thin silver needle. The nurse thrust it into his arm. It didn’t hurt as much as he expected. As she pressed on the plunger he felt a slight pressure under his skin directly around the point at which the needle had entered.

“See. It didn’t hurt that much, now did it?” she said.

He looked over at Zhitnik, who was now asleep.

“Zhitnik, wake up! We have to get out!”

The Candidate threw his arms around the elderly man, but he was already slipping away from The Candidate’s visual grasp. His face changed several times as his mind eased down the long black funnel. First it was Brown looking like General Custer with an expression of accusation and grief on his face. The Candidate felt guilty as if he’d let him down for some reason he didn’t fully understand. Then it was Mini. She looked exactly as she had the time he found her dressed up on their bed with spy posters on the wall behind her. He wondered what he had done to drive her to such extremes. Finally it was Wexford. Then it all came back. But by then it was too late. Something like a dark cloth fell over his mind as he struggled to grasp at this new fountain of memories. In the background he thought he heard someone say something about Jed Henderson, but his mind was so muddled he couldn’t be sure. All was then blackness. Someone had flicked the switch. Pulled the plug. He felt helpless as if an electrical storm had suddenly cut off his cable reception. A sonic boom ripped through the sky. A white streak slashed across the pink and grey bands of dusk. The rocket ship had plunged down into the ocean and

all that was left was the green and white fizz of seawater. There were no helicopters for miles.

## V

### 1. Bored of Directors

The Candidate smiled and took a sip of his soda water. Holding the tumbler up at eye level, he watched the bubbles sparkle like tiny crystals as they made their journey along the sides of the glass to the surface, popping before they vanished into the air. He set the glass down. It was summer. The lime green hills of the Henderson Country Club rolled in every direction. A warm breeze rustled through the grass. His first day on the board of directors of Jed Henderson's new business venture was already a success. All he had to do was walk around and look rich. What job could be easier? It was simply a matter of wearing the right suite and holding the right expression on his face. Rich people always had that certain look of comfort and confidence. What had they to be unconfident about? For the right sum of money almost anything could be bought. He stretched his arms into the air and savoured the sensation of the breeze tickling his fingertips.

He couldn't believe it had already been six months since Gables had married Mini. In a strange way they were meant for each other. Gables was a failed artist and Mini had failed at being The Candidate's wife. Yes, it was ultimately their failures in life that had brought them together. They were a match made in heaven - a heaven for failures. He felt genuinely sorry for them, since they were obviously both nice people at heart. But what had he to worry about? With his new job he had the best of everything. He got to see Percilla - who was now five and had a face like a bright pink balloon - once a week. They would usually eat cotton candy and go to the amusement park. That was the best way to enjoy your daughter. But his new life had other privileges as well. For example, he no longer had to put up with clowns like Benson and Hedges, and criminals like Della Casa and Heisman were just faded images from the past.

He shook his head in disbelief as he took another sip of his soda water. Why did he ever want to be president anyway? Presidents always lost in the end. If they weren't out in four years, they'd be chucked out in eight - unless you were a cheat like Clinton who used his charm to trick the authorities into allowing him to run for a third term, but even then he'd be out in another few years. So no matter who you were, you were guaranteed to get canned eventually. What sort of job was that anyway? You would get fired no matter how good you were. Kings and queens never got fired. Knights and dukes had at

least some sense of job security. It just showed how truly demented the world had become. The Candidate sighed a huge and comfortable sigh of relief. He was so happy to be alive. For the first time in his life he felt something like calm and stasis. Something that said he was a success no matter what he did or what he said. He had nothing more to prove. He knew he was a success. Failure and all its bloodthirsty minions were nowhere in sight. For the rest of his life he could rest easy and sleep well.

Jed Henderson pulled up in a shiny red golf cart. He stepped out and lifted his sunglasses from his nose, resting them on his temple.

“A couple out there just shot a five over par,” he said.

“Better over par than under par,” The Candidate quipped.

“That’s what I always liked about you. You have a sense of humour. That’s why we invested in your work. All the other professors we dealt with in the past were just a bunch of crusty old farts with no sense of style or purpose.”

“It’s all over now.”

“Yes,” said Henderson with a note of relief in his voice. “That Heisman character was a real stinker.”

“And what an atrocious selection of suits.”

“I can’t believe what they did to you. How he pushed you into the presidential race to turn your attentions away from the Tantalus Project so he could use Wexford’s money for illicit dealings in Myanmar.”

“He had bad breath anyway,” said The Candidate. “I guess milk and cigars is a bad combo.”

Henderson laughed. “Can’t argue with that, although it’s pretty hard to tell when there’s a squadron of F-18s raining sidewinders down at you from the sky. Thank God I was lucky enough to be in the sub-basement when they attacked.”

“I’m still thankful you rescued me from Zhitnik and that loony bin.”

“All part of good business,” said Henderson. “When I heard what had happened I couldn’t help but turn a helping hand. It was in the papers everywhere.”

“What are you doing tonight?” asked The Candidate.

“Going out. What about you?”

“I’ve got a date with Dessie McCaul.”

“Who?”

“Remember that rich sweetheart from Texas?”

“Oh, her...of course. I met her once at an art opening.”

“Funny, that’s where we’re going tonight. At least there will be free wine.”

“I can’t believe the things you have to do to maintain a good image in the business community. The night I met her an artist talked me into buying a photo series that showed him naked eating a dead giraffe. He said it represented his desire to eat a dead giraffe, nothing more.”

“How pretentious.”

“Tell me about it. At least he could have thrown in a little symbolism.”

“I never liked cymbals.”

“*There you go again...with that deadly wit!*”

“*Firewater ruined my people...*” The Candidate said in an exaggeratedly deep voice. “But Dessie’s got a lot of mileage left before it ruins her.”

“That was your finest moment.”

“Thanks, but I’d like to think there’s more to come.”

“Knowing you...”

“I’m still working on it.”

“You’re already on the board of directors. And I’m sure there’s even loftier heights to climb.”

“No,” said The Candidate. “I think it’ll be a long time before I’m *bored of directors* especially with Disney and the boys making a new blockbuster every summer. But who needs Hollywood when your life is this good?”

Henderson chuckled. “See what I mean? You’ve still got that snap.”

The Candidate looked off into the distance. His mind had already turned to his upcoming date. What would she be wearing? How many drinks would she have before she lost control? Would she end up dancing on the table and balancing an olive on her nose like she did last time? He didn’t care. They had only dated once and he was already sold on the idea of marrying her. She had something special about her. It was the way she walked. Or maybe it was the way she smiled. Or maybe it wasn’t any of these or maybe it was both. Again, he didn’t care. All he knew was that he liked her. And besides, he’d trade in a woman who dressed like a spy and watched British children’s shows any day for one who overdid the booze every now and then. Successful people, like those who frequented Henderson’s new country club, drank all the time. It was all part and parcel with being a success.

“Well,” said Henderson. “It looks like I should be going. I’ve got a date myself this evening. A saucy little Jewish number I met last night. Lots of jewellery. Long brown hair. A small sexy nose.”

“Have fun,” said The Candidate. Henderson waved and tilted his head back to get his sunglasses to drop back into place on his nose. He drove away slowly in his golf cart. The Candidate waved as he took another sip of his club soda. Soon, Henderson and his cart were just a little red dot in the middle of a vast green expanse. The Candidate tried to tie the image to a painting he might have once seen, but couldn’t. The sight was too beautiful even for the best artists. People like Gables could never have come up with such a wonderful scene in all their lives.

The Candidate smiled a full wide smile. Success bloomed around him like a field of blood-red poppies in spring. A squirrel gnawed away at a nut beneath a billowing oak tree. A bluebird chirped as it landed on a delicate overhanging branch. A group of children chased their kite onto the golf course. It swirled around wildly until it finally dove into the ground. A radiant white blimp floated above him, swimming through wave after wave of clouds as it cut through the pure blue ocean of the sky. Yes, thought The Candidate. He was happy. Without a doubt it was the most successful day of his life. Nothing could have made it better.

The End

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