

RESISTANCE IN DYSTOPIAN FICTION

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by
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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Abstract

This thesis attempts to answer the fundamental question, "How does resistance function in dystopian fiction?" and considers the value of memory and technology within this context. It also articulates the themes of the research within a creative work, a dystopian novel titled *The Department of Retribution*. With the rising popularity of dystopian fiction, the findings of this project attempt to provide timely insight into why resistance is essential to the genre and how it can be employed via memory and technology. Within the scope of authoritarian structures and their ideological origins, this thesis examines the methods protagonists of dystopian fiction use to push back against oppressive means of control. It discusses memory and its value to characters who resist the state's official narrative of the past, and it examines the ways in which the pitfalls of humanity's reliance on technology are portrayed in dystopian works. *The Department of Retribution* takes place in a future United States where hard drugs such as methamphetamine have been legalized, fatal combat sports dominate television, and a fourth branch of government, the Corporate Council, wields dominant power. Seventeen-year-old Emile Winkler longs to avenge his little sister's death at the hands of a meth user, and when he turns eighteen he applies for a murder permit from the Department of Retribution that will allow him to achieve this. Legalized murder, however, has life-altering repercussions, and Emile sets out to discover the motivation behind the system that allows it. The exegetical discourse of technological hope and pessimism re-emerges in the novel as I explore the challenge of integrating androids into society as friends and companions, and the issues of equality that might arise. I also consider future psychological developments such as intra-cranial serotonin implants and a programmable re-prioritisation of thoughts and memories called *amelioration* that may help sufferers of trauma move on from painful, dominating thought patterns.

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Introduction

Dystopian fiction has proven to be a fertile ground for the study of societal control and totalitarianism, weaving narratives that fascinate readers in a similar vein as prison stories, for in both we find protagonists who struggle, against great odds, to resist a stringent, totalising system of self-denial and institutional power.

Although authors deliberately create the fictional dystopias in their works, the founders and planners of real-world governments rarely intend their nations to devolve into dystopian states. Because fictional representations of dystopia are often modelled on existing authoritarian systems, it is necessary to locate the roots of these fictional places. In his work *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*, M. Keith Booker states:

[The] treatment of imaginary societies in the best dystopian fiction is always highly relevant more or less directly to specific 'realworld' societies and issues (1994, 19).

The best dystopian fiction's representation of existing conflicts and contradictions within society serves as an unequivocal warning to the reader about the future. Dystopian authors caution that without social and legislative revision to a nation or region's present system, a more austere and violent future awaits its citizens. In the same manner, future dystopias often reflect back on the horrific, near lawless roots that gave rise to their socio-political systems.

The usual precursor to dystopia is the desired utopia, the term created by Thomas More in 1516 that was Greek ("ou topos") for "no place". More used the term as a pun for the word "eu topos", or "good place". While theorists and scholars of utopia have often disagreed about the definition of utopia, some have proposed specific characteristics for the term that have become respected within the field. Ruth Levitas describes the essence of utopia as "the desire for being otherwise, individually and collectively, subjectively and objectively" (2013, xi). In one of the more succinct and commonly accepted definitions of utopia, Lyman Tower Sargent defines it as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space" (1994, 9). He notes that the key attribute of utopia is its non-existence (1994, 5), a characteristic that has led scholars to ponder if More, himself, believed utopia to be unrealizable. In fact, scholars of utopian studies widely disagree about the potential realization of utopia and whether or not attempts to achieve utopia ultimately lead to totalitarianism. Sargent also rejects past

definitions that claim utopias are perfect, observing that utopian fiction contains very few societies that are perfect from the author's viewpoint (1994, 9). Krishan Kumar distinguishes the "abstractly conceived societies" depicted in works by Plato and other political philosophers from the utopian novel, which "shows the best society not as a normative or prescriptive model but as actually achieved, as already in existence" (1987, 25). Kumar continues:

Utopia is a description of the best (or in anti-utopia, the worst) society not as an abstract ideal, and not simply as a satirical foil to the existing society, but as a society in full operation in which we are invited vicariously to participate (1987, 25).

The utopian novel, therefore, offers considerable detail of the better society and how it functions. The purposefully detailed structure and function, in conjunction with the invitation "to participate", forms a didactic appeal to the reader, encouraging her to accept the potential of realisable change in her present society. Not only do novels like Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) provide detailed elements of social and political structures, but they also provide explanations of how the societies in the novels came to exist.

Somewhere along the way, between the late nineteenth century utopian novels like those of Bellamy and Morris and twentieth century works such as Jack London's novel *The Iron Heel* (1908), Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the planned utopia devolves into dysfunction, dictatorship, and nightmare. Dystopia, from the Greek "dis topos", or "bad place", dates back in usage to Henry Lewis Younger in 1747, Noel Turner in 1782, and John Stuart Mill in 1868, the latter involving a political proposal. The term was reiterated by Max Patrick in 1952, this time in reference to a literary form, and has come to have a more broadly accepted definition in respect to its representation in literature, thanks to Sargent:

[A] non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived (1994, 9).

Although no two bad places are the same, the states and/or societies in many of the narratives share similar features: oppressive governments, stringent laws, collectivist ideologies, and worship of the state.

It is the goal of this work to examine the manner in which the protagonists of such works fight back, or *resist*, the rigid controls of government and/or society in their unique worlds, and to construct a creative work (novel) that incorporates a form of this resistance. To this point, the theme of resistance in dystopian fiction has not received sufficient theoretical attention. Prominent critics of dystopian fiction such as Tom Moylan, Raffaella Baccolini, and M. Keith Booker frequently allude to resistance without delving into the significant details that constitute what it is, how it works, or why it is significant. Some analysis of the topic occurs in Moylan's text *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000), which is particularly informative of this thesis. In this work, Moylan offers insight into the origins of utopian and dystopian fiction. Moylan's chapter titled "The Dystopian Turn" recounts the first fiction that appeared to argue against the viability of planned utopian societies. In his chapter "The Critical Dystopia", he discusses the ascent of corporate power in the 1980s under US President Ronald Reagan as well as the fusion of military and government later exemplified in the critical dystopias of Margaret Atwood, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Marge Piercy. Resistance is also mentioned in Baccolini's articles (Baccolini 2004, 2000). Baccolini asserts that the "blending of different genre conventions", especially in feminist critical dystopias, creates a space for resistance within the novels, and she identifies the "recovery of history and literacy, together with individual and collective memory" as important instruments of resistance by protagonists (2004, 520). Baccolini's important observation of the counter narrative serves as an impetus for Moylan's own thoughts on resistance. The counter narrative, Baccolini notes, functions, via character and plot, in opposition to the official narrative of the governing dystopian structure. Still, the majority of criticism in the field of utopia mentions resistance but leaves room for a more detailed discussion textually and theoretically. By the same token, there is a shortage of criticism analysing the specific power structures of the authoritarian regimes or systems in dystopian fiction. This proves significant since the regime often functions as an overarching antagonist trying to crush the dissenting protagonist.

Julia Gerhard's thesis *Control and Resistance in the Dystopian Novel: A Comparative Analysis* (2012) was one of the first attempts to examine the topic and its inner workings. Gerhard's work explores the impact of writing for characters in dystopia and the fictional state's control of the mind and body. In contrast, the crux of my goal is to address more fundamental questions of resistance. Why does its representation recur in nearly every dystopian novel? Why

is it necessary, and what, specifically, does it involve? What are the implications for theory as well as narrative? How are memory and technology used in the context of resistance?

Before examining resistance, it is important to consider what is being resisted. This involves the task of understanding dystopia and the real-world origins and machinations of authoritarianism, thereby providing insight into the fictional totalising system that is being resisted by dispossessed subjects. Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) offers fundamental insight into how real-world authoritarian systems come about, with a focus on the ideological birth pangs of collectivist and autocratic behaviour. Although Popper's critics have questioned his interpretations of Plato and Hegel, notable thinkers like Bertrand Russell have praised *The Open Society and Its Enemies* for championing individual freedom and aiming a sceptical gaze at philosophies that risk the creation of authoritarian states. In a field that contains as much wide disagreement as that of utopian studies, Popper's observations, even while controversial, deserve attention. Popper identifies Plato and Hegel as the authors of the authoritarian state, and he also argues that Hegel reintroduced and promoted an ultra-nationalism that is frequently advocated by authoritarian rulers. Popper claims that "the formula of the fascist brew is in all countries the same: Hegel plus a dash of nineteenth-century materialism" (2012, 66). The "fascist brew" pertains to modern government-sponsored movements, especially those of the Twentieth Century. Popper argues that in the writings of Plato and Hegel, readers are presented with a vision of authoritarian rule in which the ruled citizens possess no inalienable rights to question either the ruling class or the system that governs them, nor are citizens allowed to advance toward a higher social standing. Plato, like Heraclitus before him, views social change as destructive, a belief that stands in direct opposition to the goal of resistance, which, at its most ambitious, has the potential to restructure an entire governing system. Within the totalitarian state, ethical standards and boundaries are blurred, creating an atmosphere in which what is good or right is "whatever is useful to the might of my nation, or my class, or my party" (Popper 2012, 126).

Plato's *The Laws* describes a system of power that can be abused by authoritarian states. *The Laws* reads:

The greatest principle of all is that nobody, whether male or female, should ever be without a leader. Nor should the mind of anybody be habituated to letting him do

anything at all on his own initiative, neither out of zeal, nor even playfully. But in war and in the midst of peace—to his leader he shall direct his eye, and follow him faithfully. And even in the smallest matters he should stand under leadership. For example, he should get up, or move, or wash, or take his meals ... only if he has been told to do so ... In a word, he should teach his soul, by long habit, never to dream of acting independently, and to become utterly incapable of it (quoted in Popper 2012, 108).

The above passage emphasises the power differential between ruler and subject, and calls for the leader to have complete control and absolute authority. The intrusive nature of the leader's control over citizens' menial tasks—requiring citizens to receive permission to get up, move, wash, or take their meals—hints of surveillance and limits a citizen's position in society to that of a slave. Plato asserts that "as much as possible everyone should in every respect always live in a group, together, and in common" (Pangle 1988). Plato's emphasis on collectivist living and individual submissiveness run counter to works of dystopian fiction that emphasise individual freedom.

Hegel takes state authority a step further, viewing the state and its leader as godly objects of worship:

The State is the Divine Idea as it exists on earth ... We must therefore worship the State as the manifestation of the Divine on earth ... The State is the march of God through the world ... To the complete State belongs, essentially, consciousness and thought ... The State ... exists for its own sake ... The State is the actually existing, realized moral life (quoted in Popper 2012, 35).

The divine status given to leaders creates even more distance between ruler and citizen, between the powerful and the powerless. In Popper's view, Hegel contends that the state owns everything, including consciousness and thought, and embodies morality, itself. When characters in dystopian fiction resist the state and its ideology, the authors are typically attacking Hegel's ideology.

The roots of Twentieth Century authoritarianism, upon which the state in many dystopian novels is often modelled, would be incomplete, however, without mention of Marx, on whom

Popper casts proportionate blame. Several works of dystopian fiction are in many ways reactions to the communist nightmare experiment of the Soviet Union, which borrowed heavily, at least in its initial framework, from Marxist ideology. Marx deserves credit for his goal of freeing humanity from the burden of material necessity and hardship as well as his desire that all people should "be free for some part of our lives" (2012, 140). While Popper's criticism of Marx appears less caustic than his criticism of Plato and Hegel, he identifies a fatal flaw of the Marxists, notably their disregard for

the control of the controller, of the dangerous accumulation of power represented in the state. They never realized the full significance of democracy as the only known means to achieve this control. As a consequence they never realized the danger inherent in a policy of increasing the power of the state (2012, 140).

As a result, the noble intentions of communism, like those of utopian ideologies, are altered or transformed into actions that benefit a non-elected ruling class. The democracy mentioned in the passage signifies a check on the ruling power, or the ruling class, or the wealthy social elites, and it provides not only the right of citizens to vote, but also the potential for intra-governmental oversight, often via the courts or legislature, which is otherwise lacking in totalitarian structures of government.

The first chapter of this thesis addresses the value of resistance as both an ideological stance and a narrative instrument that contributes to conflict in dystopian fiction. George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) serves as a segue into the discussion. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reveals an understanding of the authoritarian state's ideology and methods of control with greater insight than most other novels in the genre. This insight allows greater specificity in delineating what actions the protagonist, Winston Smith, must take in order to resist the system. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* also raises critical questions about the susceptibility of rigid authoritarian systems to collapse and whether or not characters such as Smith possess any real chance of successful resistance. Although Orwell's novel remains popular many decades after its release, its critics haven't always agreed about its literary merit or classification. Raymond Williams finds it disagreeable in his early criticism and others such as Moylan note its lack of a utopian horizon. Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) offers a glimpse into a rigid, right-wing patriarchal society where contracted handmaids suffer as concubines for powerful elites, and find

little consolation in the privacy of bedrooms and bathtubs. Although the novel takes place in the near future in what is now part of the US, technology does not seem to factor heavily. Instead, Atwood aims her gaze at the fundamentalist politicisation of religion by a cruel right-wing government that suppresses women and girls. The protagonist in this work resists in an effort to carve out a niche of personal freedom. For the protagonist Offred, the sliver of hope in the form of the open ending represents a significant utopian turn in the genre, an event that would give rise to the critical dystopia. In another primary text, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 45*, a fireman whose job is burning books defies his superiors by possessing books for their forbidden knowledge. In the novel's ensuing events, the protagonist, Montag, comes into direct confrontation with authority.

In addition to analysing and comparing the primary texts, I engage with Michel Foucault concerning his documentation of public executions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and apply the dynamics of the public spectacle to that which occurs between the reader of dystopian fiction and the narrative. In the section titled "The Alterability of Memory", I present a preliminary analysis of memory in dystopian fiction and its usefulness for subjects of dystopian societies. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the state shapes truth and knowledge to reflect an official narrative justifying its existence.

In the second chapter I focus on the subject of memory, examining its importance and how it works in dystopian fiction. Using comparative critical readings of *The Giver*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, I examine the functionality of memory in dystopian systems, considering the methods the state uses in its attempts to alter or eradicate memory from individuals and society. Characters in dystopian fiction usually resist by attempting to recover memories of their past. I compare Moylan's analysis of memory to that of Baccolini and invoke Ernst Bloch's theory of memory for analysis. Bloch's theory is essential for understanding a key component of memory: the potential contrast between past and present. I note that memories in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are recovered via sensory stimuli such as the peculiar scent of perfume or the smell of soap. To protect itself and ensure its longevity, the state must modify the past and official history. In his essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life", Friedrich Nietzsche warns individuals and societies not to become mired in the past and urges them to instead move forward in the present while remaining cognizant of the

painful lessons learned. Nietzsche's distinction between "life-denying" and "life-affirming" provides us with one way of viewing characters mired in dystopian states as well as different types of dystopian fiction (White 1973). Since characters in dystopian fiction often recall memories of authentic goods and services, I include a segment about the authentic and its significance. The last section of the chapter is devoted to Lois Lowry's novel *The Giver* (1993), a work in which both the power and significance of memory are fully manifest.

The third chapter focuses on technology and its use by states to control citizens and, by contrast, its potential as a source of resistance. In dystopias, technology might function as a social liability or as society's saviour. E.M. Forster's short story "The Machine Stops" (1909) works as a prime example of technology as threat. The citizens in the story have placed themselves at the mercy of the Machine, a complex AI-type of apparatus that attends to their daily needs and functions as they live in isolated cells. Thematically, the work questions the level of reliance humanity can place on technology, and the dangers involved. In *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Herbert Marcuse offers this insight:

The technological veil conceals the reproduction of inequality and enslavement. With technical progress as its instrument, unfreedom—in the sense of man's subjection to his technological apparatus—is perpetuated and intensified in the form of many liberties and comforts (1991, 32).

Marcuse seems to warn not only of the social disparities that remain unaddressed behind the technological "veil", but also of technology's mesmerizing appeal that enslaves humanity in the context of progress.

A major question for citizens of dystopian societies is what to do with the technology the state uses to suppress or supplant them. In Jack London's novel *The Iron Heel* (1912), citizens debate whether to destroy the government's technologically advanced machines or appropriate them for their own use in their opposition to the state. In this work, the machinery often symbolizes the government-corporate alliance that gives the novel its name. A similar question is posed in Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Player Piano* (1952). In this work, former factory workers hold grudges against the machines that have replaced them.

In the section titled "Ethical Arguments: Technocracy's Distancing from the Garden", using examples from "The Machine Stops", *The Iron Heel* and Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* (1906), I discuss the contrast between technological advancement and the pastoral. Near the end of the chapter, the discussion moves to the topic of robotic labour and its potential to create class barriers—as evidenced in *Player Piano* (1952)—as well as its tendency to enslave factory workers (*The Jungle*). The chapter concludes with insights into the technological use of surveillance and dystopian fiction's tendency to speak back to technological advancement.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that resistance is essential to dystopian fiction. By functioning as the primary source of conflict in the narrative, resistance threatens the fictional authoritarian regime by deconstructing its totalising system. Memory and technology are two tools, or weapons, that protagonists can use in their resistance against the state. Memory provides a contrast to the state's official history and to the present conditions of the fictional society. In their efforts to resist state power, protagonists can appropriate technology, which is often exploited by the state for control.

The Department of Retribution

In the novel that follows the exegesis, I aim to create a character-driven young adult work that incorporates significant themes of the research—the necessity of resistance in dystopian novels, the duality of pain and connection in memory, and the contrasting theoretical attitudes toward technology (for example, in relation to the introduction of androids into society). The world conceived of in this novel resembles less the rigid austerity of the police state commonly found within dystopian fiction, and more the dichotomy of freedom and authoritarianism, or what Erika Gottlieb refers to as the "push and pull" between utopia and dystopia (2001, 8), seen in novels such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), M.T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002), Max Barry's *Jennifer Government* (2003), and the novels of Phillip K. Dick. The eighteen-year-old protagonist, Emile Winkler, aggrieved by the killing of his younger sister, longs to avenge his sibling's death, and he despises the system that created the conditions which led to her demise.

The reader is introduced to a future United States where hard drugs such as meth have been legalized, fatal combat sports dominate television entertainment, and the federal government has adopted a corporate-controlled fourth branch, the Corporate Council, which holds inordinate

power over the other three branches. Three distinct classes of citizens—those of the Corporate Zones, non-Corporate Zones, and the Underground—are separated by passport control, intra-continental barriers that require non-residents to pass through screening.

The novel is divided into two parts. The first half establishes Emile and the world of suburban Los Angeles and describes Emile's pursuit of a murder permit, a legal document that will allow him to avenge his sister's death, and the repercussions that follow. In the second half of the novel, Emile evolves into an agent of resistance, joining the secretive group SOW that works to disrupt the government's messaging and reveal the true aims and motives of the Corporate Council to the public.

Memory and technology contribute thematically to the layers of narrative. Psychologically, Emile faces the dilemma highlighted by Nietzsche: he struggles to discern the proper balance between retaining a useful memory of his sister and devoting his focus and energy on the present. To assist him, technology comes into play. A psychological advancement known as *amelioration* foments appropriate prioritisation of a person's thoughts, preventing the patient from dwelling on traumatic thoughts such as the ones Emile has of his sister. Marcuse's assertion that automation produces a "change in the character of the basic productive forces" is reflected in an increased population and the advancement of androids in society (1991, 35). Reluctant to view and treat androids as human equals, Emile eventually discovers their usefulness as well as their ability to engage in intimate personal relationships.

SOW functions as a response to Marcuse's formula of "Reason=Truth=Reality" (1991, 123). Although it possesses a militant wing that Emile serves under, SOW's primary objective remains the dissemination of truth—or of information about what is "really" happening—to citizens in the novel's three social partitions. As Marcuse observes:

Reason is the subversive power, the power of the negative that establishes ... the truth for men and things—that is, the conditions in which men and things become what they really are" (1991, 123).

Because the battle ground in dystopia usually occurs in the mind, the ability to reason coherently even while marching alongside the state's jingoism rises in value. Citizens can then use reason to negate the state's false ideology.

Chapter 1: Dystopia and Resistance

"If there are slaves by nature, it is because there have been slaves contrary to nature.

Force has produced the first slaves; their cowardice has perpetuated them." (Rousseau 2012, 158)

In this chapter I examine the dynamics of resistance in dystopian fiction and argue that resistance in such works is necessary. The majority of the chapter will focus on what Tom Moylan refers to in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* as "immaterial" resistance, or the type of resistance that involves such intangible elements as the recovery of memory and identity, and the reappropriation of language, as opposed to "material" resistance, which consists of "martial, economic, and political action" (2000, 187).

For a protagonist of dystopian fiction to resist, he first needs to conceive of the psychological prospect or possibility of resistance, or what Ernst Bloch terms "militant pessimism" (quoted in Baggesen 1987, 36). This ability to view one's situation as not yet decided is a primary trait of protagonists in the critical dystopian fiction that emerged in the late 1980s. I argue that dystopian fiction functions as a refutation of real-world propaganda, and I analyse how protagonists' memories are altered in dystopian fiction and how authoritarian regimes in these works attempt to maintain official truth and knowledge.

Whether or not dystopian fiction possesses the potential to transform real-world systems is widely debated by scholars of utopian studies. The scepticism about such transformational power tends to emulate the cynicism of those who oppose the possibility of utopia. Tom Moylan, a critic who expresses optimism about dystopian fiction's impact on contemporary society, consistently attempts to identify in dystopian novels "a utopian horizon that might provoke political awareness or effort" (Moylan 2000). Scholars who disagree with Moylan may view his assertion as wishful thinking. In his criticism of Moylan's work, Rob Latham writes:

Moylan's stress on sf and utopia as fundamentally didactic genres leads him to overestimate their ethical-political calling to remake the world while ignoring their specifically literary qualities (2002, 109).

Latham's argument not only appears to reject the transformative power of utopian and dystopian fiction, but it also tends to downplay the importance of fiction in general. Without the potential to challenge and transform preconceived notions of race, culture, gender, religion, socio-economic structure and political ideals, fiction becomes relegated, at best, to imaginary and intellectual amusement. By imposing limitations on dystopian fiction's potential, Latham raises questions about the motivations of authoritarian nations who censor literature of opposing political ideology. If Latham's assertion that the viewpoints and ideologies within dystopian fiction have no provable effects on real-world outcomes, then authoritarian regimes are merely overreacting with such censorship.

Critics such as Latham may also conflate the viability of utopian realisation with that of resistance in dystopian fiction. I would suggest that it is necessary to distinguish between the desires of those who advocate for utopias and those who resist within the confines of dystopias. In other words, although they may be seeking a better life than the one they currently know, characters in dystopian fiction are not necessarily seeking utopia. The latter position, however, depends upon one's definition of utopia.

Although Lyman Tower Sargent and other scholars of utopian studies have attempted to construct an accurate definition of utopia, debate continues regarding both the specifics as well as the parameters of what utopia entails. According to Ruth Levitas, limitations on the definition of utopia can "set up boundaries which exclude large areas of material as not properly utopian", and she advocates for an inclusive definition that can "incorporate a wide range of forms, functions and contents" (2010). Dictionary definitions of utopia—and even scholars—often refer to utopias as "perfect". Sargent argues that this is a mistake since literary utopias seldom describe a perfect society. Although imperfect, utopias connote a better way of living. This definition corresponds to the "expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living" that Levitas observes as being present in the vast majority of definitions and descriptions of the term (2013, xii). In *The Concepts of Utopia* (1990), Levitas writes:

Sometimes utopia embodies more than an image of what the good life would be and becomes a claim about what it could and should be: the wish that things might be otherwise becomes a conviction that it does not have to be like this. Utopia is then not just a dream to be enjoyed, but a vision to be pursued (2010, 1).

By distinguishing between what a better life "would" and "should" be, Levitas identifies the aspect of human desire. Unlike the word "would", the emphasis on "should" raises the prospect of hope and wishful fulfilment and underscores the real intent one has of attaining a better way of living.

On the basis of Levitas's definition of utopia, it could be argued that since protagonists in dystopian fiction yearn for a better way of living, they are, in fact, seeking utopia. The dreadful conditions of many dystopias, however, would make any hope for utopia seem impractical, but one must remember that even utopias are imperfect.

If utopias portray societies deemed better than those of contemporaneous readers, dystopias do the opposite. Dystopias function as warnings of what lies ahead for societies or nations if they fail to address problems such as inequality, greed, and corruption. Although past scholars of utopian studies sometimes used the term anti-utopia to refer to dystopia, current scholarship makes a distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia. More specifically, anti-utopias refer specifically to literary works that refute the possibility of utopia. Therefore, not all dystopias are anti-utopias. Krishan Kumar refers to anti-utopia as "utopia's evil twin" (1987, 99). He explains further:

The anti-utopia is formed by utopia, and feeds parasitically on it. It depends for its survival on the persistence of utopia. Utopia is the original, anti-utopia the copy—only, as it were, always coloured black. It is utopia that provides the positive content to which anti-utopia makes the negative response. Anti-utopia draws its material from utopia and reassembles it in a manner that denies the affirmation of utopia. It is the mirror-image of utopia—but a distorted image, seen in a cracked mirror (1987, 100).

Kumar makes it clear that anti-utopias cannot exist without utopias. The creators of anti-utopias "reassemble" the utopian "material" to counter the ideological assertions of utopias. In the same manner, anti-utopian fiction provides a refutation of utopian fiction. Using the metaphor of the mirror, the authors of anti-utopian fiction argue that such an image remains impossible, and that therefore the image must be disturbingly altered.

Militant Pessimism: The Potential for Resistance

In George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) Winston Smith, the protagonist who works for the government's propaganda arm, discovers a photograph that contradicts the Party's version of events concerning three men who were executed as traitors:

[...] this was concrete evidence; it was a fragment of the abolished past, like a fossil bone that turns up in the wrong stratum and destroys a geological theory. It was enough to blow the Party to atoms, if in some way it could have been published to the world and its significance made known (1961, 59).

Winston's propaganda work for the government involves not only revising the past to fit the narrative of Oceania's government, but also in shaping the present to coincide with the past. Therefore, the photograph of the three men contradicts the official narrative. Winston's discovery and subsequent desire to share it involve the battle over truth. The phrases "blow the Party to atoms" and "published to the world" invoke not only resistance, but full-blown rebellion, with the aim being the replacement of the existing government with another—that of the "proles" or lower-class citizens.

The complexity of resistance in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* suggests that not all resistance is equal or achieves the same effect. Much of the resistance that occurs in dystopian fiction occurs at an individual level. In dystopias, however, resistance does possess a common denominator: pushback against the regime. Characters who resist the state risk their lives in the hope of altering their slave-like existence. Resistance refutes the system's commands, denies its official narrative of events, and in some of the novels under study attempts to remove the regime from power. For protagonists in dystopian fiction, the desire to improve their current conditions springs from a similar place as "the desire for being otherwise" (Levitas 2013).

The potential of resistance within dystopian fiction allows the literature to be assessed according to how bleak or optimistic its themes and/or outcomes may be. Darko Suvin refers to this as dystopia's ability to "reconcile the principle of hope and the principle of reality" (1988, 83). He advocates for a "more mature polyphony envisaging different possibilities for different agents and circumstances, and thus leaving formal closure cognitively open-ended" (1988, 83), a description that pertains to many of the critical dystopias, but also some classic dystopian novels

such as Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (1938) and Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), whose endings resist ideological closure. Another key observation comes from Raffaella Baccolini, who explains that the dystopian text "negotiates the clash of the official narrative and the oppositional counter-narrative" (quoted in Moylan 2000, 152). The counter-narrative proves vital because it creates a space of hope for the protagonist in his or her struggle against the status quo of state power.

Soren Baggesen takes the analysis of dystopia further, drawing upon Ernst Bloch's *Experimentum Mundi* (1975) to establish two different types of dystopian pessimism within a dystopian text: "resigned pessimism" and "militant pessimism" (1987, 36). For Baggesen, resigned pessimism "implies a response to a historical situation that regards it as 'already decided,' as opposed to the militant position, which sees the situation as 'not yet' a closed matter" (Moylan 2000, 153). These terms offer substantial insight into the challenges posed by resistance. Protagonists who view their situations with militant pessimism are more likely to possess hope for a better future than characters with resigned pessimism. Militant pessimism, therefore, exists in the vast majority of the critical dystopias that began to appear in the 1980s and especially in the more recent young adult dystopian novels.

Militant pessimism, therefore, contains relevance when applied to resistance. In *The Principle of Hope* (1986), Bloch expresses an optimistic view for situations that possess the capacity for alteration. Bloch identifies these situations as the "Real Possible" and describes their potential as "unclosed" and "changeable" (1986, 196).

Bloch writes:

And as long as the reality has not become a completely determined one, as long as it possesses still unclosed possibilities, in the shape of new shoots and new spaces for development, then no absolute objection to utopia can be raised by merely factual material (1986, 197).

Much of Bloch's optimism for utopia relies on the future. While authoritarian states enact rigid laws and systems designed to arrest change, the "new shoots" and "new spaces" nevertheless spring into being. They also represent potential spaces for resistance in dystopian fiction.

The Necessity of Resistance

Dystopian fiction draws attention to power differentials within society, highlighting the divide between the ruling class and the working (or enslaved) class—including the gap between technocrats and disenfranchised labourers whose positions have been replaced by machines—and noting inequality based on gender, race and ethnicity. Dystopian fiction has "confronted the historical contradictions and conflicts of the [twentieth] century" (Moylan 2000, 180).

Accomplishing this requires adopting the point of view of a discontented character who sees through and rejects the authoritarian system's inner workings. Herbert Marcuse asserts that "forces and tendencies exist which may break this containment and explode the society" (1991, xlvii). Citizens who are interpellated into society and do not question the state's contradictory behaviour will not only fail to stand up to such practises, but are also less likely to illuminate, in all its complexity, the dark machinations of the regime behind the mask. This is why the full picture of the authoritarian state is best viewed by a protagonist imbued with a sense of basic individual freedom—freedom of speech, the freedom to organise and protest, the freedom to practise one's religion—an ingrained conviction of right and wrong, an individual citizen who, regardless of his or her fate, opposes the state on the basis of its crimes against its own citizens, specific ethnic groups, or foreigners.

At its ideological core, resistance invokes the human capacity to fight back against repression. Although scholars of dystopian fiction often view the body of work through a Marxist lens, resistance does not necessarily adhere to a leftist political affiliation. Citizens holding conservative views also resist the control or legislation of liberal governments. In both instances, the target of the resistance tends to be the state, or more specifically, the actions taken by the state. From a Marxist viewpoint, however, resistance is essential to the proletariat's perpetual revolution that Marx envisioned, while failure to resist, and to instead submit to the regime's brutality, only reinforces the system's control. We know that a major goal of Marxism is "a radical process, that of the destruction of the state (the end of state power, the end of every state apparatus)" (Althusser 2006, 11), to not only liberate the dispossessed proletariat from its exploited status, but also to eradicate the state's self-aggrandising ideology.

Certainly, many citizens of totalitarian societies deem resistance too radical, too costly, as overthrowing a regime will likely mean the loss of thousands of lives. However, without citizens who are both willing and capable of resisting the authoritarian state's practises and the state itself, the destruction of the state and its apparatuses remains unattainable.

Apart from ideological implications, resistance functions as a dynamic literary mechanism within dystopian fiction. It not only drives the plot in many dystopian novels, but also develops the main character. In a totalitarian world, the character's identity has been stripped away. Only by resisting the oppressive forces of society—by writing, speaking one's mind, toiling in one's craft or talent—will the individual be able to regain and possibly maintain his identity. This requires that a protagonist be active, instead of passive, when responding to conflict. Activities of resistance—whether writing in a journal or conspiring to sabotage a political system—also support what American writer Robert Olen Butler refers to as "yearning", or the dynamic of desire (Butler and Burroway 2006), an essential feature of fiction. Structurally and thematically, resistance works as a harbinger of change in dystopian novels, threatening to change the status quo in authoritarian communities as their characters embark on a journey to an unknown future. In addition, Raffaella Baccolini notes that "the focus is frequently on a character who questions" the system (1992, 140). Winston Smith resists in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as do Montag in Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and Offred in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Even in E.M. Forster's short story "The Machine Stops" (1909), young Kuno resists to a degree by trespassing beyond the Machine's barrier, allowing him a firsthand view of the Machine's intricate components and of a land citizens are forbidden from entering. In the young adult novels of Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993), Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008) and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011), not only do the protagonists resist their governments and societies, but they are also construed as having unique character traits that empower them for the task of exposing and bringing down their totalitarian governments. Why such characters resist, however, is not always explained.

The contributions of resistance in dystopian fiction are not limited to plot and character. The very nature of resistance spurs a wildfire of conflict that affects every other element of a dystopian narrative. Baccolini observes that dystopian fiction is "built around the construction of a narrative [of the hegemonic order] and a counter-narrative [of resistance]" (1993, 293). The

first necessitates the other, not unlike a contest between two combatants. Responding to Darko Suvin's definition of dystopia, which requires the adoption of the point of view of "a representative of a discontented social class or faction, whose value-system defines 'perfection'", Moylan concludes that Suvin's stipulation "leads to a direct linkage with a potentially oppositional readerly stance" (2000, 155). In other words, a connection is made between reader and protagonist: both recognise the brutality of the state and oppose its authority. Suvin's definition is important because it specifies a protagonist who possesses an understandable motive to resist authoritarian control.

Because readers often identify with the dispossessed protagonist, both fiction and its readership tend to embrace resistance in the dystopian genre. Not only are protagonists in fiction generally required to be active participants in the resolution of conflict, but in addition, dystopian fiction and its readers will seldom settle for the status quo of authoritarianism. Through resistance, protagonists and other groups of characters create significant conflicts, which enhances the narrative. As often observed about Russian literature, combining these conflicts with strong societal themes (i.e. inequality, corruption, contradiction) has long made for rich fiction.

The potential for resistance is usually revealed in a dystopian novel's opening pages as the "discontented" protagonist stands in opposition to the dystopian system. While the counter-narrative often proceeds to the novel's end, the protagonist's success or survival is not certain, especially not in an anti-utopian work such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The brutal ending of Orwell's novel, with its lack of hope and the warning that resistance is ineffectual, has divided scholars concerning its overall message and outcome. Moylan expounds on the novel's lack of a utopian horizon:

[t]here is no meaningful possibility of movement or resistance, much less radical change, embedded in any of the iconic elements of the text. Winston's and Julia's pleasure in the room above the shop may suggest a space that could be named utopian, but their meeting is set up, watched, and then used as the occasion for the capture and torture of the lovers ... And certainly, the ending of the bleak narrative forecloses the possibility of any social transformation. Thus, while Orwell powerfully exposes the terror of official utopianism as he has come to see it, he also sets up a narrative

structure that denies the possibility of an oppositional utopian resistance—be it in an organised formation, in individual actions such as those of Winston and Julia, or in the everyday lives of the Proles (2000, 162).

Moylan's analysis indicates that Winston's exploits—which range from writing in a journal to joining the pseudo underground resistance—appear to have been in vain, offering no hope. Although Andrew Milner's assertion that the Newspeak Appendix at the end of the novel—which Atwood mimics in the form of the symposium at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale*—functions as a source of hope and as an integral part of the fictional text by proving the regime of Big Brother has fallen, I share Moylan's view that the appendix "stands analytically, cognitively outside the story" (2000, 162). Not only does the appendix fail to alleviate the reader's despair over Winston's death, but the fall of Oceania's authoritarian government is also not attributed to any of Winston's efforts. This contrasts with *The Handmaid's Tale*'s symposium—an event that signifies the passing of the novels' patriarchal regime—where citizens discuss Offred's diary, including the intricate details of her life. Milner categorises *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a critical dystopia, a mistake in my view, as it contains no hint of successful resistance, and therefore fails to offer the viable hope that typically distinguishes the critical dystopia from its predecessors. Robert Philmus more accurately labels it a dystopia due to its "near-total absence, or invisibility, of any informing ideal recognizable as utopia" (2005, 18).

The success or demise of protagonists in dystopian works raises important questions concerning the effects of resistance on the reader. By viewing the austerity of a dystopia as a visitor or outsider, the reader of dystopian fiction functions more or less as the equivalent to the citizen who views public executions. Foucault contends that the viewing public's disapproval and outrage over public executions—which included torture and gratuitous violence—was a major factor in the state's abolition of such spectacles (1977, 73). So great was this outrage that the state, by brutalizing the condemned man, was inadvertently provoking the citizens to feel sympathy for those punished, creating the very atmosphere of rebellion that it aimed to suppress. Foucault contends:

It was, in any case, dangerous, in that it provided a support for a confrontation between the violence of the king and the violence of the people. It was as if the sovereign power did not see, in this emulation of atrocity, a challenge that it itself threw down and

which might one day be taken up: accustomed as it was to 'seeing blood flow,' the people soon learnt that 'it could be revenged only with blood' (Lachere). In these ceremonies, which were the object of so much adverse investment, one sees the intersection of the excess of armed justice and the anger of the threatened people (1977, 73).

Foucault appears to identify the contradictory nature of the state, which demands that its citizens live in harmony within the context of its laws while simultaneously inflicting suffering in the name of justice. By punishing with the letting of blood, the state unknowingly or subconsciously motivates its citizenry to resist oppression using the same methods. Similarly, long before the protagonist desires to resist the system's totalitarianism, the reader of dystopian fiction recognises a lack of fairness and regard for human rights within the story that deprives the fictional citizens and benefits the ruling class. In *Fahrenheit 451*, a novel which forecasts the criminalization of possessing books, the fireman protagonist Montag escapes from the authorities, leading the regime to kill a completely innocent man via the robotic Hound, which is adept at tracking both books and people. The execution is televised in real time, and the television media proclaims, "The search is over, Montag is dead; a crime against society has been avenged" (Bradbury 2008, 69). The latter claim recalls the Eighteenth Century's state vengeance, which is also made visible during the "Salvaging" and "Participation" scenes in *The Handmaid's Tale*. By using violence as a means of control, the state antagonises its citizens to the point that some will resist either independently or collectively, which coincides with the reader's empathy for the oppressed protagonist. The "anger of the threatened people" is transformed into resistance. (In novels such as Pohl and Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants* (1952) and Max Barry's *Jennifer Government* (2003), this lack of fairness is also relative to corporate power, which is conjoined to the governments in these works. Especially since the 1980s and the rise of multi-billion dollar corporate conglomerates, readers have perhaps become even more sensitive to corporate totalitarianism and are quick to recognise the patterns of corporate control.)

The human capacity and need for resistance are markedly underscored by the protagonists in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Fahrenheit 451*. As Offred drifts back and forth between past and

present, wondering what happened to her husband Luke, she identifies both the hope and need for resistance in an authoritarian society such as Gilead:

He made contact with the others, there must be a resistance, a government in exile. Someone must be out there, taking care of things. I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light. There must be a resistance, or where do all the criminals come from, on the television? (2010, 101)

In this context, resistance is viewed as the natural opposition to single-party government. The light and shadow metaphor reinforces the relationship between utopia and dystopia: viewed in a mirror, they each reflect a distorted image of the other, and we are reminded that intended utopias often result in dystopias.

This appeal to the light is also seen in *Fahrenheit 451*, where Faber pleads with Montag to change his course, if not alter the status quo: "But Monty, you mustn't go back to being a fireman. All isn't well with the world" (2008, 48). Faber is insinuating that Montag can't proceed with life as usual, nor can he continue to take part in the suppressive role of a fireman who burns books and homes and occasionally citizens. Having been exposed to truth, Montag has essentially crossed over onto the side of the resistance.

The Critical Dystopia

The critical dystopia, like the classic dystopia, is often set in a future society where an authoritarian government enacts stringent laws and brutal punishments on its citizens. The essential differences, according to Raffaella Baccolini, are that critical dystopias "maintain a utopian core" and "deconstruct tradition and reconstruct alternatives" (2000, 13). The critical dystopia not only contains a significant utopian enclave within the text, but in some cases—as has been the case in the latest young adult fiction—results in successful rebellion. Its impact can also be applied to resistance, for it is this construction of an alternative that begins to form, or has been forming for some time, in the protagonist's mind in regard to the rigorous discipline imposed upon citizens by the authoritarian system. In *Fahrenheit 451* this is implicit in Faber's

response to Montag's confession to killing Beatty: "You did what you had to do. It was coming on for a long time" (2008, 60).

Such an alternative exists at the end of Lois Lowry's novel *The Giver* (1993). Jonas, the teen protagonist, has fled his authoritarian community and, carrying an infant, is riding a sled toward a house that he knows only through a shared memory which the Giver passed on to him.

Downward, downward, faster and faster. Suddenly he was aware with certainty and joy that below, ahead, they were waiting for him; and that they were waiting, too, for the baby. For the first time, he heard something that he knew to be music. He heard people singing.

Behind him, across vast distances of space and time, from the place he had left, he thought he heard music too. But perhaps it was only an echo (1993, 327).

For Jonas the new place signifies hope, but in leaving his home town, Jonas is taking a chance by abandoning nearly all that he has known, except for the infant and the memories he possesses. Because of the music and the loving memory Jonas has of the house, the ending leans more toward optimism than *The Handmaid's Tale* does. While the latter retains the structure of a classical dystopia, as a precursor of the critical dystopias that followed in the late 1980s, Moylan observes that it has "taken the traditional dystopia to a historical limit" (Moylan 2000, 166). Here Moylan seems to be referring to the level of "utopian engagement" that Atwood offers (2000, 187), or what I would suggest is a wider, more substantial glimpse of hope for both the protagonist and the utopian enclave. In other words, Atwood pulls back from the clearly defined levels of successful resistance that characterise critical dystopias. In the novel Offred is spirited away by Nick, the chauffeur, and doesn't know whether she will be led to safety or to her demise.

Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped ... And so I step into the darkness within, or else the light (2010, 307).

Nick's previous actions—his truthfulness and intimacy with Offred—suggest he is trustworthy and, other than the paranoia Offred seems to suffer near the end, there is little that suggests otherwise. This leads readers to view resistance as a worthwhile endeavour, a small growing

light within the chasm of dystopia, a plan that succeeds even though society's attempt at utopia has failed.

The Drastic Contrast

In many works of dystopian fiction, the cautionary tale's "other place" is "considerably worse" (1994, 9), as Lyman Tower Sargent puts it, than the place in which the reader lives. The "other place" cannot be slightly worse, because that would not send a strong enough warning about what lies ahead if citizens of the reader's society continue unabated. What is depicted, instead, is a nightmare state—or as Tom Moylan puts it, "the very worst of social alternatives" (2000, 147)—which denies its citizens the privileges of the reader's own society. Additionally, the citizens are often surveilled and managed with Foucauldian discipline on strict workmanlike schedules.

The "worse" descriptor pertains not only to the obvious—for instance, the banning of writing and free speech—but also to elements that may, at first glance, appear utopian. For example, in Huxley's *Brave New World* the majority of citizens appear content with their daily lives, medicated with steady doses of the mood-altering drug Soma and free from the sexual restraints of monogamy. But for its manipulation, the government's vigorous brainwashing program and creation of social classes via genetic engineering lend the facade of a harmonious society. This "push and pull" between utopia and dystopia occurs in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as well (Gottlieb 2001, 8). Although the government of Oceania has not imposed any nameable laws, it becomes clear that this absence contradicts the regime's systematic control of citizens' speech, behaviour, and even thought processes. Adding to the austere measures in these societies is the absence of both natural and unnatural phenomena, such as the snow that Jonas's community in *The Giver* has never experienced.

Gordon Browning explains that authors criticize the most wayward components of their own societies by "projecting them into an imaginary environment" (1970, 18). The key aspects of horror in such societies do not emanate from technology, but from human ambitions in the context of repressive ideology. This is evident in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where technology figures little in the state's suppressing role. Browning views dystopia's warning as one tinged

with hope—that all is not lost and things can improve "if man will only accomplish a certain series of necessary reforms" (1970, 18). For him, hope in the dystopia goes hand in hand with resistance, for who else can bring about hope other than those who aim to change the existing nightmare structure? The "reform" he refers to can only come about through resistance by the disenfranchised protagonist or affiliated group of characters.

Perhaps the emphasis on resistance encourages the reader to reject real-world government abuses that mirror those in the fiction.

The Dystopian Novel as Refutation of Official Propaganda

We can say that by revealing a nightmarish state in its entirety, the dystopian novel not only warns the reader of what is to come if "such and such" goes on, but also frightens—or at the least, attempts to frighten—the reader. This seems to be a coercive measure employed by the writer to work not only on the reader's conscience, but also on his or her emotions, appealing to her to react against authoritarianism. This can be illustrated with a formula: narrative plus counter-narrative equals didactic narrative. In this sense, the counter-narrative forms the crux of the argument against dystopian propaganda, and the novel as a whole functions as a refutation of the collectivist, state-worship propaganda typically used by real-world authoritarian governments.

By equating the dystopian novel to propaganda, I am highlighting the author's condemnation of the authoritarian state. In novels that include examples of utopia, the state system of governing is not portrayed as being as rigidly totalitarian as those in novels such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, where few, if any, aspects of utopia are presented; Orwell and Atwood have chosen to show only the more negative, hellish policies and regime tactics, without any positive, utopian accounting. The laws of Oceania and Gilead have not improved the lives of anyone save for the ruling class.

Moylan notes the similarities between the Republic of Gilead and the social conditions of the 1980s, describing Gilead as follows:

With elements from the New Right and Christian fundamentalism conjoined with deformed and distorted feminist formations, mass-mediated consumption, and the military-industrial complex, a variant of 'friendly fascism' comes alive on the page (2000, 163).

By portraying a society that champions extremist elements of evangelical conservatism, Atwood's work exhibits exaggerated qualities of propaganda, which tend to make its message more alarming. Despite Gilead's strict control over its citizens, the Handmaids engage in a "culture of resistance" through illegal sexual exploits, spying, and language-involved actions such as Offred's tape recordings, as well as the covert activities of the Mayday Underground (Moylan 2000, 163).

The extreme practises of many authoritarian systems expose the paranoia of such regimes. That writing is banned in the societies of Gilead and Oceania highlights the governments' fears that such writing could be used against them, particularly as a means of resistance.

Writing for oneself, as Winston Smith does in his diary, functions as something of a benign cancer, for the simple thought of conspiring against the system, while potentially fatal to the system if it were to spread to other citizens, remains private and therefore isolated. Still, by creating a tangible documented outlet for the protagonist's counter-narrative, it allows the individual to maintain his own paradigm of truth and reality.

Offred says:

Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. Even when there is no one (Atwood 2010, 42).

Offred's comments reveal the potential political impact writing has on other citizens. Any written word or group of words is capable of being read by another citizen and passed on to others in a spiralling chain throughout one's community. Offred then discusses the addressed "you" in writing a letter:

A story is like a letter. Dear You, I'll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say you, you, like an old love song. You can mean more than one.

You can mean thousands.

I'm not in any immediate danger, I'll say to you.

I'll pretend you can hear me.

But it's no good, because I know you can't (2010, 42).

Offred correctly, although perhaps not sincerely, assumes that her audience could reach "thousands", and the ban on citizens' writing confirms the state's paranoia of this fact. Such narratives offer first-hand accounts from dispossessed characters, with the potential to influence other characters within the novel. The tone of Offred's writing, particularly in the first paragraph, shows an intimate side of her that we don't usually see in her interactions with other characters.

The Alterability of Memory

An important area for discussion, in respect to individual and collective resistance, is that of memory and what happens to it in a dystopian system. If memories are lost, such as in *The Giver*, people in a closed society are limited in their knowledge of both history and the outside world, and this ignorance yields greater power to the society's rulers and elites. Lowry doesn't explain how the Giver transfers the memories to the protagonist, Jonas, only that it is possible for one person to hold onto them for safekeeping, as though memories are sacred, powerful and potentially harmful, and they can be given to another person. Lowry describes the Giver's first transmission of memory to Jonas:

'I am going to transmit the memory of snow,' the old man said, and placed his hands on Jonas's bare back . . . he became aware of an entirely new sensation: pinpricks? No, because they were soft and without pain. Tiny, cold, featherlike feelings peppered his body and face. He put out his tongue again and caught one of the dots of cold upon it.

It disappeared from his awareness instantly; but he caught another, and another. The sensation made him smile (1993, 62-63).

With the Giver's tactile transference of memories, Lowry suggests that the sharing of personal memories constitutes sensitivity, intimacy and warmth, something that the current society in *The Giver* mimics, but tends to fall short of in the truest sense. Since the community has eradicated snow through climate control, the memory of snow provides a natural contrast to the community's habitual conditions. The sensory details involving touch and taste—the snowflakes striking the flesh, catching snow with one's tongue—reveal memory's connection to the senses, and Jonas's smiling at the end of the passage emphasises its connection to emotion.

In addition to sensory appeal, memory lends significant value to a character struggling within dystopia. An individual's ability to recall a specific memory grounds him in truth, which in turn functions as a defensive barrier to the regime's historical narrative. By proving such a narrative false, citizens within a dystopian state can challenge the ruling class's legitimacy. Baccolini explains:

Because it is authoritarian, hegemonic discourse shapes the narrative about the past and collective memory to the point that individual memory has been erased; individual recollection therefore becomes the first, necessary step for a collective action (2004, 520-521).

While I agree with Baccolini's assertion that the dystopian state employs various discursive strategies to alter the official past, I question whether an individual's memory in such a dystopia can be "erased". Through the regime's repeated discourse (i.e. educational brainwashing, official news, other propaganda), it remains possible for an individual to repress specific memories, but as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale* reveal, the individual possesses the ability to recall memories, especially after initiating the writing process, proving that the memories have, in fact, not been erased, but have been dormant within the protagonist's mind.

Offred recalls her nights in the gymnasium, which served as an indoctrination camp, when Aunt Lydia showed old films to the young women. She questions the validity of Aunt Lydia's arguments, among them that the existence of divorce, dysfunctional marriages, and violence against women prior to the establishment of the Republic of Gilead had subjected women to a

lower quality of life than the present life in Gilead. Among the arguments she puts forward to support her claim that the current society is an improvement (i.e. "freedom from"), Aunt Lydia shows old videos of violence against women and describes the various problems women faced in a free society.

If Offred possesses one consolation, it is the time that belongs to her, and she uses this time to delve into her memory. As she lies in her room, she ruminates, "But the night is my time out. Where should I go?" And she answers herself, "Somewhere good" (2010, 40).

By fixating on good memories that counter the government's historical narrative, Offred's mental exploration constitutes an act of resistance. First, she revels in a friendly exchange with her friend Moira. Then she searches for a deeper memory, recovering one of her mother. Later in the novel, the memory of her husband Luke reveals the contrast between her past and present emotional states: "We thought we had such problems. How were we to know we were happy?" (Atwood 2010, 51) This passage validates Baccolini's claim that "[j]ourneying to the past through memory often coincides with the realisation that what is gone represented a better place and time" (1996, 345).

Moylan contends that the "reconstitution of empowering memory" by the protagonist and other disenfranchised characters occurs as a result of the "reappropriation of language"; thus, he sees language as a "weapon for the reigning dystopic power structure" (2000, 149). In response, the counter-narrative usually proceeds via the same language-driven weaponry. Baccolini notes that in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* "a new language, Newspeak, is created and history and culture are rewritten", and in *The Handmaid's Tale* "although the state is at war, only its victories are reported . . . history and the Book of *Genesis* are rewritten" (Baccolini 1992, 143). On the potential for memory's erasure and its recovery due to the power of language, Moylan seems to approach agreement with Baccolini:

With the past suppressed and the present reduced to the empirica of daily life, dystopian subjects usually lose all recollection of the way things were before the new order, but by regaining language they also recover the ability to draw on the alternative truths of the past and 'speak back' to hegemonic power (2000, 149).

Moylan's explanation that memories are "suppressed" appears at first to be at odds with Baccolini's claims that they are "erased". However, Moylan's view that dystopian citizens "usually lose all recollection" of the pre-authoritarian past approximates Baccolini's analysis and invites further examination. If the subjects "usually" lose recollection, Moylan does not specify those instances or conditions in which the subjects hold on to such recollection. While I agree that actions involving language, such as writing in a journal, assist in promoting the recovery of the protagonist's past experiences, I suggest that memory is not confined to language. Offred recalls the memories of her previous life even before she reappropriates language by speaking into a recorder.

The "alternative truths" that Baccolini refers to in the above quote are either real truths about the past or they are or they are the previous government's official truths. The importance here lies in the alternative truth's opposition to the dystopian state's official truth. This alternative truth, therefore, offers ammunition to the resisting character in his attempt to fight (i.e. "speak back" to) the totalitarian regime. Revealing such a regime's falsehoods has the potential to unite the civilian population against what it views as an illegitimate ruling system. Moylan goes on to say that the dystopian regime "restricts memory to nostalgia for a fictive golden age" that incorporates its own ideology. Here it appears he is referring to the regime's official version of its founding, which is constructed with narrative attributes that ordinary citizens would find appealing, if only it were true. Sceptical or altogether disbelieving of the state's narrative, the protagonist

reclaims a suppressed and subterranean memory that is forward looking in its enabling force, liberating in its deconstruction of the official story and its reaffirmation of alternative ways of knowing and living in the world (2000, 150).

A memory that is "subterranean" contrasts with Baccolini's, which is "erased". Here we recognise the accuracy of Moylan's metaphorical adjective; he is comparing such a memory to a buried artefact, something that lies beneath the conscious surface and must be dug up using the appropriate means of recovery.

Truth, Knowledge and Hope

For the dystopian regime, revising history is not enough. It also desires to place its version of history within a narrative framework that appeals to citizens of every social class. The story the regime creates must make sense to the average citizen, it must be consistent with accompanying narratives, and it must be a story that the citizens want to believe (i.e. heroic attributes, legends, stories exemplifying virtues of founders). For example, Oceania's citizens would not be as eager to praise Big Brother if the regime's narrative included Big Brother's wartime exploits of murdering babies and torturing children.

The state also officially claims it enacts and enforces its totalitarian laws for the wellbeing of the collective society. The true reason remains its desire to control—or even enslave—lower classes of citizens, some of whom may belong to races, ethnicities or religions that differ from those of the ruling class. Sargent, like Robert Philmus, views utopia—and by default dystopia—as political in nature. His most stalwart defence of utopia contains an understanding of both utopia and the fundamentals of government:

The history of political thought does not offer blueprints for building new societies. Constitutions rarely go beyond the basic governmental structure, and seldom has the author of a proposed political system expected that his or her descriptions could be put into practise without modification (1982, 570).

Despite the totalising aspects of the dystopian state, Sargent's argument reveals the alterability that exists in such governments. Government framers did not intend to establish rigid, unalterable systems, nor are their structures permanent. When Offred remarks in *The Handmaid's Tale* that "[w]omen were not protected then", as opposed to their "protection" in present-day Gilead, the state has manipulated language to impose its own ideology of control while, in reality, its harsh measures do not protect anyone except the ruling class.

In order to protect the official narrative, the dystopian state seeks to eliminate voices of dissent, including the literature and media that the state deems as threatening. For the resisting protagonist, the possession of such items becomes important. For example, in *Swastika Night* and *Fahrenheit 451*, books function as secret weapons that must be safeguarded in the fight against the authoritarian systems. The knowledge in the books equates itself to truth in the battle against

the regimes' propaganda, historical revision, and mistruths. In *Fahrenheit 451* Granger laments the fact that people failed to use books adequately:

But even when we had the books on hand, a long time ago, we didn't use what we got out of them. We went right on insulting the dead. We went right on spitting in the graves of all the poor ones who died before us (Bradbury 2008, 75).

The state has just destroyed the city of Chicago through bombing, and Granger's comment implies that, by applying the knowledge from the books, citizens could have done more to prevent such destruction.

Although *Fahrenheit 451* underscores the difficulties faced by oppressed citizens, Darko Suvin argues that some regimes teeter more toward fallibility than others (2010, 18), noting that certain systems, such as Forster's Machine, are particularly subject to collapse. It is this human element, the fact that humans are prone to error (in some cases catastrophic error), that ironically provides hope for citizens in dystopias. Regardless of a totalitarian system's attempts to secure its power, its lack of omnipotence, and therefore its fallibility, leave an opening for protagonists to resist. For example, many governments must entrust power to a specific individual or group of individuals. Such individuals may, either wilfully or mistakenly, but almost always clandestinely, use their power or privilege to exploit the system's weaknesses. This occurs in *The Giver*, in which the character by the same name has been assigned the task of possessing types of memories—such as those of love and war—that are unfamiliar to citizens in the novel's community. The memories imbue Jonas, the Giver's apprentice, with a wisdom that recognizes the community's draconian flaws, and this ultimately empowers him to resist by saving an infant from being put to death.

Another area where the state remains vulnerable involves technology. In this case, the capacity for human error is revealed in manmade hardware and software. Machinery possessing artificial intelligence may function independently, based on its own motives, but if its actions are flawed, this will still reflect the mistakes humanity made when constructing it. One example can be found in "The Machine Stops", a story in which citizens have given total control of their lives to a vast electronic apparatus called the Machine. Some of the daily services the Machine provides are: drawing one's bath water, attending to one's medical needs, and summoning the "Airship" for travel. While some legislation and oversight lie with a group of people known as

the Central Committee, much of the power is reserved for the Machine, which is vaguely described as having some degree of artificial intelligence.

'I want to see you not through the Machine,' said Kuno. 'I want to speak to you not through the wearisome Machine.'

'Oh, hush!' said his mother, vaguely shocked. 'You mustn't say anything against the Machine.'

'Why not?'

'One mustn't.'

'You talk as if a god had made the Machine,' cried the other.

'I believe that you pray to it when you are unhappy. Men made it, do not forget that. Great men, but men' (Forster 1954, 110).

At the beginning of this exchange, Kuno reveals his contempt for the Machine, and Vashti's response suggests that speaking against the Machine is illegal. Her claim that "Great men, but men" invented the apparatus works as an ironic harbinger for the Machine's malfunction and destruction in the end. The Machine's malfunction draws attention to the fact that even sophisticated dystopic systems are susceptible to rupture, which often lends hope to characters who resist the state.

This chapter has attempted to answer the fundamental question of how resistance functions in dystopian fiction. A view of militant pessimism allows protagonists to believe in the alterability of the system in which he or she lives, which provides the characters with motivation to resist oppressive authority. Resistance becomes necessary in dystopian fiction to both enhance the conflict and as a departure from the status quo of rigid, unquestioned authoritarian rule. Since the state attempts to alter history and memory to justify its existence, protagonists often resist the authorities by recovering their memories, historical facts or narratives, or by possessing illegal literature.

As a relatively new field of research within utopian studies, resistance could be investigated further in the context of the following: minority and/or indigenous ethnic groups, non-technologically advanced societies, climate change, and interstellar communities.

The following chapter delves deeper into a topic introduced in this chapter—memory.

2. The Role of Memory in Dystopian Fiction

"But how can you stop people remembering things?" cried Winston, again momentarily forgetting the dial. 'It is involuntary. It is outside oneself. How can you control memory? You have not controlled mine!'" (Orwell 1961, 195)

Individual and collective memories usually play an important role in dystopian fiction. Novels such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Giver*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* portray discontented protagonists who retain countering memories of life before the authoritarian state assumed power. The potential for weaponising such memories is not unrelated to the political philosophical struggle of regimes to project solidarity, prosperity and stability in their societies while castigating the preceding governments and ways of life. With their connection to history, memories can provide evidence that contradicts the authoritarian state's claims.

In novels such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993), memory can be regarded not only as a character's recollection of the past, but as a potent tool or weapon that must be safeguarded. Memory is included in the broader spectrum of history, which authoritarian states manipulate with the same intensity that they bring to the task of monitoring their citizens. Memory's value is evident in the party slogan of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "Who controls the past ... controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (Orwell 1961, 27).

Raffaela Baccolini notes the importance of memory in these works:

History, its knowledge, and memory are ... dangerous elements that can give the dystopian citizen a potential instrument of resistance. But, whereas the protagonists, in classical dystopia, usually do not get any control over history and the past, in the critical dystopia the recovery of history is an important element for the survival of hope (2003, 215).

In discussing the distinction she makes between classical and critical dystopias, Baccolini emphasises the contrasting outcomes of protagonists in the two forms. In critical dystopias, protagonists usually experience a greater degree of success in their struggle against the regime.

Whether it's Offred's likely escape in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1984), von Hess's surviving book in Catherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1939), or Jonas's daring flight in *The Giver*, the critical dystopia typically offers a space of hope that Tom Moylan refers to as a "utopian enclave" (2000, 162). Memory figures significantly in such utopian enclaves. For resistance to be effective, history is "central and necessary" and makes possible the "maintenance of hope" (Baccolini 2003, 116).

In order to understand the function of memory in dystopian fiction, we need to examine how it is employed. How does it work, and why is it valuable? To begin with, Baccolini and Moylan list memory as one of the potential sources that can be appropriated and weaponised by both individuals and societies:

... the process of taking control over the means of language, representation, memory and interpellation is a crucial weapon and strategy in moving dystopian resistance from an initial consciousness to an action that leads to a climactic event that attempts to change the society (2003, 6).

For Moylan and Baccolini, memory represents a major facet of resistance available to the protagonist. Often it is employed in conjunction with language. As Moylan explains, the "reconstitution of empowering memory" typically follows the "reappropriation of language" (2000, 149). This is evidenced in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as Winston begins to write in his diary. By giving expression to his innermost thoughts through writing, his personal past and his perceptions of Oceania pre-IngSoc tend to re-emerge in his consciousness. After identifying differences between his recollections and the official historical accounts of IngSoc, he attempts to act on this initial consciousness, which leads to his superior O'Brien suppressing him.

In their individual works, Moylan and Baccolini diverge in their interpretations of the state's treatment of memory. As mentioned in the previous chapter, for Moylan the past is "suppressed" (2000, 149), while Baccolini maintains that it is "erased" (2004, 520-521). Nevertheless, both agree that the past, including memory, are recoverable. Moylan delineates the typical blueprint for the "reconstitution of empowering memory" by the protagonist:

With the past suppressed and the present reduced to the empirica of daily life, dystopian subjects usually lose all recollection of the way things were before the new

order, but by regaining language they also recover the ability to draw on the alternative truths of the past and 'speak back' to hegemonic power (2000, 149).

It would require torture or brainwashing—like that in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—to effect this erasure, and I therefore question Moylan's assertion that dystopian subjects "usually lose" their recollection of pre-regime life. However, Moylan may be referring to the complexity of memory, in which case the subject "reclaims a suppressed and subterranean memory" that had been consciously absent (2000, 149). A possible descriptor for the memories, at least in the case where trauma has removed them from consciousness, is "dormant". Dormant memories should be distinguished from those that are repressed.

One interpretation of Moylan's claim may relate to what might be referred to as a lack of "memory space". Because the dystopian character's mind is bludgeoned by the state's historical narrative, the character's own memories are all but squeezed out, assigned to an inactive repository. This is intimated by Mihalache Delia Doina, who, while viewing memory and identity as inseparable elements, contends that through the "constant change and influence of the collective memory ... the mind of individuals is gradually replaced by the 'official' memory" (2014, 9). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this leads to an "attack on collective memory in the effort to provoke an identity crisis" (Doina 2014, 9). Winston's childhood memories of Oceania spur questions about his personal identity, including his upbringing and the characteristics of his parents, as well as those of Oceania, his home country.

Regardless of whether memory has been lost or is lying dormant, what seems to be important is the activation, or perhaps reactivation, of memory into a weaponising force against the totalitarian regime. The memories are recalled, and the disenfranchised character is able to assign them new meaning and value because of the contrast to his or her situation in the present society. In this sense, memory exists as a force that is "liberating in its deconstruction of the official story and its reaffirmation of alternative ways of knowing and living in the world" (Moylan 2000, 149-150).

Because of this liberating quality, Baccolini invokes memory as a possible means of resistance. The mere act of remembering an incident that occurred, or of recalling a historical fact, grounds a character in truth. She explains:

Because it is authoritarian, hegemonic discourse shapes the narrative about the past and collective memory to the point that individual memory has been erased; individual recollection therefore becomes the first, necessary step for a collective action (2004, 520-521).

Baccolini's claim that individual memory is "erased" approximates Moylan's interpretation. Instead of being literally erased, the memory described by both Moylan and Baccolini seems to refer to subconscious memory. What Baccolini seems to suggest is that the regime's emphasis on collective memory often leaves no space for individual memory. Nevertheless, the lone dissenting protagonist usually attempts to recover his or her memory, often through writing or narration. Baccolini views memory as a momentous force that must first be recovered at the individual level before it can function collectively.

Returning to memory's link to identity, we know that past experiences give shape to a unique character. Characters in dystopian fiction usually remember previous versions of history that contradict the state's current narrative. In addition to the character's perspective or interpretation of the event or events, the character's response is also valuable in the context of resistance.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Winston appears to exhibit only a vague memory of his father. However, in other memories, such as those of the three traitors, Winston exhibits a clearer perception, responding with more insight into the remembered event:

Some time after their release Winston had actually seen all three of them in the Chestnut Tree Cafe. He remembered the sort of terrified fascination with which he had watched them out of the corner of his eye. The glamour of the underground struggle and the civil war still faintly clung to them. He had the feeling, though already at that time facts and dates were growing blurry, that he had known their names years earlier than he had known that of Big Brother. But also they were outlaws, enemies, untouchables, doomed with absolute certainty to extinction within a year or two. No one who had once fallen into the hands of the Thought Police ever escaped in the end. They were corpses waiting to be sent back to the grave (Orwell 1961, 57).

Attached to Winston's memory are not simply the images—the tears in Rutherford's eyes as well as the fact that both Rutherford's and Aaronson's noses were broken—but also his perceptions

and feelings about the three men at the time. Like Goldstein, they represent everything the state abhors, and by associating them with the terms "outlaws, enemies, untouchables", Winston is recalling both the state's amplified personification of the men as well as his own attitude towards them at the time. By portraying the three men as existential threats to Oceania, the state is able to deflect attention from its own crimes while generating indignation toward those labelled "criminals" or "terrorists".

That was ten—eleven years ago. Today, probably, he would have kept that photograph. It was curious that the fact of having held it in his fingers seemed to him to make a difference even now, when the photograph itself, as well as the event it recorded, was only memory. Was the Party's hold upon the past less strong, he wondered, because a piece of evidence which existed no longer HAD ONCE existed? (Orwell 1961, 61)

This passage gives an example of the "novelty" of memory that Baccolini views as vital to memory's usefulness (2003, 118). Like history, the past provides counsel to those in the present based on similar historical premises. In eleven years of experience, Winston has gained an advanced education about Big Brother's machinations. He has a much clearer idea not only of how Oceania's government works, but also of what is at its metaphysical core, and with this understanding he has made the transition from being suspicious of government to being decidedly resistant in his thoughts and actions.

Contrast: Memory's Value to the Present

As previously noted, the value of memory lies not only in the truth as it applies to the past, but in the contrast it provides to the present. The State boasts of its overwhelming success, portraying its system as efficiently robust while denouncing the corruption and ineptitude of the previous government. Evidence from the past, which can include memory, serves as a potential weapon in efforts to disprove the narrative of the ruling regime. But in order to provide a contrast between past and present, the type of memory Ernst Bloch termed *anagnorisis*, or recognition, is required (1986, 178).

In this regard, Bloch's distinction between recollection (*anamnesis*) and recognition (*anagnorisis*) can be helpful. For Bloch, knowledge of recollection (*anamnesis*) is confined to the

past. However, Vincent Geoghegan observes in his essay "Remembering the Future" that in anagnorisis memory is "reactivated" and that the past finds relevance—and even power—in its similarity/dissimilarity to the present (1990, 59). In this light, memory has the potential in Bloch's scheme to function as what Geoghegan calls a "repository of experience and value" (1990, 60).

The sensory stimuli that trigger Winston's memories in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* offer one way in which the traces are "reactivated in the present", setting up a clash between past and present. I suggest that the devices employed in the novel to trigger Winston's memory are not randomly activated, but are limited to sensory relics that work as stimuli in his consciousness:

He did not remember the raid himself, but he did remember his father's hand clutching his own as they hurried down, down into some place deep in the earth, round and round a spiral staircase which rang under his feet and which finally so wearied his legs that he began whimpering and they had to stop and rest (Orwell 1961, 24).

While many of the details of the raid appear foggy to Winston, what he remembers most concerns the senses: holding his father's hand and stepping up the stairs. In this case, rather than hearing sirens signalling the raid, the sense of touch appears to have made a stronger impression. In another instance, while Winston and Julia are together in private, the scent of her perfume jars his memory of an encounter with another woman:

As he took her in his arms a wave of synthetic violets flooded his nostrils. He remembered the half darkness of a basement kitchen, and a woman's cavernous mouth. It was the very same scent that she had used ... (Orwell 1961, 112)

In *The Handmaid's Tale* the senses pique Offred's memories in a similar manner:

I step into the water, lie down, let it hold me. The water is soft as hands. I close my eyes, and she's there with me, suddenly, without warning, it must be the smell of the soap. I put my face against the soft hair at the back of her neck and breathe her in, baby powder and child's washed flesh and shampoo, with an undertone, the faint scent of urine (Atwood 2010, 73).

Like Orwell, Atwood uses memory to reveal the protagonist's yearning for the intimate relationships of the past while emphasizing the absence of such connections in the dystopian state. In both cases, the state has disrupted the family dynamic: Offred's daughter has been taken from her, and disappearances in Oceania are common. The smell of soap, in this case, seems to work as a conduit of spiritual presence, merging the past aura of Offred's daughter with the present: "she's there with me, suddenly".

Memory's Place in the Past/History

... the Party member, like the proletarian, tolerates present-day conditions partly because he has no standard of comparison. He must be cut off from the past, just as he must be cut off from foreign countries, because it is necessary for him to believe that he is better off than his ancestors and that the average level of material comfort is constantly rising. But by far the more important reason for the readjustment of the past is the need to safeguard the infallibility of the Party (Orwell 1961, 242-243).

The above passage reveals the prudent behaviour a Party member in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* must exercise if he or she is to survive in Oceania. Openly or even privately denouncing Oceania's economy or standard of living could result in imprisonment or death. To effect this control, the government of EngSoc coordinates its present-day narrative via the official narrative of the past.

Memory has a complicated, though useful relationship to history and the past. The past maintains the original from which all things have evolved, and it therefore represents the pure form of a society that Plato and Heraclitus, despite their support for the State and its ruling class, would endorse, since both look favourably upon original forms and view change as destructive (Popper 2012, 16).

In his essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life", Friedrich Nietzsche notes the danger of individuals, societies and cultures being stuck in the past and being unable to forget, delineating a "degree" and a "boundary at which the past has to be forgotten if it is not to become the gravedigger of the present" (2007, 104). Nietzsche advocates an ability to appropriate the past through what he terms "plastic power", or

the capacity to develop out of oneself in one's own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds (2007, 104).

This seems to urge individuals to possess a knowledge of the past, complete with wisdom, without shouldering the spiritual brokenness of past suffering. Nietzsche distinguishes between those who are strong and able to weather the storm of suffering and those who are meek enough to "perish" from a "single painful event" (2007, 104). If a person's "roots" remain strong, he or she will be able to "assimilate and appropriate" the elements of the past. Nietzsche writes:

Cheerfulness, the good conscience, the joyful deed, confidence in the future—all of them depend, in the case of the individual as of a nation, on the existence of a line dividing the bright and discernible from the unilluminable and dark; on one's being just as able to forget at the right time as to remember at the right time; on the possession of a powerful instinct for sensing when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically (2007, 104).

People and nations should possess the ability to move on from tragic events while still possessing the memory of the events. The ability to "forget at the right time" becomes necessary to heal the wounds inflicted by war, racial division, and bitter, hard-fought elections, while the necessity to "feel historically" often becomes visible during memorials of great loss and may serve as powerful lessons for a nation or people.

In his monograph *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), Hayden White suggests that Nietzsche makes a key distinction by identifying two main ways of recalling the past:

Nietzsche divided the ways in which men looked at history into two kinds: a life-denying kind, which pretended to find the single eternally true, or 'proper,' way of regarding the past; and a life-affirming kind, which encouraged as many different visions of history as there were projects for winning a sense of self in individual human beings (1973, 346).

The life-affirming view of history offers hope and optimism even in the midst of suffering, and therefore suits the critical dystopian trend in fiction. Opposing this view, and adopting the life-denying view of history, is the totalitarian state, which moulds a mythic singular past to suit its self-preserving structure. Such a state precludes differing perceptions—particularly from individuals, as noted by anti-utopian critic Karl Popper—of historic events, since they would provide a challenge to the ruling class's legitimacy. Baccolini refers to the life-denying view—which she applied to memory—as anti-utopian, and the life-affirming view as utopian (2003, 117). She explains further: "In order for memory and history not to hinder progress, and Utopia, there has to be room for novelty in memory, and history must not be cyclical" (Baccolini 2003, 118).

In other words, for memory to be useful for resistance, it must possess adaptability, or mutability, in corresponding to conditions of the present. Fearing this potential, the ruling class seeks to eliminate any historical narrative that counters that of the present. As Theodor Adorno claims, an "advancing bourgeois society liquidates Memory, Time, Recollection as irrational leftovers of the past" (Baccolini 2003, 118). By erasing memory and dispensing with the contrasting past, the state justifies its abuse of the dispossessed classes.

For Herbert Marcuse, the state regards memory as subversive, as a weapon "which breaks ... the omnipresent power of the given facts" (quoted in Baccolini 2003, 118). Additionally, Marcuse appears to criticize Nietzsche, claiming the "ability to forget" is dangerous and leads to the "mental faculty which sustains submissiveness and renunciation" (1972, 163). Baccolini states that ignorance of the past, as well as forgetting it, "means avoiding responsibility and may lead to political paralysis" (2003, 119). Despite the latter belief, she invokes the need to forget as useful in the role of reconciliation.

Marcuse advances this line of thinking even further:

The liberation of the past does not end in its reconciliation with the present. Against the self-imposed restraint of the discoverer, the orientation on the past tends toward an orientation on the future ... for future liberation" (quoted in Baccolini 2003, 57).

This attitude towards the future seems essential to the critical dystopia. For novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Giver*, the utopian horizon at the end depends on a future that is better than the dystopian present.

The Authentic

The memory of authentic products and experiences—the chocolate in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the coffee in *The Penultimate Truth*—represents another common element in dystopian fiction. In dystopian societies supplies are often rationed due to a faltering economy, rampant corruption, hoarding of goods by the ruling class, or a combination of the three.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the smell, followed by the taste, of authentic chocolate recalls an uncomfortable, momentarily undecipherable memory in Winston. Real chocolate in Oceania is reserved for the higher class of Party members, and Julia has stolen a slab of it:

Even before he had taken it he knew by the smell that it was very unusual chocolate. It was dark and shiny, and was wrapped in silver paper. Chocolate normally was dull-brown crumbly stuff that tasted, as nearly as one could describe it, like the smoke of a rubbish fire. But at some time or another he had tasted chocolate like the piece she had given him. The first whiff of its scent had stirred up some memory which he could not pin down, but which was powerful and troubling (Orwell 1961, 94).

The authentic chocolate represents the grave imbalance of surplus value in the dystopian state, where the elite ruling class reserves for itself what is real and pure in the form of luxury goods. The rubbish fire simile invokes a lack of quality as well as the fleeting nature of consumption. Winston's reaction to the memory triggered by the chocolate appears to be one of suppression. As he chews the chocolate, the memory becomes more troubling: "He pushed it away from him, aware only that it was the memory of some action which he would have liked to undo but could not" (Orwell 1961, 94).

On a later occasion, Winston retrieves the memory as one in which, ironically, he stole a piece of chocolate from his infant sister even though his mother had already given him three-fourths of the chocolate slab. To escape his mother's rebuke, he ran out of the house, and when he returned, he found his mother and sister gone. Chocolate as the remembered food evokes the bittersweet nature of memory in general. On one hand, Winston is reminded of both his mother and the taste of real chocolate; on the other, the chocolate prompts him to recall an absence: his

mother and sister's departure from his life. In this case, the authentic is used to contrast the present false sense of belonging with one in the past that was true.

In Phillip K. Dick's novel, *The Penultimate Truth* (1963), the past, summoned by the sensory stimulus of smell, similarly carries an aura of the authentic. Residents are crammed in an underground maze of cubicles known as the Tom Mix ant hill, one of several such complexes where people have been coerced to live below ground by a duplicitous regime. Nicholas St. James lives with his wife Rita in cubicle 67-B, a tiny apartment in a complex whose tenants are forced to share bathrooms, ration supplies, and drink coffee made from synthetic coffee beans. Dick writes:

And of coffee beans, he thought, I could use an endless amount. If there was such a thing. But, like everything else, the (as marked on invoices) syn-cof-bnz were severely rationed. And after all these years he accepted it—intellectually. But his body craved more.

He could still remember how real coffee, in the pretank days, had tasted. Nineteen, he remembered; I was in my first year of college, just started drinking coffee instead of malted milks (2004, 18-19).

The real coffee represents a time of abundance, before the leadership took control. And even the synthetic coffee must be rationed, a reminder of the hyper-exploitation within dystopia, where the ruling class's power goes unchecked. Furthermore, the disappearance of real coffee and the dwindling supply of synthetic coffee may indicate problems with the economic system of production.

Like memory's contribution to the past/history, memories of the authentic reinforce memory's value in fictional dystopian societies by offering a contrast to fictional present-day living conditions. By recovering their memories, characters can evaluate the conditions of past and present against the often-exaggerated claims of the state.

Memory in *The Giver*

"For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief."

Ecclesiastes 1:18

Memory is rarely as potent a weapon in dystopian fiction as it is in Lois Lowry's novel *The Giver* (1993). As Moylan observes, dystopian authorities are able, by repressing memory, to keep their systems "unseen and unexamined", and it is the recovery of memory that aids the protagonist in viewing his "situation for what it really is and thus to trace the relationship between individual experience and the operation of the entire system" (quoted in Hanson 2009, 48). In *The Giver* two types of memory are powerfully in play: 1. The memory of war, 2. The memory of love. Together, they function as a stabilizing force of wisdom, or as what Carter Hanson describes as "a source of considerable individual and emancipating power" (2009, 46).

The society in the novel functions through a system known as Sameness. Children are assigned to families biologically unrelated to them, and a Committee of Elders makes important community decisions, which includes determining the career paths for citizens such as Jonas, the twelve-year-old protagonist. The title of the novel refers to the designated role of the civil servant who possesses a large archive of both individual and collective memories that have been passed on from a period of time preceding the formation of the community, an unnamed community which not only exists in isolation from other communities, but whose inhabitants are oblivious to both historical knowledge and any current knowledge external to the township. By confining such information to one individual, the society in *The Giver* seems to treat memory as a trove of potentially harmful secrets. Hanson attributes the apparent "orderliness" of the community to the "absence of memory" (2009, 47), while the township views both memory and history as a "pain to be avoided" (2009, 51). It is the Giver's task to mentor the Receiver of Memory and to transfer the archived memories to him. Lowry doesn't go into significant detail, nor does she include any scientific explanation, concerning either the possession or transfer of memory. Hanson views memory's transfer as fantasy fiction-based "in order to demonstrate [memory's] effects and its power" (2009, 58). While the fantasy categorization makes sense, speculative processes in both utopian and dystopian fiction have been treated similarly to memory in *The Giver*.

Like Baccolini, Hanson views the work of Ernst Bloch as significant to the discussion of dystopia and memory, and he detects key Blochian concepts such as recognition and the Not-Yet-Conscious as operating within *The Giver*. Hanson writes:

... memory, historical awareness and hope can be harnessed to bring about resistance and significant change. By privileging memory as the novel's one means of anticipating an alternate, better existence, which is the hope embodied in Bloch's Not-Yet-Conscious, Lowry makes memory both the source of potential transformative change and of the novel's final moment of possible utopian realisation (2009, 46).

As mentioned before, memory differs from historical awareness due to the character's perception of the remembered event as well as the individual value assigned to it. But what is most important here is Hanson's valuation of memory as a source of resistance. Hanson's mention of "transformative change" likely refers to the potential alteration of society that would occur as a result of Jonas sharing the memories with the community, allowing citizens to experience the same emotionally intense memories that the Giver has transferred to him. The Not-Yet-Conscious, which represents an individual's "creative anticipation of a potentially realizable future", emanates from Bloch's view that music, architecture, daydreams and literature are authentic forms of utopian desire (Hanson 2009, 55). Bloch emphasises literature as an effective tool for countering alienation because individuals can use its imagery to form a critical, transcendent response. In fact, Bloch finds literature more empowering than reality as a route to "anticipatory consciousness" since the objects in literature are

immanently more achieved, more thoroughly formed, more essential than in the immediate-sensory or immediate-historical occurrence of this Object. [...] everything that appears in the artistic image is sharpened or condensed to a decisiveness that the reality of experience in fact only seldom shows (1986, 215).

When compared to immediate experience, Bloch's empowering view of literature at first sounds vaguely familiar to the concept of a utopian blueprint. The "sharpened" or "condensed" images of art and literature tend to resemble the refined schematics of well-devised plans or diagrams. Opponents of utopia argue that utopia leads to totalitarianism because of the design, or blueprint, that must be adhered to, even with force, without deviation. As mentioned in the first chapter,

Sargent counters the anti-utopian claim by emphasizing the alterability of utopian planning and of government constitutions in general (1982, 570). Regardless of the initial impression of the above passage, the "decisiveness" of literature in Bloch's view suggests that the refined artistic images lend to potential correctives of the wrongs, and to latent utopian possibilities, of experience.

As for the process of transference itself, Hanson writes:

By receiving memories through a wakeful dream state as lived experience, as opposed to a more passive method, Jonas takes full possession of them. They become distinctly his memories and his past, not just a generalized historical past (2009, 52).

Hanson views Jonas's receiving of memories as a process that "approximates the utopian effects of daydreams and literature described by Bloch" (2009, 56). The first memory, which the Giver identifies as one of war, comprises an experience and history that has been withheld from the community. Since memories in the novel are transferred by touch, the Giver places his hands on Jonas, the Receiver of Memory, who then experiences the following:

He was in a confused, noisy, foul-smelling place. It was daylight, early morning, and the air was thick with smoke that hung, yellow and brown, above the ground. Around him, everywhere, far across the expanse of what seemed to be a field, lay groaning men ...

One of Jonas's arms was immobilised with pain, and he could see through his own torn sleeve something that looked like ragged flesh and splintery bone. He tried his remaining arm and felt it move. Slowly he reached to his side, felt the metal container there, and removed its cap, stopping the small motion of his hand now and then to wait for the surging pain to ease. Finally, when the container was open, he extended his arm slowly across the blood-soaked earth, inch by inch, and held it to the lips of the boy. Water trickled into the imploring mouth and down the grimy chin.

The boy sighed. His head fell back, his lower jaw dropping as if he had been surprised by something. A dull blankness slid slowly across his eyes. He was silent.

But the noise continued all around: the cries of the wounded men, the cries begging for water and for Mother and for death. Horses lying on the ground shrieked, raised their heads, and stabbed randomly toward the sky with their hooves.

From the distance, Jonas could hear the thud of cannons. Overwhelmed by pain, he lay there in the fearsome stench for hours, listened to the men and animals die, and learned what warfare meant (Lowry 1993, 90).

Like Winston's memories in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the above memories are associated with strong sensory perception, even though they are not triggered in this case by sensory stimuli. Instead, they are transferred directly by the Giver's touch. As Hanson points out, Jonas "inhabits" the memories as "first-hand lived experiences, full of sensations and emotions rather than detached observations" (2009, 52). The memory of a wounded arm, in particular, with its imagery of blood and bone, emphasises a level of physical suffering that, on the surface, Jonas's community has not only eradicated, but prevented. This is accompanied by the sounds and smells of war: foul smells and smoke, cannons blasting, the cries of men and shrieks of horses. And of course Jonas witnesses death up close with the "dull blankness" of the boy's eyes. In total, Jonas is shocked by the memory of war because he has never experienced or witnessed anything like it, nor does he have knowledge of anyone else experiencing such an event. For this reason, the Giver apologizes for sharing the memory, but explains that it is necessary. By receiving the memory, Jonas has also siphoned off the burden, the deep emotional pain inflicted by the memory, from the Giver. This is evidenced by the Giver's request for Jonas to "take some of the pain" before sharing the memory (Lowry 1993, 90). In fact, the Giver is so troubled by memories like those of war that he often sends Jonas home with no tutorial for the day.

Lowry employs the memory of war as a warning about actions the community should avoid. However, the warning resides only with the Keeper of Memory, since the community elders have decided not only to abstain from warfare, but also to censure the notion or imagery of war, which they believe would harm citizens.

Now we move to the second memory—love—which the Giver transfers to Jonas after passing on the memory of war.

He was in a room filled with people, and it was warm, with firelight glowing on a hearth. He could see through a window that outside it was night, and snowing. There were coloured lights: red and green and yellow, twinkling from a tree which was, oddly, inside the room. On a table, lighted candles stood in a polished golden holder and cast a soft, flickering glow. He could smell things cooking, and he heard soft laughter. A golden-haired dog lay sleeping on the floor (Lowry 1993, 91).

The sensory stimuli suggest an atmosphere of safety and comfort. First, there is the physical warmth from a fire, followed by a sensation of its opposite: cold from the snow. Then we encounter the colourful lights, as well as the candle's flicker. Together they recall a time of intimacy that appears to be lacking in the families of the novel's engineered community.

The planned diminishing of familial bonds can be traced as far back as the *Republic*, where Plato, in his exaltations of the state and pleas for the regimented separation of classes, calls for the sharing of both private property and children, with the latter viewed strictly according to the benefit that they afford society. As Plato asserts in the *Republic*:

There is common property of wives, of children, and of all chattels. And everything possible has been done to eradicate from our life everywhere and in every way all that is private and individual. So far as it can be done, even those things which nature herself has made private and individual have somehow become the common property of all. Our very eyes and ears and hands seem to see, to hear, and to act, as if they belonged not to individuals but to the community (quoted in Popper 2012, 108).

Plato seems to suggest that the above traits and behaviours are those of a cohesive society, a community whose interconnectivity models that of a large family. It can also be inferred from this passage that individual memories are to be shared and reformed into an overarching collective memory that shapes and stabilises the society.

On one hand, withholding memories from other citizens works as a protective mechanism, a barrier against the trauma that would be caused, for example, by images of war. According to Michael Levy, this withholding helps protect citizens from traumatic experiences (Hanson 2009, 5). In the words of Hanson, this is done "so that others can live unburdened by the pain, knowledge and guilty of human history" (2009, 5), an explanation that is supported in Lowry's

novel by the Chief Elder's assertion that by inhabiting the volume of memories Jonas "will be faced [...] with pain of a magnitude that none of us here can comprehend" (Lowry 1993, 50). On the other hand, the knowledge of close familial experiences, and the emotional connections attached to them—which the Giver calls "love"—could lead at least some in Jonas's community to question the dynamics of the current familial system that prioritizes the wellbeing of the community above that of the family. Therefore, the memories of the outside world are stored in a trusted official, the Keeper of Memory, only to be used for insight when the community elders make important decisions on community matters.

Armed with the memorialized knowledge of love and war, Jonas suffers discontentment because of a closed society ethics that not only contradict its own claims of peace and wellness but also conflict with his newly informed values. Hanson writes: "Jonas's memories lead to hope that things could be different; this is the novel's utopian drive" (2009, 55). The pivotal moment for Jonas occurs when he witnesses his father, a Nurturer, killing an identical newborn twin, one of smaller birth weight, via cranial injection, a process the community has ambiguously labelled a "Ceremony of Release", stating the fairy tale-like claim that the infant, and others who are released, will be taken to a mysterious destination named "Elsewhere" (Lowry 1993, 102). Death itself, isn't the impetus for Jonas's inner conflicts, but as Hanson states,

when combined with the memory of familial love and bonds between generations [engrams], the infanticide reveals the moral horror of his father's act, a complete violation of his role as Nurturer, and the terrifying recognition that his society ignorantly commits gross injustice merely in the name of organization (2009, 55).

The execution of the child may conflict with objective morality; however, Hanson's assertion that Jonas's father has committed a "complete violation of his role as Nurturer" may need clarification. According to Sameness principles, identical twins are not allowed. In this light, the Nurturer is fulfilling his responsibilities as the system requires even though some of these, particularly the violent aspects, are conducted in secret. The system also employs the collective use of a deliberately vague language that glosses over such horrors, protecting these methods from the public's understanding.

The Giver attributes a rare, fantastical value to memory that is absent in most dystopian novels. Through the realisation of memory's power, the novel's protagonist Jonas is able to resist an austere collective ideology that adheres to infanticide and euthanasia of other citizens because of old age and crimes of incompetence. Like the memories in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, memories in Lowry's novel are experienced with a heightened awareness of the senses.

The points made in this chapter reflect the importance of memory as it relates to resistance in dystopian fiction. However, there is ample room for further discussion related to the topic—for example, the fundamental nature of memory, whether or not memory is reliable, and the value of memory for future liberation. Like memory, another tool—technology—can be weaponised by characters in dystopian fiction, and this is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Technological Considerations in Dystopian Fiction

Technology and its potential for abuse by its human creators lies near the heart of much dystopian fiction. The crux of the matter involves the nature of technology, the question of whether or not, to use Gorman Beauchamp's phrasing, it is "dehumanizing" and "destructive" (1986, 54). While some theorists agree with these descriptions, others consider technology to be value neutral, or even beneficial to humankind. The majority of technology within this chapter will refer to concrete technologies such as those of production, communication, electronics, surveillance and weaponry. Where possible, a distinction is made between the concrete technologies and Foucauldian technologies of power. Kieran Tranter characterises the pessimistic view of technology thus:

Within thinking about technology and society, there is a tragic strand that regards modern technological existence as the end of true human life, its vitality replaced by empty exchange (2018, 2).

Within this strand of thinking, exchange value immediately invokes Marx and the political and economic implications of technology. For Marx, the mechanised factory possesses "a tendency to equalise and reduce to one and the same level every kind of work that has to be done by the minders of the machine" (1984, 396). Although Marx may have underestimated both the amount and variety of skills necessary to "mind" such machines, he nevertheless recognised technology's pervasive nature in the sphere of humankind. Ramesh Mishra offers further insight about Marx's theory:

Machinery is essentially labour-saving and displaces 'hands' wherever it is employed in production. The increasing spread of machinery therefore tends to create unemployment (1979, 143).

This passage reinforces the notion that technology not only becomes more useful in material production, but that it also displaces humankind's own usefulness in manufacturing. A prime example of this has occurred in the automotive industry, where the human workforce has been significantly reduced because of the influx of robotic machinery.

A standard definition of technology has long been that of American sociologist Read Bain, who offers the following:

Technology includes all tools, machines, utensils, weapons, instruments, housing, clothing, communicating and transporting devices and the skills by which we produce and use them (1937, 860).

This definition of technology may be viewed separately from the technology of power that relies as much or more on strategy than on concrete tools. The material and immaterial elements in Bain's definition have been created, invented, and acquired by humans, and in some cases such as gorillas or chimpanzees, by animals. Among the many variations in the definitions of technology, some confine technology to human endeavours, while others include knowledge as a key component. Because of the motivating factors of both characters and governments in dystopian fiction, the stipulation that technology is created by humans appears significant. If technology is created by humans, then its purpose and design factor into the will of these characters and governments. Both the Oxford Dictionary and the Cambridge Dictionary emphasise the practical and industrial uses of the material and immaterial aspects of technology.

In his essay "The Question of Technology", Martin Heidegger provides another definition of technology:

The manufacture and utilization of equipment, tools, and machines, the manufactured and used things themselves, and the needs and ends that they serve, all belong to what technology is. The whole complex of these contrivances is technology (1977, 5).

Heidegger includes not only created products, but also the design and goals of such goods, including biological and nuclear weaponry, with all their nefarious impacts. The definition's holistic impression emphasises the importance of each technical component. For Heidegger, technology's essence is "a means to an end" and "a human activity" (1977, 4). In other words, the physical apparatus of technology, as well as its blueprint and the knowledge of how it works, cannot be separated from the human elements—the creators, the engineers, the caretakers, and those consumers and citizens that the technology supposedly serves.

Heidegger expounds on his definition:

The word [technology] stems from the Greek. *Technikon* means that which belongs to *techne*. We must observe two things with respect to the meaning of this word. One is that *techne* is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts (1977, 12-13).

The Greek word *techne* refers to the craft or skill involved in the bringing about of technology. Plato connects *techne* with the word *episteme*, which refers to "knowing in the widest sense", while Aristotle links *techne* with *aletheuein*, or revealing (Heidegger 1977, 13). Heidegger's addition of the arts of the mind to the concept of technology carries special significance when applied to the concepts of dystopian fiction that have influenced real-world technological development. (This will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.)

On the polemical topic of technology's nature, Heidegger has often been linked with determinists who fear an unrelenting invasion of technology into humankind's sphere of existence. Heidegger observes:

Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology (1977, 12).

Heidegger suggests that those who possess a neutral view of technology fail to understand its complexity, particularly its human component. Proponents of the neutral view risk being exploited by technology's potential for harm.

Theoretical discourse concerning technological value carries over into dystopian fiction. Since the Twentieth Century, dystopian writers have endeavoured to respond to the argument of H.G. Wells that science and technology could solve humanity's problems. Wells's opponents (such as Orwell) argue that mankind, not science or the lack thereof, is the cause of civilisation's woes, and that governments will use and abuse both science and technology for their own gain. Primarily for this reason, many writers of dystopian fiction, cynical about technology's coercive and destructive potential, remain suspicious of its innovation and proliferation, and create characters who resist the authorities by appropriating fictional technology.

In dystopian works technology often functions as satire, as Keith Booker observes about M.T. Anderson's novel *Feed* (2002) (2013, 83). For example, Booker draws attention to the flying cars and air-purifying domes that cover houses and entire neighbourhoods, contrasting them with the deteriorating natural environment. The settings of many Philip K. Dick novels offer similar paradoxes, with poverty, crime and corruption still major themes in technologically advanced societies. In his utopian novel *Looking Backward*, Edward Bellamy predicted that by the year 2000 science and common sense would stabilise society not only in the US but throughout the world, that disenfranchised groups would no longer be shunned, and that capitalism's shortcomings—with its emphasis on money, privatisation, and corporatisation—would be resolved. Dystopian writers typically reject such harmonious forecasts, instead imagining communities just as violent, as economically and ideologically segregated, as those of the present. Theoretically, Marx finds the roots of modern societies' dystopian tendencies in capitalism's exploitative nature. Even though technology in Ancient Greece lacked the sophistication of the Industrial Age, Aristotle nevertheless seems to locate society's exploitative roots in a different source:

Men readily listen [to utopias], and are easily induced to believe that in some wonderful manner everybody will become everybody's friend, especially when someone is heard denouncing the evils now existing ... which are said to arise out of the possession of private property. These evils, however, arise from quite another source—the wickedness of human nature (quoted in Durant 1961, 200).

This latter emphasis on humanity's tendencies seems to be absent in Bellamy's novel. In *Looking Backward*, Doctor Leete, a character in the (then) future year 2000, attributes the majority of problems of the late 1800s to society's capitalist structure. Aristotle, however, recognises that the problems visible in society emerge from within humanity.

As Orwell argues:

Unfortunately the equation of science with common sense does not really hold good ... Much of what Wells has imagined and worked for is physically there in Nazi Germany. The order, the planning, the State encouragement of science, the steel, the

concrete, the aeroplanes, are all there, but all in the service of ideas appropriate to the Stone Age (quoted in Horan 2013, 57).

In other words, instead of using technology for the benefit of their citizens and people of other nations, totalitarian governments use technologies such as those of production, communication and surveillance to dominate them. Orwell appears to refer to the conflict between morality and efficiency in certain authoritarian governments. In Nazi Germany, technology was abused by a brutal, powerful regime. The ideas Orwell refers to appear to emanate, at least in part, from the same source of human ethical corruption cited by Aristotle.

For Beauchamp, dystopian fiction "fuses two fears: the fear of utopia and the fear of technology" (1986, 53). He raises the question of whether technology in dystopian fiction functions as a simple "instrument" for the state, or whether it perhaps evolves into "an autonomous force that determines the values" of the given society (1986, 54). This constitutes the debate between "technophiles", who view technology as merely an instrument of humanity, and "technophobes" who see it as a "creation that can transcend the original purposes of its creator and take on an independent existence and will of its own" (1986, 54). While the fears of technophobes may be understandable, most writers of dystopian fiction treat technology in its pure state as value neutral, isolated from the applications and values placed upon it by its human inventors. The majority of current technological applications—including artificial intelligence—are not only amenable to control and modification by their creators, but are also either accepted or rejected by consumers, corporations and states.

This selection of technological applications by humanity—and therefore the potential of human agency—returns us to Heidegger. Despite Heidegger's technological pessimism, Tranter observes:

Heidegger can be seen as clearing the way for thinking about technology and humanity as co-located, as conceiving humanity as a thoroughly and wholly technical entity, as 'technological Being-in-the-world' (Tranter 2018).

According to Tranter, Heidegger recognises that humankind and technology inhabit the same existential space, which raises additional questions in the case of AI and the potential for anthropomorphism. Heidegger's stipulation that technology is a human activity doesn't

necessarily preclude the possibility of AI carving out a space of Being. If future forms of technology are able to establish agency, will this lead to conflict between human and technological entities, or will humans and technology engage in a shared agency that is mutually beneficial to both humans and technology? Technological theorists, as well as scholars of utopia and science fiction, are divided on the issue. Tranter observes:

[Donna] Haraway and others suggest that it is possible to 'live in' technical legality. They identify embodied locations where a possibility of 'responsibility for becoming' can emerge, which offers ways of living within the total triumph of technology (2018, 3).

Technical legality, or the intersection of technology and law, serves as an arbiter between humankind and technology. Haraway foresees a humankind that is estranged from previous experiences, but that nevertheless emerges into a new existence alongside that of burgeoning technology. In other words, technology's advancement in society and the world at large does not inevitably impose restrictions on human agency.

Haraway's view is particularly relevant in connection with technology's potential to usurp humanity. Often built upon the concept of artificial intelligence, the potential for machines and robots to conquer their human creators has been well documented in fiction such as E.M. Forster's short story "The Machine Stops" (1909). Beauchamp offers a precise summary of this dilemma:

Technology, that is, like the Sabbath, should be made for man, not man for technology; but whether it is possible to maintain that proper relationship in the face of the technological imperative, to keep the slave from becoming the master, is the question that haunts dystopia. Forster's future fails to—and perishes as a result (1986, 58).

In the story that Beauchamp is referring to, the Machine has evolved into an independent authority that serves citizens' minute-to-minute needs, but in doing so, it also holds totalising control over their lives. The Machine's complex physical apparatus represents mechanical and electronic technologies, and its design and purpose invoke the technology of the self, a division within the technology of power. The Machine's self-sufficiency corresponds to the themes in science fiction works in which robots and machines assume their own identities, motivations,

and agendas and pursue them independently of their human creators. Just as Darko Suvin's definition of dystopia requires an explanation of how the dystopia came to exist, Forster offers a generalized accounting for the Machine's ascendance to authority over the citizens: "in all the world there was not one who understood the monster as a whole. Those master brains had perished" (1954, 138). The text implies that the original designers/engineers of the apparatus have died, and with them the understanding of its mechanics as a unified entity. Since the Machine has attained an autonomic-like status, its design and purpose as a technology of power assumes more complexity. If purposefully created by political leaders to control citizens, the Machine has now assumed a space of agency.

Tom Moylan expounds upon this reversal of power and control:

... the narrator (and Forster) locates the source of power and discipline in the systemic logic of the Machine that gradually alienates its own creators from themselves, turning them from inventive agents to reified cogs in its own expanding mechanism (2000, 117).

For many dystopian writers, technology functions as an amplifier of humanity's cruel, sinister persona. To become the master, a slave would require either a power and intellect that is superior to that of the creator, or the master would need to cede control outright. Proponents of technology may be sceptical about whether a machine like the one in Forster's story could, through its own independent means and autonomy, outmanoeuvre and supersede its human creators. In terms of their own creations, humans desire control, and when technological creations begin to malfunction or behave in ways that are inconsistent with the creators' intentions, there is almost always a "kill switch". (Exceptions occur, however, in apparatuses such as atomic weapons and computer viruses whose destructive effects are intended to proliferate upon activation.) Creators hold power and dominion over their creations, with intricate details of their designs having proliferated among the scientific community for years or even decades leading up to the invention. Through reverse engineering, professionals in areas as complicated as robotics, aerospace and astrophysics are able to unlock the secrets of foreign mechanical designs.

Technology's potential ascendance to power isn't limited to usurping its human creators. Even if AI doesn't overpower its masters, one could argue that hi-tech devices control people via Baudrillard's concept of objective power over the subject. For example, the fixation and devotion that consumers show toward the modern smart phone suggests an aura of captivating control that the device has over their lives. Technology, Jacques Ellul says, "transforms everything it touches into a machine"; as it "enters into every area of life ... it ceases to be external to man and becomes his very substance" (Ellul quoted in Beauchamp 1986, 60). This can only occur with humanity's acceptance of, or its addiction to, technology.

This interwoven relationship between humankind and technology is demonstrated in "The Machine Stops". The Machine in Forster's work represents what Beauchamp identifies as a "technotopia", or "an advanced totalitarian state dependent upon a massive technological apparatus" (1986, 54). As Forster's story demonstrates, such a society becomes more susceptible to collapse in the event of a technological glitch (i.e. computer malfunction or error) or in a cyber attack that disables normal functions. As cracks in the Machine begin to appear, citizens begin to discuss the problems, but as often occurs in authoritarian societies, they learn to stop complaining and accept the shortcomings:

The sigh at the crisis of the Brisbane symphony no longer irritated Vashti; she accepted it as part of the melody. The jarring noise, whether in the head or in the wall, was no longer resented by her friend. And so with the mouldy artificial fruit, so with the bath water that began to stink, so with the defective rhymes that the poetry machine had taken to emit. All were bitterly complained of at first, and then acquiesced in and forgotten. Things went from bad to worse unchallenged (Forster 1954, 141).

When the beds fail to appear for sleeping, however, the people offer up a potential new cause for the crisis: "someone is meddling with the Machine ... Someone is trying to make himself king, to reintroduce the personal element" (Forster 1954, 141). Moylan, however, interprets the story to suggest that "the population refuses to see the overall situation in which the Machine has produced the conditions of its own destruction" (2000, 119). And even though such a natural breakdown would seem to support Forster's assertion of technology's unreliability, I would suggest that the possibility of subversion should not be discounted, particularly when the presence of resistant individuals such as Kuno suggests such a potential. Kuno is described as

athletic and intelligent—the type of individual that the Machine usually weeds out—and he demonstrates independent thinking and an independent will throughout the story. By trespassing beyond the Machine's established residential boundaries, Kuno discovers the intricate structures of the Machine as well as homeless individuals who do not dwell within the controlled domain of ordinary citizens.

Near the climax of this series of mechanical failures, Kuno tells Vashti, "The Machine Stops ... The Machine is stopping, I know it, I know the signs" (Forster 1954, 139). This raises questions about Kuno's ability to know that the Machine is, in fact, faltering. No information is given concerning the Machine's past mechanical problems, nor of failures with other forms of technology in the society, and Kuno, a citizen who is not described as possessing extraordinary mechanical or technological knowledge, also doesn't explain how he knows the system is collapsing. The "signs", however, most likely refer to technical glitches—mechanical, electronic, or both—in the Machine's daily functioning. Here, the time period in which "The Machine Stops" was written deserves mention. Although it is described as a complex apparatus with anthropomorphic features, the simplistic name given to the Machine, which appears to represent machinery in general, was probably an attack on the machines and other technological applications in the early Twentieth Century that malfunctioned or broke down frequently. People at that time in history would have identified the "signs" as strange noises, not unlike people do in the contemporary era. Subversion or sabotage of the Machine cannot be discounted, but there is not enough evidence in the story to suggest that such an act occurred.

At the end of the story, when the system appears to be imploding, the narrator comments that mankind "was dying, strangled in the garments that he had woven" (Forster 1954, 145). The image emphasises that humanity is responsible for its creations. The simplicity of a garment, a normally harmless artefact, suggests that humankind's own actions—and not those of the created thing—are responsible for its death. This would seem to reveal the value of both simple and sophisticated technology in dystopian fiction, highlighting the fact that the danger of technology lies in humanity's irresponsible application of it.

The Weaponisation of Technology

Many forms of technology proliferate to an extent that the blueprints of their inventions are documented and improved upon. If the technological determinism of "The Machine Stops" is accurate, technology displaces human conscious agency to the extent that humans depend on technology to perform basic functions and assist in making decisions. Heidegger observes technology's expanding nature:

This setting-upon that challenges forth the energies of nature is an expediting [Fordern], and in two ways. It expedites in that it unlocks and exposes. Yet that expediting is always itself directing from the beginning toward furthering something else, i.e., toward driving on to the maximum yield at the minimum expense (1977, 15).

In other words, technology quickens. It serves as a catalyst for humanity's needs and desires. The "furthering" suggests the possibility of infinite advancement of a design. For Heidegger, technology "unlocks and exposes" secrets and truth (1977, 12). The "minimum expense" draws attention to capitalistic aims of profit.

Just as with transportation and other necessary functions of life, the catalysing nature of technology is especially true of the advancement of sophisticated weapons. Because of science and technology, humanity continues to discover easier, faster methods of annihilating itself. Despite rhetoric about curbing nuclear weapons proliferation, technology itself remains irreversible: there is no going back. While world powers such as the US, Russia and China no doubt view themselves as responsible caretakers of nuclear munitions, the possibility for fallout from a nuclear power plant remains even in these nations, as well as the dread concerning countries perceived as less responsible.

In this light, technological advancement appears, in many ways, irreversible in its effects: development deemed useful by powerful states or popular with consumers cannot, in the normal course of events, be undone. Even though nuclear weapons have proven to be vastly destructive of life and the environment, their existence not only continues, but has proliferated among the world's nations. This example helps explain Heidegger's suggestion that "technological advance will move faster and can never be stopped. In all areas of his existence, man will be encircled ever more tightly by the forces of technology" (quoted in Beauchamp 1986, 54). This passage

suggests that 1. Human inventors are continually searching for faster, better, more convenient applications of technology to cater for a particular need or use, and that 2. As this advancement occurs, humankind loses an unknown amount of agency, which likely begins at the unconscious level. The current dependence on cell phones, computers, the Internet, and social media serve as a reminder of this. Because science is often shared, and because of the marvels of reverse engineering, allied and rival nations and scientists are able to keep up with the latest inventions.

If Heidegger's assertion is true, then it is only through catastrophe—caused by climate change or nuclear holocaust, events which would destroy the world's infrastructure and technological equipment—that technological progress could be hampered. Examples of this can be located in Ayn Rand's novel *Anthem* (1938), in which the state restricts the use of technology by its citizenry, and in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006), where civilisation has been devastated by nuclear fallout. Nevertheless, in the latter work, citizens continue to search for the most advanced weaponry available as a means of survival.

Ultimately, in dystopian fiction and in real life, humanity is portrayed as a less than responsible caretaker of its own advances. Whether it's the exploitation of factory workers who are enslaved to machines or the mass murder of civilians with heavy weaponry, the tendency to race toward apparent advantages of scientific and technological innovation sometimes comes with great harm, as seen in the nuclear obliteration of Chicago at the end of *Fahrenheit 451*.

Ethical Arguments: Technocracy's Distancing from the Garden

Daily life in "The Machine Stops" seems to function in total opposition to the naturally grounded life represented by the Garden of Eden. The conflict between the natural world and the technological world has enormous consequences for humanity. Most notably, in the Biblical Garden, man and woman are free to choose their own fates, whereas in "The Machine Stops" citizens remain enslaved by a technological god of their own creation. In hexagonal cells below ground, citizens are catered to by the Machine for each of their needs, which include food and medicine:

There were buttons and switches everywhere—buttons to call for food, for music, for clothing. There was the hot-bath button . . . There was the cold-bath button. There was the button that produced literature (Forster 1954, 112) .

Confined to the cells, citizens lack true personal interaction with other humans, limited to communications involving video, similar to today's Skype or Facebook. The political leaders in the story have brought about the normalisation of the conditions for the majority of citizens. Revealing early on his resistant attitude toward the Machine, Kuno tells Vashti that he wants her to visit him, but "not through the Machine ... not through the wearisome Machine" (Forster 1954, 110). Vashti regards Kuno's disparaging of the Machine as blasphemy. In fact, the Machine has come to be regarded not only as a solution to every need in society, but as a source of spiritual comfort, a deity deserving worship. When Vashti takes the airship to visit Kuno, she and another passenger echo another passenger's mantra, "How we have advanced, thanks to the Machine!" (Forster 1954, 121). Vashti places her faith and security not only in the Machine, but also in the Book of the Machine, a combination of instruction manual and bible that guides citizens to frantic reverence. When worried, she holds the book and offers praise, "O Machine! O Machine!" (Forster 1954, 118). In fact, the only peace citizens seem to experience comes when they handle this book. By elevating the all-encompassing machinery to godly status, Forster is arguably mocking technological zealots like Wells who possess a sanguine view of science.

The deification of The Machine in Forster's story resonates with the divine status of leaders who promise to bring about utopia. Erika Gottlieb observes that the masses under totalitarian rule are lured by the "seductively utopian promises of a dictatorship hiding behind the mask of the messiah" (2001, 10). Gottlieb emphasises the deceptive nature of tyranny and authoritarian structures. The citizens in "The Machine Stops" appear to have ceded control to the Machine. It is not just the Machine's independent power that has brought this about. The citizens' failure to question and resist, and hence their subservience to and idolatry of the Machine, has led to a power shift that exalts the Machine above the humans it was meant to serve.

Kuno challenges Vashti concerning the deification of the Machine:

'You talk as if a god had made the Machine,' he cried. 'I believe that you pray to it when you are unhappy. Men made it, do not forget that. Great men, but men. The

Machine is much, but it is not everything. I see something like you in this plate, but I do not see you. I hear something like you through this telephone, but I do not hear you (Forster 1954, 110).

As someone who expresses discontent, Kuno has an attitude which implies that he is an anomaly—one who resists the Machine—and that other citizens remain content with their living situations and lack of genuine face-to-face contact, which the Machine has discouraged. While citizens in the story consider monitor-based conversations as authentic social contact, such behaviour may seem reclusive to many contemporary readers.

Because of their isolation, citizens in "The Machine Stops" are also deprived of any pastoral environment involving animals, flora and fauna, the sky and moon, natural bodies of water, the very elements that lend the Garden its aura of tranquil paradise. In *The Machine and the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964), Leo Marx refers to the pastoral as "a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence 'closer to nature'" (1964, 6). Although one is proximal to nature, she remains free from its "violent certainties" (1964, 22), a status that distinguishes the pastoral from the primitive. The pastoral, therefore, lies between the technological marvels of civilization and "unimproved, raw nature" (1964, 22). Marx goes on to show how many American writers since Washington Irving have portrayed the manifestations of technology as intruding upon the early pristine landscapes of America.

The contrast between the technologically complex style of living and the pastoral is depicted in *The Machine Stops* when Kuno tells Vashti of his unauthorized trip to the earth's surface. There, Kuno experiences the warm sensation of sunshine on his skin, and in another first, he sees the stars in the night sky above. This leads to a teleological distinction between the naturalist and the technologist. The Machine offers its citizens a false sense of security, attending to their necessities and comforts in ways that, in the end, prove to be inadequate. The Machine itself functions as a simulation of nature (being far removed from a close approximation, it would belong to Baudrillard's first order of simulacra (Butler 1999, 36), providing calming sounds and music and adjusting the light for the inhabitants in an array of hues for different occasions (i.e. sunrise, sunset). But Kuno's discovery reveals that for all the advances and benefits of science—vaccinations, communication devices, and transport vehicles—technology fails to provide what

nature does: tranquillity, freedom and a sense of belonging. In essence, the environment that technology manufactures fails to speak to the human soul.

Kuno describes this unnatural imbalance in another of his critiques of the Machine:

We created the Machine, to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now. It has robbed us of our sense of space and of the sense of touch, it has blurred every human relation and narrowed down love to a carnal act, it has paralysed our bodies and our wills, and now it compels us to worship it ... The Machine proceeds—but not to our goal (Forster 1954, 115)

Although the Machine was created to serve its citizens, they have become servants of the Machine. And despite the Machine's attempts to appease its citizens, the end result is their imprisonment, without the sense of space one feels in nature. The absence of love, which would result from close, direct encounters between citizens, recalls one of the key themes in Lois Lowry's novel *The Giver* (1993), where infants are separated from their mothers at birth, just as they are in Forster's story.

In Jack London's novel *The Iron Heel* (1908), the protagonist Ernest Everhard locates this separation of man from the pastoral:

With the introduction of machinery and the factory system in the latter part of the eighteenth century, the great mass of the working people was separated from the land. The old system of labour was broken down. The working people were driven from their villages and herded in factory towns. The mothers and children were put to work at the new machines. Family life ceased. The conditions were frightful. It is a tale of blood. (2005, 25)

London makes the connection between machinery and slavery, with workers chained to industrial settings while being removed from the pastoral. The description of workers as "driven from their villages and herded" equates them with livestock. The inclusion of mothers and children in the workforce, with long hours and harsh conditions, signals the industrial society's breakdown of the family.

The "herding" of people into "factory towns" likewise compares with the dystopian hell of Chicago's Packingtown in Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* (1906), one of the most cynical,

brutal depictions of dystopian life in the genre. Although the latter novel doesn't take place in a futuristic world, it nevertheless achieves closure via the imprisoning isolation of its immigrant subjects in Packingtown, where the slaughterhouses of early Twentieth Century Chicago function as hell for animal and immigrant alike. The Rudkus family, working class Lithuanians, find themselves trapped in a Darwinian society where the powerful and connected prey upon the impoverished and newly arrived workers. Food and water are unsanitary, working conditions are unsafe, and everyone is on the take, ready to exploit the naive and unconnected. Labour within the stockyards is described in gruesome detail:

The 'Union Stockyards' were never a pleasant place, but now they were not only a collection of slaughter houses, but also the camping place of an army of fifteen or twenty thousand human beasts. All day long the blazing midsummer sun beat down upon that square mile of abominations; upon tens of thousands of cattle crowded into pens whose wooden floors stank and steamed contagion; upon bare, blistering, cinder-strewn railroad tracks and huge blocks of dingy meat factories, whose labyrinthine passages defied a breath of fresh air to penetrate them; and there were not merely rivers of hot blood, and carloads of moist flesh, and rendering vats and soap cauldrons, glue factories and fertilizer tanks, that smelt like the craters of hell—there were also tons of garbage festering in the sun, and the greasy laundry of the workers hung out to dry, and dining rooms littered with food and black with flies, and toilet rooms that were open sewers (Sinclair 1985, 328-329).

The humans and animals in this passage tend to attract the horrid elements of heat, flies, disease, putrid smells, decaying food and garbage and human waste, as though Sinclair has chiselled a metaphor of pestilence and Biblical wrath for what happens to the lowest caste of industrial society. The conditions of Packingtown reveal that the authoritarian hell need not necessarily be confined to the future, nor must its society fit Lyman Tower Sargent's requirement that a dystopia must be "considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (1994, 9). As Erika Gottlieb has observed, many Eastern European writers such as Zamyatin created dystopian works under social systems as oppressive as the ones they portrayed (i.e. the Soviet Union) (2001, 5). While Sinclair's story adheres to the here and now as opposed to the "imaginary environment" of dystopia's definition emphasised by Gordon Browning, Sinclair, like dystopian

authors whose stories are set in the future, urges his readership to "accomplish a certain series of necessary reforms" (Browning 1970, 18). And although the method of warning differs, the purpose of a dystopia like Sinclair's remains similar to that of a dystopia set in the future: to highlight present-day societal abuses and policies and demand that they be altered and/or corrected. *The Jungle* ultimately reminds us that we need to look no further than the present to locate the harshest, most savage societies and systems.

Despite the violence of Packingtown, the pastoral not only contrasts the industrial world, but also offers renewal for Jurgis, the protagonist. This is highlighted when Jurgis takes the train out of Packingtown and Chicago and is restored to the countryside:

Whenever the cars stopped a warm breeze blew upon him, a breeze laden with the perfume of fresh fields, of honeysuckle and clover. He snuffed it, and it made his heart beat wildly—he was out in the country again! He was going to live in the country!

... for three long years he had never seen a country sight nor heard a country sound! ... and for a few times that he had rested in the city parks in the winter-time when he was out of work, he had literally never seen a tree! And now he felt like a bird lifted up and borne away upon a gale; he stopped and stared at each new sight of wonder—at a herd of cows and a meadow full of daisies, at hedgerows set thick with June roses, at little birds singing in the trees (Sinclair 1985, 255).

As Jurgis is reintroduced to flora and fauna and a sense of space, his perspective changes and hope is rekindled. In addition, his physical and spiritual separation from Packingtown reveal something else: technological enhancements of urbanized industrial life remove humanity from its natural environment, cursing it with misery, transforming it into a spiritless kind of machinery. Jurgis's escape from the city, therefore, could be construed as an act of resistance against industrial society and those who profit from it.

Another aspect of the Garden that contrasts with technological advancement is that of innocence. Not only does the Garden's aura imply simplicity, but it also invokes ethical purity, at least before the Fall of humanity. Its opposite in terms of setting is a highly sophisticated technological metropolis or other civilisation in which humanity's greed, as well as its desire to exploit and control, are amplified through means of advanced weaponry, computerization,

logistics, telecommunications, propaganda and surveillance. As humanity moves further from the Garden in technological development, it tends to exploit nature, moving constantly until it reaches the extreme seen in "The Machine Stops", where humanity worships the creation of the Machine. This human capacity for idolizing its own constructions (other than the first source—its capacity for weaponisation) remains humanity's second ethical flaw with regard to technology. Apart from the divine aspect of the Machine in Forster's short work, the technological creations in other works of dystopian fiction function differently. In M.T. Anderson's *Feed*, implanted computer chips in citizens' brains seem to distract them from urgent matters such as the existing environmental crisis. Through a constant electronic network, citizens are absorbed into an aggressive and domineering corporate media complex that bombards their feeds with advertisements. By the quality of their feeds and personalised advertisements, citizens' identities are shaped via the technology of the market.

An area of dystopian fiction that deserves further discussion, particularly in the context of resistance, is that of technological ownership. Many high-tech corporations often work in collaboration with the government via contracts (i.e. the corporate-government conglomerate), and authoritarian regimes are known to appropriate new technological blueprints and related machinery. To have a greater chance of success, resisting citizens would be wise to gain access to the same components.

Within the context of technological ownership, dystopian fiction in the late Twentieth Century and early Twenty-First Century usually involves what I will call counter technology. That is, for the proletariat to succeed in its resistance against the totalitarian state, it would benefit from technology that rivals the power of the state's technology. This remains one of the arguments of Ernest Everhard in Jack London's *The Iron Heel*. Instead of destroying the state's productive machinery, as suggested by some dissidents, Everhard advocates taking control of the machinery from the state. While his opponents—who he refers to as "machine-breakers"—maintain that the machines replacing human workers function to society's detriment, Ernest, possibly speaking on behalf of the author London, challenges them to consider the root of the problem:

Let us not destroy those wonderful machines that produce efficiently and cheaply. Let us control them. Let us profit by their efficiency and cheapness. Let us run them for

ourselves. Let us oust the present owners of the wonderful machines, and let us own the wonderful machines ourselves (2005, 81).

The "owners", of course, refers to the corporate-government conglomerate known as The Iron Heel, a powerful organisation that exploits the proletariat for profit. When his opponents still fail to see his point, he renders the consequences of their faulty thinking:

All right, then, you prefer to be anachronisms,' Ernest laughed. 'You prefer to play atavistic roles. You are doomed to perish as all atavisms perish (London 2005, 82).

This passage suggests that restoring conditions to a more primitive technological state will not result in improvement. At the end of Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Player Piano*, we find a similar scenario. A rebellion by workers who have been replaced by machines leads to chaos, anarchy, and the destruction of the machines, themselves.

In the station's waiting room, carnage was everywhere. The terrazzo floor ... was strewn with the guts and internal secretions of the automatic ticket vendor, the automatic nylon vendor, the automatic coffee vendor, the automatic newspaper vendor, the automatic toothbrush vendor, the automatic shoeshine machine, the automatic photo studio, the automatic baggage checker, the automatic insurance salesman (2000, 310-311).

While the rebels seem to have won the battle, they face the consequences of destroying the machines. Ironically, they find themselves yearning for the Orange O machine, which had produced a tangy, repulsive goo. The repetition of the words "automatic" and "vendor" seems to mimic the simple repeated sounds of machines as well as emphasise the combination of automation and capitalism at the expense of human labour.

Paul and Finnerty left the car to examine the mystery, and saw that the centre of attention was an Orange-O machine. Orange-O, Paul recalled, was something of a *cause célèbre*, for no one in the whole country, apparently, could stomach the stuff ... Orange-O machines stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the rest, though the coin-box collectors never found anything in the machines but stale Orange-O.

But now the excretor of the blended wood pulp, dye, water, and orange-type flavoring was as popular as a nymphomaniac at an American Legion convention.

“O.K., now let’s try anotha’ nickel in her an’ see how she does”, said a familiar voice from behind the machine—the voice of Bud Calhoun.

“*Clunkle*” went the coin, and then a whirl, and a gurgle.

The crowd was overjoyed (Vonnegut 2000, 312).

Mistakenly believing the machines to be the problem, the people realize the benefits of automation too late. Bud Calhoun represents the technician who is able to repair such machinery in the event of catastrophe. The scene reveals the blind spot of technophobes: technology can enhance our lives, if we let it.

Robotic Labour and Panopticism

For the corporate-government conglomerate in dystopian fiction, robotic labour makes sense. While sophisticated machinery costs more in the short term, the long-term benefits outweigh the expenses associated with using human workers, who are prone to illness and errors of judgment, and lack the capacity for consistent production of mechanised labour. In *Player Piano* citizens who do not work as managers or engineers for labour-dominant machines either serve in the Army or in the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps, which focuses on tasks related to infrastructure. Halyard, a government chaperone, explains this to the visiting Shah:

Before the war, they worked in the Ilium Works, controlling machines, but now machines control themselves much better ... Less waste, much better products, cheaper products with automatic control ... And any man who cannot support himself by doing a job better than a machine is employed by the government (Vonnegut 2000, 27).

This dependence on machines has led to a siphoning off of America's middle and lower classes, who now live in less affluent districts than their engineer and manager counterparts. The Shah, recognising the government workers as a lower caste, humorously refers to them as "slaves", explaining that in his country there remain only two classes of citizens (Vonnegut 2000, 27).

In *The Jungle*, machinery is shown in an imprisoning light, with blue collar workers juxtaposed alongside the machines of their profession, revealing the men, women and children as machine-like and worth no more than equipment to their employers:

Then he set someone else at a different job, and showed the lad how to place a lard can every time the empty arm of the remorseless machine came to him; and so was decided the place in the universe of little Stanislovas, and his destiny till the end of his days. Hour after hour, day after day, year after year, it was fated that he should stand upon a certain square foot of floor from seven in the morning until noon, and again from half past twelve till half past five, making never a motion and thinking never a thought, save for the setting of lard cans (Sinclair 1985, 88-89).

Stanislovas, who is sixteen years old, is relegated to a mechanical existence, controlled by his machine, and since the machine cannot function without the human worker, the boy forges part of its identity. The phrases "was decided" and "it was fated" emphasise his lack of choice in a world that, with a hint of predestination, has determined what he should do and where he should do it and for how long. Just as eerie is the phrase "making never a motion and thinking never a thought", which depicts Stanislovas as a non-thinking entity incapable of actions requiring critical thinking. The teen's treatment reflects the connotation of the popular phrase "the swing of things", as Marcuse explains:

The phrase admirably expresses the change in mechanised enslavement: things swing rather than oppress, and they swing the human instrument—not only its body but also its mind and even its soul (1991, 26).

In other words, the manual worker is lulled into a rhythmic stupor of mechanised labour in a way that constitutes him as a detachable, expendable piece of the hardware. Mishra notes a similar line of thinking in Balibar's observations of industrial technology:

[...] it is the labour process entailed by machine production which finally establishes the dominion of capital over labour. It does this in two ways: first, by divorcing the labourer from ownership of the means of production [...]; and secondly, by making the worker an appendage of the machine (capital) (1979, 147).

The process describes a wresting away of agency from the human worker, as technology in the form of machinery replaces the labourer's inherent value. The human is forced into a new existence, an almost cyborg-like becoming that raises questions of agency and identity. In total, the industrial worker is characterised as part machine, forced into his or her situation with few options other than starvation and homelessness. As seen in the novels *Player Piano* and *The Jungle*, characters in dystopian fiction may resist the proliferation of industrialized machinery as well as the weakening of the characters' conscious agency. In doing so, the characters in these novels are simultaneously resisting against the technology of power.

Despite the benefits of machinery, "The Machine Stops" and *Player Piano* both emphasise the fallibility, or breakability, of robotic labour. This is evidenced in the latter with various instances of mechanical malfunction, including the supercomputer's failure to answer the Shah, and the overheating of a machine, Checker Charley, when it loses a checkers game. In "The Machine Stops" citizens have become totally dependent on the Machine—so much so, in fact, that that overreliance leads to their deaths at the end.

While corporations gain profit and control through robotic labour, the state maintains control of citizens via an ever-expanding technological panopticon. One would think this automatically equals more control over its citizens than in the past, where control was imposed by humans, without electronic support. The wrench in this thinking happens to be the technology itself. If authorities of the state know how to use the latest technological equipment, there is also the potential for suppressed citizens to learn how to use it and employ it in their resistance. The pushback, therefore, of appropriated technology that counters the state may decrease the state's technological advantage. The key for the resistance lies in appropriating the technology and weaponising it.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the greatest form of surveillance emanates from the people themselves. Not only do children spy on anyone who seems suspicious, but by forcing citizens to guard against thought crime and participate in the Two Minutes Hate, the panopticon system seems to have achieved its intended effect of internalization. Beauchamp contends that the government of Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has deliberately stifled technological progress. While I accept the premise that governments keep secret specific kinds of technology, particularly those that can be suited to warfare, I'm not sure I agree with the characterization of

Oceania as a "technologically primitive society" (1986, 55). Here, it is important to note the future timeline of Orwell's predictions: his visionary world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* lay just thirty-five years into the future of his own time, a narrowly projected time frame compared to the centuries-long gap that occurs in many dystopian novels such as Zamiatin's *We* and Huxley's *Brave New World*. Nevertheless, advanced technology is evidenced by the television in Winston's home that functions not only as such, but also as a means of surveillance.

A more indirect example of surveillance occurs in *Fahrenheit 451*. The hound, the robotic version of a dog, has replaced the use of actual canines in fire departments, and it functions as both a tracker of delinquent citizens and an assassin of the state's enemies. Because of its ability to track any scent and locate subversive citizens, the hound contributes to the government's panoptic goals through intimidation and terror. And worse, it is equipped with a lethal weapon: "a four-inch hollow steel needle plunged down from the proboscis of the Hound to inject massive jolts of morphine or procaine" (Bradbury 2008, 11). Even though citizens in the novel are not surveilled on a constant basis, the hound's existence, especially in the hands of firemen whose purpose is to find and burn books, dissuades most citizens from possessing books. The horror aroused by the hound lies not only in its threatening role, but in the fact that it possesses the ability to kill, and does so when required.

Dystopian Fiction Speaks Back to Technological Advancement

Technological advances often accompany the visions of utopian writers. In other words, utopian/dystopian fiction and the real-life applications of technology tend to speak back to each other. Kieran Tranter deems science fiction "the West's storehouse of technological futures" (2018, 33). Authors of dystopian fiction propose new uses of technology through either a simple projection or a more detailed blueprint. Heidegger states, "It is as revealing, and not as manufacturing, that techne is a bringing-forth" (1977, 13). I suggest that constructing the concept—or in science fiction terms, the novum—is the first step toward such a revelation. Even though Orwell argued against utopian ideas, he believed that H.G. Wells's visions of the future promoted actual changes in the real world (Horan 2013, 66).

A prime example of dystopian fiction's impact on real-world technology is found in the 1997 historic cloning of the Scottish sheep named Dolly. Tranter views the event as a pivotal moment in the history of genetic cloning. Anticipating this possibility, novels such as *Brave New World* and *The Boys from Brazil* (Levin 1976) forecast the real potential of cloning—particularly in humans—and raised questions about the ethical considerations involved. At the time of Dolly, references to *Brave New World* "circulated in newspaper reports, governmental reports, and law reviews" (Tranter 2018, 25). For Tranter, the novel functioned as "one of the primary discourses that mediated the reception of Dolly within the politico-legal networks of the West" (2018, 25). The created elements within the fictional narratives, as well as the reception of such elements, initiated the legal process to protect humankind from the feared adverse effects of cloning. In other words, fiction provides the "images, tropes, and narratives through which the implications of a technology can be projected into the future" (Tranter 2018, 27). In the case of genetic cloning, the connoted implications are negative (as a result of the nightmarish depiction within the fiction), causing fear and anxiety among the public. Tranter observes:

In these events, science fiction is the myth-source for technological futures. It stores up, examines, and projects anxieties and also hopes for technological-driven change. In this, science fiction is the airbag for future shock. It provides the interpretative schema—the images, lexicon, and narratives—to cushion the alleged jarring disruption of the endless technological evolution (2018, 28).

By equating science fiction to myth, Tranter recognises the limitation of technological innovations that are projected through narrative. In addition to the imagined novum, authors of dystopian fiction project hypothetical uses, plots and human reactions to new technology throughout their narratives. Novels such as *Brave New World* and *The Boys from Brazil* tend to propel the Frankenstein Myth, instead of offering a more complete and complex explanation that would entail the "hope" of the equation mentioned in the passage above.

Dystopian fiction, as well as the broader fields of utopian and science fiction, have also predicted the symbiosis of humans and technology. One example of this dynamic is the novel *Feed* and Elon Musk's recent proposal to make the concept a reality. In *Feed*, which takes place in a future US, people have become so reliant upon technology that it has assumed a part of their identity; it has invaded their lives to the extent that, like cyborgs in science fiction, it functions as

a prosthetic attachment, a computerized neuro-cerebral implant that downloads news, data and shopping advertisements directly to people's brains. Recently, in March 2017, entrepreneur Elon Musk announced that his company Neuralink was developing a "neural lace" brain implant technology that will connect human brains with computers. He said that part of the rationale for this development is the threat posed to humans by artificial intelligence. Musk explained:

I think if we can effectively merge with AI by improving the neural link between the cortex and your digital extension of yourself ... then effectively, you become an AI-human symbiote (Molloy 2017).

Musk believes the implants could help stabilise the neural systems of people affected by stroke, cancer or paralysis. The technology has not yet been attempted on actual patients, but Musk estimated that human trials could be conducted by the end of 2020.

In "The Machine Stops", humanity's dependence on and acquiescence to a machine that both administers service and controls daily functions appears to envisage the contemporary world of the Twenty-first Century, where people become increasingly dependent on computerized technology such as cell phones and GPS devices. Foreseeing the future of commercial jet-propelled aircraft, Forster describes an "airship" that can transport passengers from one city on Earth to another in a matter of hours. Here the author is building upon the already devised airships and airplanes of the author's time, and furthering the dream of travel.

Dystopian fiction portrays technology's potential in the context of human will. It is this human perspective—humankind's dreams, aims, and conflicts—that fashions dystopian narratives into significant tales of warning and wisdom. This chapter has explored (theoretically and contextually) diverging views on technology and whether or not technology itself is harmful or beneficial to humankind. Because of its utilization by the state to control its citizens, technology figures prominently as a means of resistance for subjects in dystopian fiction. In novels such as *The Iron Heel* and *Player Piano*, characters suggest that instead of eliminating corporate and state-owned machinery, protesting citizens should appropriate it. This chapter noted the irreversible nature of technological advancements and observed the contrast between technology and the pastoral in dystopian works. It also addressed the technological novums in dystopian fiction that affect the advancements and innovations of the real world. Still, because of

constant technological innovation, areas for further research regarding this area within dystopian fiction are endless. Such possibilities might include bodily implants for various uses, including identification, and the ever-expanding area of cyber systems and their applications.

Conclusion

This work set out to answer the fundamental question, "How does resistance function in dystopian fiction?" as well as address specific applications of resistance in the context of memory and technology. A major goal was to articulate these topics via a creative work in a way that would illustrate their complexity. The novel which is part of this thesis explores the motives that characters in dystopian fiction have for resisting dystopian systems, and the methods they use to do so. This resistance involves the protagonist's struggle to develop life-affirming memories of his dead sister and find connection in his present society. It also addresses the repercussions of equipping society with advanced technology that includes androids. In the preceding chapters of this exegesis, I discussed the ways in which resistance serves as the impetus for the counter narratives in dystopian fiction, and also as the driving force of conflict and conflict resolution within dystopian fiction. By requiring an active protagonist, resistance emphasises a character's agency, his or her ability to act, despite the restraints of authoritarian control. Without resistance, the state maintains a one-dimensional social structure that both manufactures and contains its own contradictory elements.

With the rise of critical dystopian fiction in the 1980s, the topic of resistance has received more attention. The targets of many dystopian novels are totalitarian governments and collectivist systems that currently exist in the real world. The goal of contributing to the downfall of such regimes is an ambitious one on the part of the authors, yet in order to achieve any real, lasting change either in the world of the text or in that of the reader, resistance must be invoked, and this begins at the individual level.

In the first chapter I proposed a connection between the protagonist in dystopian novels and the contemporaneous readers of such works. The "representative of a discontented social class" (quoted in Moylan 2000, 155), as stipulated in Darko Suvin's definition of dystopian fiction, is intended to appeal to what Tom Moylan terms an "intentionally oppositional readerly stance" (2000, 155). I illustrated this relationship between reader and dystopian subject with Foucault's depiction of real-world public executions in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. The brutality of the state, in the context of the inequality between the ruling class and its subjects, drove citizens to protest the excessive violence of the executions. It is in this light that authors of dystopian fiction wish to illuminate social and ethical disparities for their readers. Dystopian

novels then serve as meaningful comparative references to a diversity of powerful present-day states.

I emphasised the drastic contrast between the present world and the imagined world of the dystopia. This vast disparity between the two worlds is necessary to warn readers of what awaits—a more austere, amplified version of the abuses and contradictions within their current society/government—if they fail to take action to address current grievances.

I offered another key connection between resistance and hope. Without attempting to recover his or her own thoughts, language or memories, a protagonist finds it difficult to maintain hope. Even in the event of failure—such as that of Winston and Julia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—citizens who push back against oppressive controls begin to contemplate lives that are free from their current restraints. Moylan refers to this potential for improved conditions or protagonist success as "utopian engagement" (2000, 166). This form of engagement requires an attitude of "militant pessimism", a view of the situation that sees it as still being in a state of flux. Such alternative pathways are commonly seen in the critical dystopias that emerged in the 1980s after *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is largely credited for their arrival. The use of language, such as writing in one's diary, can assist subjects in recalling memories, although language is not the only means of retrieving memory.

By warning readers of the potential emergence of actual dystopias, the dystopian novel urges them to oppose authoritarian impulses in their current societies. The didactic nature of this narrative, working jointly with the story's counter-narrative, functions as a refutation of the ideology and behaviours of the state, society and commodity culture.

The dystopian state not only alters history to its advantage, but also frames its existence in the context of a heroic narrative that it believes will appeal to citizens. By shaping the narrative, the state conceals facts and crimes that portray it in a poor light. Nevertheless, Sargent's application of political thought reveals the potential for the modification of political systems, even those which may be considered dystopian. This potential, combined with the element of human error, makes the collapse or restructuring of dystopian systems possible.

The second chapter responded to the questions "What triggers memory in protagonists of dystopian fiction?" and "How is memory useful to such characters?" Memory has the potential to

be a weapon of resistance in a dystopian society, and as a medium which can provide access to historic events and truths, it possesses the capability to delegitimize the government and ruling class. Because of this, the state attempts to suppress memory and re-write history in a way that supports the regime's founding.

Moylan refers to memory being "suppressed" in dystopian subjects, while Baccolini observes that it is "erased". The use of different terms when discussing the subject of memory can be attributed to its complexity and ability to reside undetected in the unconscious, and I suggested that the memories of citizens in a dystopian society are not literally erased, but can be retrieved through methods such as writing, or through experiencing specific sensory stimuli. Therefore, I concluded that memory is not lost but is effectively lying dormant, with the potential to be reactivated.

Since old memories are usually of life in a pre-dystopian society, the character who recovers them must decide how to interpret them and also how to respond. After reactivating a memory, the protagonist assigns it new meaning applicable to the present conditions, offering what Baccolini refers to as "alternative ways of knowing and living in the world" (Moylan 2000, 149-150). In this manner, a memory can be used as a weapon to deconstruct the authoritarian state's official narrative. This "novelty" or adaptability of memory, which involves the type of memory Ernst Bloch calls *recognition*, highlights the contrast between past and present.

I observed that protagonists in the genre often retrieve memories while subjected to specific sensory stimuli. For Winston, memories are triggered by the smell of perfume, the taste of chocolate, and holding his father's hand. For Offred, a particularly strong stimulus is the smell of soap while she lies in warm bath water. In both novels, the memories that are suppressed, and then later recalled, are often those of intimate relationships, highlighting the fact that in dystopia the state demands loyalty above one's family.

Also discussed was the value of the past in relation to memory. Nietzsche insists that for a person to overcome his or her past, it is essential that she be able to forget the past, but not completely. Instead, the person should "assimilate and appropriate" specific contents of the past that can be useful in the present. Additionally, Nietzsche's view of history allows alternative interpretations of the past, an approach which provides avenues of hope to individuals in

dystopian fiction. While possessing the fortitude to move on is important, Herbert Marcuse warns against the danger of forgetting the past, maintaining that remembering the past is vital to reconciliation with the present as well as "future liberation" (quoted in Baccolini 2003, 57).

I observed that dystopian fiction makes use of authentic products to reveal the scarcity of such goods, at least for the middle and lower classes, and to provide a contrast to a time in the past when these products were plentiful. For example, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the taste of real chocolate spurs a memory for Winston of a time when, as a child, he stole chocolate from his infant sister.

Memory also figures significantly in *The Giver*, the Lois Lowry novel in which the character of the title's name is entrusted with possessing individual and collective memories of past societies. Through the process of transference, the memories become those of the Receiver, Jonas, and are weaponised as a source of resistance. By appropriating personal memories such as those of love and war, Jonas is able to identify the dystopian aspects of the unnamed community in which he lives.

The third chapter addressed technology and its potential for abuse by the state, and for use by dispossessed citizens as a means of resistance. Though technology doesn't always figure significantly in dystopian fiction, it frequently functions as the ruling class's powerful, lethal tool for suppressing citizens and opposition.

Despite technology's benefits, it cannot overcome the exploitative nature of capitalism, corruption or totalitarian states. Because of this, dystopian writers typically reject the notion of technology as a saviour in future societies. Instead of using technology to benefit entire classes of people, authoritarian governments often withhold its advantages from citizens and, instead, use it to suppress them.

A key aspect of technology that was investigated was its potential to usurp its human creators. E.M. Forster's short story "The Machine Stops" exemplifies the dilemma posed by humankind's reliance on technology. The deification of the Machine by the story's citizens reflects the power given to humanity's own creations. I observed that the prospect of AI's control over its creator remains speculative, but that the objective power of technology as advocated by Baudrillard likely exists in present day society; more threatening to humanity than AI's

anthropomorphic potential is humanity's acquiescence to technological control such as that of the Machine. While the Machine in the narrative generally functions to improve the lives of citizens, machinery in Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* is portrayed in a starker manner. In the latter work, the harmony of the pastoral is contrasted with an imprisoning industrial world that crushes individual human agency. It was also noted that closure can be achieved in a present-day setting like that in *The Jungle* without resorting to a future time or place.

As Heidegger observes, technology serves as a catalyst for the satisfaction of humankind's desires, and together, technology and humankind inhabit the same space. While technophobes fear technology's crushing of human agency, optimists such as Donna Haraway envision future technological advancements as being favourably coexistent with their human creators. Technology's advance is especially pertinent to weapons proliferation, where even with the reduction of nuclear and other destructive weapons, the knowledge (i.e. technological blueprint) to make them has been recorded in the scientific canon. The Machine in Forster's story dispenses material comfort, but it also appears to provide a false sense of security, and it evolves from being a source of reliance to being an object of worship. As the ending of "The Machine Stops" reveals, humanity, as well as the earth itself, are eventually prone to decay.

In Jack London's novel *The Iron Heel* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, characters propose destroying machinery as a solution to labour shortages and power imbalances. Both authors, however, appear to warn against such measures, which would ultimately weaken the prospects of resistance. Vonnegut cautions that anti-technology attitudes harm society's progress, and that without human oversight, machines will malfunction or destruct. Through the arguments made by his protagonist Ernest Everhard, London suggests that instead of adopting an adversarial attitude towards state-owned machinery, the resisting forces should appropriate the advanced technology in its struggle against the state. According to Everhard, destruction of the machinery would have an atavistic effect on humanity, reversing any technological progress.

Another possible finding regards the potential for technology to create class barriers. The machine specialists in *Player Piano* secure high-paying jobs while the other citizens are relegated to government-supported manual labour and live in a less affluent part of town. In *The Iron Heel*, the dilemma appears to be less a case of machine-related labour skills, and more one

of ownership. The corporations and elitists who own the machines have carved out their own ruling class apart from the non-owners.

In many dystopian novels, the state often uses technology to surveil its citizens. In novels such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, the concept of panopticon, in which citizens modify their own behaviour due to a fear that they are being surveilled, tends to be more prevalent. Finally, dystopian fiction also speaks back to the technological advances of the era, oftentimes predicting the advances or offering modifications to those that already exist.

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The Department of Retribution

by Darren Dillman

1

The worst type of pain doesn't emanate from physical suffering—not disease, hunger, injury, or even torture—but from the interminable recognition that someone you love is suffering, or has been killed.

I'm sitting behind the wheel of a 2032 Camaro, a sixty-year-old red GT that used to be my dad's until he transferred ownership to my name, Emile Winkler. I'm parked along the curb three houses opposite Oscar Gray's three bedroom stucco, in a quiet part of Morson, the L.A. suburb where we used to live, as I've done every Friday for the past two months. It's 9:45 p.m., still too early. Oscar doesn't get home from the meth resort until ten. I know, because I've followed him.

Until I began to drive, Dad kept the Camaro, which had belonged to my grandfather, in a garage. Not as an antique, but as junk. No harrier jets. No flight mode. It doesn't even have hover. Its black vinyl coarse but unbroken, with an ancient dusty smell. Not that I care, as long as it does the job.

At five minutes past, Oscar pulls into his driveway, easing along. At a much slower speed, I'm sure, than when he ran over my little sister Illy in a Dodge Quantum pickup, fracturing her sternum and skull. And much slower than the speed in which he fled the scene. Before that, he had broken the law almost a dozen times. Eleven, to be exact. At least, that's the number he was convicted of. Who knows what else he did, or was planning to do. A pharmaceutical disposal specialist, he had been dumping meth by-products into the estuary at Harden's Cove near Long Beach. For months, fish, dolphins, and even a few whales washed ashore while most authorities attributed it to climate change. When he was finally caught, Oscar lawyered up and served a year in jail. For killing my sister Illy, instead of the mandatory twenty years for DUI manslaughter, he was sentenced to five years in an Underground penitentiary and was released early for good behaviour.

His pickup's wheels gleam with new mags, and the jet propulsion in back looks like it's hardly been used, its exhaust pipes unmarked. The garage door slides open, the pickup scoots inside, and the door closes.

Tomorrow, on May 5, 2092, I'll turn eighteen, the minimum age required to apply for a murder permit. I need to return the paperwork to the Department of Retribution, where I'll make the formal application in front of a panel of four community judges. When the permit gets approved, I'm going to put the old Camaro to good use: I'm going to murder Oscar Gray.

I'm lying on my bed in my dad's two-story home in Corrales, one of the newest L.A. suburbs. A wide desk sits in front of the window, and a new carpet smell lingers. A bikinied hologram of Volcana, the lead guitarist of the alt-alt metal band The Corps, is suspended three feet above me, her dark-brown hair tied into five braids, her eyes a solemn blue. A small H-tatt of a derringer gloats above one breast, below her collarbone, while another, a prickly pear cactus, snakes around her hip. But no matter how much I stare at Volcana's hologram, or try to imagine her on top of me, I still can't force her to appear in my dreams. No, those are reserved for Illy, our old house on Taylor Street, and Mom—the way she used to be, before she had the SDI, or serotonin-dopamine injector implant.

In my seventeen-year-old adolescent brain, the voices of two women are clamouring for attention. One is that of Cara, my mom's platonic partner, but who functions more or less as my true mom—or as my biological mom used to be. As a social worker off the hill, Cara literally saved Mom from committing euthanization. The other is that of Ms. Kinerson, my former sophomore English teacher who, like all the other teachers off the hill, has been replaced by an android in the classroom.

Ms. Kinerson was thin, single and in her thirties, with freckles and strawberry blonde hair. Most of the time she was laid back, someone with a sense of humour, and she took an interest in us and our wellbeing. But there were other times that, while discussing certain topics, she seemed angry. Not angry at us, really, but angry about the elections, the changing of political parties, and the fact that too many people, including us students, didn't seem to notice the changes or care enough to protest in the streets and demand change. She was a stickler for making us do our reading. Up until then, my English classes had been a joke, run by old Sunday school types who made us recite Shakespeare, learn vocabulary words no one used in the real world, and understand the difference between "lie" and "lay."

But for Ms. Kinerson literature was religious. It had power. I remember once when I slacked off and didn't finish reading the first half of Carson McCullers' novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. On the quiz, I missed four or five questions, which would have constituted an F. But Ms. Kinerson didn't even put a grade, she just wrote "Bad!!!" at the top of the paper in red ink. It

made me laugh at first, but the more I thought about it, it challenged me, and I had this deep sense of dread, this desire to prove I could not only read the book but could analyse it using the literary terms Ms. Kinerson had lectured on. That day, I read the novel during lunch and all night to catch up, and I aced the next quiz two days later.

I reach out with my hand to summon the H-console, turn off Volcana's hologram, and then call up Dr. Glasgow, the V-shrink program Dad bought me for Christmas four years ago. His holographic image appears, hands raised and folded behind his head, sitting in a brown leather chair in his office. He's in his late thirties, with a balding head and brown hair, and he likes to wear long-sleeve button-up shirts with the cuffs rolled up and the shirt untucked.

"Hey Doc", I say.

"Hey there, Mister Winkler", he says. "How's it hangin'?"

"It's hanging", I say.

"At least it's still attached, right?" he says. "Not that there would be anything wrong with having it unattached. Just sayin'."

"Doc", I say with irritation.

"Don't shoot the shrink", he says. He grabs a manila folder from his desk, opens it, and looks through the paperwork. "Say, were you staring at Volcana again before you turned me on?" He bursts into laughter, slapping his knee. "Get it?"

"Yeah", I say. "It's not that funny."

"Well ex-squeeze me", he says, his voice rising a pitch. He slips on some squared tin-rimmed granny glasses, sits up straight, furrows his brow. "So, what's going on in Emile Winkler's head?"

I give a short laugh. "Take those off."

"What? These?" he asks. He removes the glasses, holds them in his hands. "A dear old patient gave them to me as a—"

"You don't have any other patients. You never have. I'm the only one. Brass tacks." I always say this to him when I'm serious.

"Talk about patient control", he says. Then he gives in, tossing the glasses to the side, where they hit the wall and crash to the floor. "Okay. Nothin' but the brass. How's school? What's it like staring down the barrel of graduation?"

"Some barrel", I say apathetically.

"No snafus or anything?" he asks, glancing up from the papers in the folder.

"No snafus", I say.

"And then what?" he asks. I suck in the side of my cheek, but say nothing. "We need a plan. You can alter it, add to it, or even wad it up and create a new one. But the key is to have one."

"Because it gets me thinking", I say. Like amelioration—the latest shrink fad designed to recalibrate the signals in one's brain—he's talked about plans before, just not as often.

"That's right", he says. "And for most people, thinking is good."

"Yeah, well, whatever program created you needs to rethink itself."

"The truth is, Emile, we all need to rethink ourselves", he says.

"Yeah", I say.

There's a pause. Acutely aware of this, Dr. G smacks his lips. "Say, you haven't been thinking of ol' what's-his-name. Have you?"

If Dr. G could detect a rise in blood pressure, he would know that mine is elevating. It's a slight but sharp simmering, the species of anger that seeks vengeance, blood for blood. Because Oscar Gray is a free man, free to commit crimes. Free to do to someone else's child what he did to Illy.

"What if I have?" I ask.

Mr. G gazes at me as though he's measuring my psychopathy. Then he starts to ask about our next appointment, but I close him out.

Before my alarm goes off, the smell of bacon and eggs lures me out of bed. I take a five-minute shower, get dressed, and pad into the dining room, where Dad and Eneca, his android partner of the last year and a half, are seated. Even though she has model features—narrow nose, wide cheekbones, and emerald eyes—Eneca's not without her defects.

I help myself to fried eggs and crispy brown bacon: Dad's cooking. Eneca is taking cute little bites of it. I shove one of the smaller, darker pieces into my mouth and begin chewing. Then I pause.

"Dad, Eneca smells again", I say.

"Don't say that in front of her", Dad says, without looking up from his plate.

"Why not?" I ask. "It's not like it hurts her feelings."

"Manners", Dad says. He pats Eneca on the back of her hand. "Sorry, dear."

"No problem", Eneca says, staring at me.

She's an A7, the newest model from Simulan, which controls a seat on the Corporate Council. Dad purchased her—or in politically correct language, "partnered" with her—after a year of dating and five more years of celibacy. He and Mom had split up a year after Illy died. The A7's cost as much as a new harrier but have a lifetime warranty. For the life of the owner ("acquiring partner") that is. They eat and digest food—the second android to do this—even though a chunk of their energy comes from a self-sustaining lithium composite battery. And to make them appear even more human, they have an option for emitting subtle bodily odours. Usually I wouldn't mind. It's just Eneca is producing three or four times the amount she should be.

"You look like you have something to say", I say.

"I'm composed of over twenty-four living tissues and—" she says.

"Geez!" I say, letting my head droop. "Here we go with the twenty-four living tissues." For a second I detect android anger, which lacks the razor's edge of human anger but is still palpable. Reeling from the odour, I shed some of my sarcasm. "Sorry, Eneca. Would you like a hug?"

"Emile", Dad says, glaring at me with his hardened blue eyes.

I sigh, then nod. I can't piss Dad off, not after what he's been through. What *we*'ve been through. The last thing he needs is more attitude from me. Besides, if he gets angry enough, he might take the Camaro away, and there goes Oscar Gray, getting away like before.

I pick up the piece of bacon, take a bite.

"Good bacon, Dad", I say.

"Thanks", he says. "I'll take Eneca to the doctor, see what's going on."

"Sorry, Eneca", I say, this time sincerely. "I guess this is bunghole day or something."

"Bunghole day?" she asks.

"I was being a jerk", I say.

Eneca grins. "It's okay. Sticks and stones, right?"

"You got it", I say, laughing. That's the A7's best quality: their subtle sense of humour.

"By the way, Happy Birthday", Eneca says.

The comment reminds me of last year, during the spring, when I showed Eneca a computer spying program I was developing. I had taken a few semesters of computer programming and was really getting into writing code. Eneca complimented me on its design as well as the tight Java code and asked what I would use it for. I couldn't tell her the truth, that I had imagined using the program to eavesdrop on the government, to record its thinking or designs that left average people out in the cold, and then share it with anyone who would listen. After all, why had the government legalised meth and murder? And what was with all the euthanization ads? A few days later, I unleashed the program on the senior principal, Mrs. Elliot-Bunsen, during homeroom, when everyone was watching the lame student newscast. The newsfeed cut to a shot

of Mrs. Elliot-Bunsen, the senior principal sitting in her office, dipping a chocolate-covered Twinky into a mug of coffee, opening her mouth wide and chewing big, pronounced bites. My classmates in homeroom flopped about, shrieking with laughter. The program self-destructed after one minute, and they never found out who was behind it.

"Yeah", Dad says. "Happy Birthday."

"Thanks", I say.

The drive to Dick Cheney High takes fifteen minutes. Depending on the traffic, cars with hover can make it in five minutes. The air reeks of the black exhaust the oil tankers and industrial trucks ahead are spewing into my vent. Along the way, hologram ads shoot from the billboards:

The Corporate Defence Force: After D.C., We Kept You Safe

Support Your Local NRA Militia

Ask Your Doctor about the New Orion Cancer Vaccine

End the Loneliness: the New A7 from Simulan

When a recruit joins the CDF, his family gains access to the Corporate Zones, or what people call *on the hill*: towns and small cities that occupy the hills, mountains, coastlines—the richest and most scenic parts of America. Congress set this in motion with the Privatisation Act of 2058.

When Illy died, Pfizer gave us the option of moving onto the hill, but Dad refused. Mom, however, accepted the offer and was more or less adopted by Cara, who functions as a capable companion. Those of us who are off the hill basically fend for ourselves, through self protection and private police and fire responders. The promptness and quality of the latter two depend on one's quality of insurance. Increasing numbers of off the hill citizens don't have either. Since he works for Pfizer as a quality control analyst—one of the highest paying jobs off the hill—Dad carries the platinum of insurances, Cloudcroft, which allows us access to Joust Security, the best

private cops money can buy, at least in our neck of the woods. Which isn't to say that the government is totally hands off outside of the CZ's. In case of a national security threat, swat teams and the National Guard are sent in for *sweeps*.

A mile from Dick Cheney High, a patrolman flashes his lights behind me. He's hovering in his patrol car despite not being in the hover lane. Patrolmen aren't policemen, but rather, are relegated to traffic safety.

I pull over to the curb. As the patrolman strolls toward the Camaro, I roll down the window, thinking he might be an android. His shades obscure his eye colour. But then his stooped posture, the way he bends awkwardly, minus sharp angles, to look inside the car, tells me he's human.

"How's it goin'?" he asks in a friendly voice.

"It was going a lot better before I got stopped", I say, as he scans the microchip license in my wrist.

The patrolman laughs. "I imagine it was." The nametag above his shirt pocket says *Officer Jones*.

"Is Jones your real name?" I ask.

"Afraid so. The corporations might be taking away other people's names. Not mine." His eyebrows raise up as he peruses the license info on his H-phone. "Looks like it's your birthday. The big eighteen."

"Yeah", I say.

"You don't seem too excited", he says. "Got any plans?"

I shrug. "Drink a Nostalgic Coke, listen to the Corps."

"The Corps are banned, you know", he says.

"All the more appealing", I say.

Officer Jones grins, looks down at the street, then back to me. "You can join the CDF. Might be good for someone like you. The kind of money they're dishing out now, I wish I was young enough to sign up. You could move your folks onto the hill."

"And have them thrown back off the moment I'm discharged", I say.

"Come on", he says. "Uncle Sam wouldn't do that."

Uncle Sam, I think, will do anything to stay in power. For example, outlawing The Corps for ostensible threats to the government, which is really coded language for criticism of corporate power. Something about my expression slows Officer Jones down a second.

"Yeah, well, we can't have everything we want, can we?" he says. "Have a nice day." He starts strolling back to his car.

My H-phone vibrates, and there's an H-text from the Corrales Transportation and Safety Department informing me of a \$500 fine for a bad brake light.

"Five hundred bucks?!" I say.

"I took three hundred off on account of your birthday", Officer Jones says, looking back. "Look, I'm just doing my job. A cog in the ol' wheel."

"But", I say, looking from the phone to Officer Jones, "can't one cog help the other cogs out?"

As Officer Jones pulls away, I let loose with a few angry words. Then, as usual, I feel a patter of shame for what Cara refers to as my "abrasive attitude."

Sometimes I hate this country, I think.

Sometimes? an inner voice asks.

Okay, more than sometimes, I admit.

As I drive the last leg to school, another billboard pops up.

SOW the Seeds of Justice: End Corporate Tyranny

SOW, an underground group that opposes the federal government and wants to abolish the Corporate Council, the government's fourth branch. Who else could have posted the sign? But then some people say SOW is a myth, that there is no such group. If the group wanted to remain underground, why display a message with its name? Could someone else—a single person, some other group—have posted it? From what I hear, SOW also wants to criminalise all meth and murder, which I would be okay with, except that I *really* need justice for my sister, which in this case requires murder.

At Dick Cheney High, the seniors occupy the north campus, separated from the juniors and sophomores on the east and west campuses. The android teachers tell us the arrangement is designed to prevent us from "compromising our position of responsibility." Which means they don't want us beating the shit out of the underclassmen.

As of two years ago, human teachers are no longer allowed in classrooms, another of the government's brilliant decisions. Too much disparity in teaching quality, they said, although Cara says the government is afraid of the teachers' bias, that the instructors could turn the students against state and federal authority. One-fourth of the teachers are A7's, like Eneca. They can laugh, yell, pound their fists, pick their noses, scratch their heads, sneeze, cough, curse, cry, burp, and even fart. But since they're androids, it takes away from the authenticity of the behaviour.

Ms. Carter, my world literature teacher, and an A7, is standing behind a brass-coloured titanium lectern, reading from *Richard III*. Her green cotton skirt matches the oval gems on her earrings. There are thirty students in class. I often look at their faces, trying to guess, from their expressions, gestures, and postures, the roots of their own demons, or if there are any to begin with. My grandmother used to say that the world was either devouring you, or excreting you. Some of my classmates have less to deal with than others. I consider the usual pain: the divorce, the breakup/broken heart, loneliness, bullying, sexual identity, calculus, rejection, a parent's lost job or unemployment, failing to get accepted by the right college, falling a year behind in school, moving to a new town. Serious issues. Damaging. Still, others motor about, laughing, cracking

jokes, making out with their girlfriends or boyfriends, caught up in the latest H-vid, song, or TV show, rollicking about the party where everyone got drunk, wasted, or both, and the virgin who got laid, with few stumbling blocks in their paths. Progressing, for the most part, according to plan. A bitter jealousy sometimes springs up within me, as it has for many years, and I wish I could trade places with them, leaping from one stepping stone to another. But then I'd have to abandon the opportunity before me, the chance to make things right: retribution in its finest, purest form.

As Ms. Carter reads, I think back to Ms. Kinerson railing against the government in one of her firebrand lectures, and I begin wishing the actual Richard III, with his gangly hunched back, were here. I conjure up an image of the ruthless king, a gnarly beast on all fours, wearing a spiked black collar with attached leash, which extends to my hand. I would take the beast king with me when I visit Mom and Cara, set him loose on the hill, and watch him sink his yellowing white jaws into the lobbyists, CEO's, and bloodsucking elites.

"Emile, are you paying attention?" Ms. Carter asks.

"I am now", I say.

A few students chuckle. Ms. Carter grins and continues the discussion.

I must have nodded off, or started to. Sometimes the A7's will stop and scowl at a student who is talking, or drop a mammoth textbook onto the desk of a sleeping student. The A6's might clear their throats at such behaviour, whereas the A5's, the oldest models allowed to teach, will ignore it altogether. What's worse is to get caught by a BM (behavioural monitor), or what the students call a *Dickbot*, a three-foot tall motorized robot that patrols randomly selected classrooms searching for misbehaving students. Dickbots use facial recognition to record students' names and report them to administration, and they are commonly known to emit a light shock, usually into a student's arm, which is legal under the Public Education Act of 2075.

As Ms. Carter prattles on, she looks back and forth from the class to the heap of text spread before her. I notice the perfect contour of her legs, a shade darker than Eneca's. Her skirt stops at her knees. Once in a while, usually during a discussion or while a student is reading, she'll sit on

the edge of her desk, and if she's wearing a skirt it will pull up, just a few inches higher, and the guys in the room will stare at the lower part of her thighs, even though she's an android.

I sometimes wonder where she lives, and whether or not, like Eneca, she lives with a man. The android teachers never mention details of their personal lives. Dad says most of them are owned by the school, but that wouldn't necessarily prevent them from living with someone.

Ms. Carter catches me looking at her legs, and pauses her reading.

Now it's my turn to smile.

During lunch period I take the five minute drive to Burger King. A Sustainable Life Association poster on the window says *Android Friendly and Efficient 100% Guaranteed*. Inside, I stand in line, fighting back my hunger as the smell of fries drifts from the kitchen. A crew of androids serve customers, punching in orders and moving swiftly, but carefully, between the fountain drink dispenser, food assembly line, and counter. A worker dumps an aluminium tray of frozen fries into the deep fryer, unleashing a sizzling storm.

I order a double cheeseburger: mustard only, no ketchup. The androids have never screwed up my order, but five years ago, when people worked the counters and kitchens, my burger would have ketchup fifty percent of the time, despite my mustard-only request.

In support of the case for androids (and therefore the corporations), the media has bombarded us with TV and newspaper reports claiming androids are more precise, efficient, and cleaner than people in performing virtually every job. They particularly point to restaurant and fast food service jobs, where cleanliness has always been an issue. No more spitting into the soup or sneezing into the sauce. Androids don't even scratch themselves, which is a relief to know.

While I'm waiting, a couple of Dick Cheney High jocks in navy blue and gold letter jackets slyly squirt a blotch of mustard onto an A4's forehead. The android, whose name is Kevin, knows the mustard is there. He can *feel* it. He just doesn't have the capacity to realize its social

significance. A handful of students are laughing while one or two are throwing the jocks looks of disapproval.

My burger, fries, and drink are served in exactly one minute. I carry the tray to a booth with some shade and unwrap the burger's packaging to confirm that there's no ketchup, just a healthy splat of yellow mustard, along with pickles and cheese. I take a bite and think, Thank God for androids. And for a second I can almost understand Dad's attachment to Eneca. It's not about control, at least not entirely. Some people program their androids to argue with them, to not consent to everything. One of Dad's friends from work, Aaron Sparkman, does exactly that. I don't doubt Dad's need for companionship, but I think most people with android partners have sex for themselves, like in that Sharon Olds poem "Sex Without Love" that we read in Ms. Carter's class two months ago. Sex with an android amounts to glorified masturbation, except that the human person needs someone—or some *thing*—to be with him, to remind him, or give him the illusion, that he's not alone.

The burger and fries have a minimum amount of grease, the right amount of salt, and the meat patties are fried perfectly, toasted on the top and bottom, the same way every time. How can human workers compete with that?

I wolf down the food in less than five minutes. After refilling my Coke, I sit down and pull the Application for Murder permit from my backpack. At top, printed in ancient blue font, is The United States Department of Justice. There is an answer space for *time* and another for *likely method of killing*. In parentheses is a reminder that without submitting a preliminary online application, the process for a decision takes three to five business days—not exactly a long wait for bureaucrats. No problem. Last week I sent the online application with all the basics: who I want to kill, why, and when. That way, the DOR can do the leg work, including looking up Oscar Gray's background, and be prepared to give me a decision right then and there. I write down the date for next Friday. 10 p.m. Chevy Camaro.

There are five wide lines for "reason", with another parenthetical: *Please do not write more than five lines*.

I think. And keep thinking. But no words come. No words, no language, seem proper. Inside I feel hollow, despite having eaten. It's like my digestive tract is one endless expanse of tin, and

if you dropped a penny into my mouth, it would keep falling, never hitting bottom. I can't adequately explain—not on paper, not orally—what the loss of Illy meant to me and my parents. That moment when our lives pivoted, went racing downhill along a rickety cobblestone trail of brokenness. I think of Oscar Gray, flooring the gas of the pickup, leaving Illy in the middle of the street, and the old anger starts to simmer.

I slide the Application for Murder permit into the backpack and exchange it for an old sketchbook I've had since I was fourteen. The covers are light brown, the corners worn, but otherwise it's in good shape. Each page is about an inch shy, in height and width, than a sheet of standard loose leaf notebook paper.

I turn to the first page: a pencilled sketch of me holding a handgun, shooting Oscar Gray between the eyes. I fling through the other pages. Some are more gruesome than others, but I've tried to avoid blood spatter. Instead, what I strived for were the grimaces, the expressions of pain on Oscar's face, as though he hadn't imagined how unbearable it would be. In one, he is held up high in the air, his hands and feet impaled like kabobs by iron spires. Another shows a plastic bag over his head, and I'm pulling a string and cinching it like the mafia hit men in the movies, his eyes bulging, his mouth one immensely wide oval. In all, there are forty-one such sketches. I drew the last one a few months ago, and a new sketch, the final one, is burgeoning in my mind.

The students are screwing with Kevin again, this time tossing salt into his hair. Despite my not being the biggest fan of androids, my blood is beginning to seethe. I hate bullies like I hate authoritarianism. They are one and the same. As my anger reaches its threshold, I'm reminded of what Cara taught me is anger's three potential stages: repression, control, and release. *Don't bottle it up*, she has said. And *Don't antagonise your demons*. My sketches have helped me control my anger for Oscar Gray, but by drawing them I conjure up the anger itself, and it is never released. But it beats punching a wall or mirror.

I rise from my seat and stroll toward the students. One is Matt Bearden, a tall junior forward on the basketball team.

"Leave him alone", I say.

"What you gonna do?" Matt asks.

Erik Robinson, a senior basketball player, pats Matt on the arm. Erik knows me, and he remembers my fight with Stacy Forsett two years ago.

"We need to go, anyway", Erik says. "Bell's gonna ring." He nods to me. "Hey, Emile."

"Hey", I say.

They head out through the doors, sipping their drinks.

I look at my watch: I'm late. The bell will ring in two minutes.

I grab my things and hurry to the Camaro.

After school, I drive to the Corrales Department of Retribution, which lies in a two-hundred-year-old police department building about three miles from Corrales proper. The structure was remodelled three years ago, with long, vertical windows set between white cinderblock walls with sea green borders. For a few decades, the building was a museum of the old Valley jail and was a favourite of the Orange County Ghost Tour.

The DOR, as some people refer to it, began operating two years ago after the US Department of Justice announced that, because of inadequate prison space and the potential for releasing "un-rehabilitated" prisoners back into society, retribution by private citizens would be legalized on a case by case basis. Supporters of the law said it was like Stand Your Ground, only on offense. It was intended, the government claimed, to address those instances where the law failed victims of violence.

No one outside the authorities seems to know which murders are sanctioned by the DOR and which ones aren't. Not that the homicide rate wasn't already high before, but now when someone is killed violently, people are left wondering whether or not it was "legal." Early in the school year, a senior at Dick Cheney High, Stephanie Velasquez, was stabbed to death at a party. No one at Dick Cheney High knew the female attacker, and no one was ever arrested. Although the privacy laws discourage it, sometimes the more aggressive investigative journalists will report a DOR-sanctioned murder, only to retract the story the next day, and it's not uncommon for the reporter to be fired in the following month or two.

As I enter the building, guards armed with M25 automatic rifles swivel toward me. The floor is bare, with smooth gray tiles, and it smells like a hybrid of a hospital and Walmart. On the walls are replicas of the Constitution and The Bill of Rights. The shorter guard has a moustache, chews gum rapidly, and wears a black embroidered slogan *God Bless the Corporate Council* on his breast pocket. He doesn't look half as serious as the other, who I guess is the android.

"What's your business?" the tall guard says in a deep voice. He's about 6'4", with muscles to spare. His thumb minding the safety.

"I have an interview", I say, and hand him the appointment notice.

He eyes the other guard, then takes the paper and looks it over.

"Got a weapon?" he asks.

I shake my head.

He nods toward the security platform. I step up and stand inside a small white circle. A warm white light washes across my body. The shorter guard steps toward me.

"Look into my eyes", he says.

You *would* be the stiff, I think. How could I be so wrong? As I stare at his irises, his eyes take on a tiny green tint near the pupils: his lie detection sensors.

"Got anything you shouldn't?" he asks.

"No", I say.

"You up to anything illegal?" he asks.

"No."

"He tells the truth, homie", he says to the other guard. "This boy's mama taught him good."

The tall guard grins and presses a button, and a heavy door unlocks. "Take a left. Waiting Room Five."

I push the door open and step into a well-lit hallway. Above, the lights buzz. Other than that, it's quiet. A couple of doors say *Staff Only*. This used to be a jail, I think. Men used to rape other men behind these walls. Now they do it in the underground prisons. I pace myself as I walk toward the door that says just as the guard described: Waiting Room Five. I turn the silver rectangular handle and open the door.

Inside, along a white tiled floor, there are three rows of conjoined chairs, with six people seated and looking at me. Their expressions imply a mixture of shame and curiosity: shame because of their own murderous intent; curiosity about my own lethal plans. I take a seat on the back row, in the corner. There's a space between me and a fiftyish-looking skinny redneck with a witch's chin in a yellow-banded black cowboy hat. On the band are the words *I Fart When I*

Want To. NASCAR must be in town, I think. This guy would kill you for a can of Meister Brau. A gust of body odour drifts by, and I think briefly of switching seats, but while I'm stuck in the Valley of Indecision, the chin swivels toward me.

"Who you want to bump off?" he asks in a gritty voice, chuffing out an invisible cloud of snuff breath.

"You a crudder?" I ask.

"Do I look like one?" he asks.

"Yeah", I say.

The man rubs his lips together. "You ain't too good at makin' friends."

"I don't make friends with crudders", I say.

He grinds his teeth, trying to size me up. "You don't know much, do ya? A crudder's the best friend you'll ever have. That government shit's pierced your noggin. Crudders carry knives. Crudders eat babies. Crudders is boogeymen."

"I'm not too high on the government", I say.

"You don't say", he says with enthusiasm, and then belts out a wheezing smoker's laugh. "Come on now. Who you gonna pop? Teacher? Ex girlie friend?" I don't answer. He gives me a cockeyed look. "Boyfriend?"

"A methhead who killed my sister", I say.

"Ohhh", he says, nodding, looking all serious. "That'll do it. Meth will fuck you up. But Noxadol sobers you before you leave the meth joint." He puckers his lips. "I reckon that fucker has it comin'."

"Who do *you* wanna pop?" I ask.

The man straightens up his shoulders. "I wanna pop lots of folks. Most of all I wanna smoke the pansy ass CEO that fired me and my friends and put green-blooded pan faces in our place."

"What line of work are you in?" I ask.

"Construction", he says. "Used to be, anyway. Till them fuckers fucked me." He reaches for his wallet, pulls out a business card and hands it to me. "In case you need to build somethin'."

"Thanks", I say. I study the card. Sterling Baxter, Builder and Consultant. I put the card in my pocket.

"What do you think the chances are that you'll get approved?" I ask.

"Not too good", he says. "But in your case, you got the goods. Don't worry."

My last name flashes in blue across the display panel along the front wall, and I rise from my seat.

"Gotta go", I say. "Nice talking to you."

"What the fuck?" the man says, glancing at the display panel. "Jesus H. Lopez. How come you get to go? I been waitin' all fuckin' day."

In the hallway, I walk another twenty feet until I reach the last door, which is cracked open. I can't hear anything from inside. What do I do now? Should I knock?

"Come in, please", a female voice says from inside.

I push the door open, step inside, and close the door. The room is half the size of a classroom at Dick Cheney High, with gray carpet and the kind of granite walls I'd expect to find in a maximum security prison. In the corner stands a US flag on a portable pole.

At least the flag remains, I think. Unlike the extinct bald eagle, which was replaced by the Colt AR15 as the nation's symbol.

Two men and two women sit behind two adjoining tables. One of the men is the former principal at Dick Cheney High, Mr. Galen, a four-eyed fiftyish geezer with thick gray-brown hair. Centred in front of them is the kind of plush chair you might find in a hotel lobby, with soft, pleated, upholstered arm rests. One of the women gestures to the chair, so I step forward and plop down onto a wickedly hard seat that grates against the bony part of my butt.

"Mister Winkler?" the woman asks in a formal tone. Also in her fifties, she has wavy dyed brown hair, thick glasses, and the aura of a lawmaker, someone who's used to being in charge.

"Yes", I say.

"I'm Cathy Stedman, Chair of the Retribution Council", she says. "Before we get to your application, I just want to remind you that what you're requesting shouldn't be taken lightly. The four of us on this council may work for the federal government, but first and foremost we're members of this community. Part of our responsibility is to view your request in the entire context so that we can help resolve the problem at its core. If you decide to go through with this, there may be unforeseen consequences, such as long-term guilt and possible substance abuse. Do you understand?"

"I do", I say.

Ms. Stedman pauses, then holds my application in front of her. "On your application, the reason you give for wanting to kill Mister Grey is 'By killing my sister, he ended my life as well as those of my parents.'" She sets the paper back down. "You had four lines left to continue. Maybe you'd like to expound on your explanation now."

I take a deep breath. The four stalwarts of vengeance are peering into my soul. A tadpole of a pulse flitters along the side of my neck.

"Oscar Gray destroyed my family", I say.

"How so?" Ms. Stedman asks. "You and your parents seem to be thriving. You get good grades in school. Your father holds a steady job as a chemical analyst, and your mother lives in a very nice home on the hill."

"The classes at Dick Cheney High are a joke", I say. "With my grades and my dad's job, you're just seeing the surface." I look down, then back up. "When my parents lost Illy, they forgot how to love. They stopped loving each other. They stopped loving me. They stopped feeling anything for anyone else. My mom's a basket case. She had the SDI and spends all her time gardening and crocheting. I'm closer to her partner Cara than I am to her. And my dad is

coping, but that's all. His only enjoyment comes from sex, conversation, and chiropractic adjustments from his android."

"And what about you?" Mr. Galen asks, eyebrows knitted with concern. "Do you feel anything?"

"Yeah", I say after a beat. "Anger."

"At Mister Grey?" he asks.

I nod. The words constitute far more than Mr. Galen and I ever spoke to each other at Dick Cheney High.

"And your feelings for others?" he asks.

"There's Cara", I say.

"Do you still love your parents?" he asks.

I think about it, and gradually nod. "Yes, I do."

"Anyone else?" he asks.

I shake my head. "I guess I have my parents' genes."

There's a pause. The other man and woman, the quiet ones, are scribbling away in thick spiral binders. What are they, if not my shrinks? Why so many questions? Just let me kill the guy already!

"Have you received counselling or considered amelioration?" the other woman asks.

I shake my head.

"What about the counselling platform with your father's A7?" Ms. Stedman asks.

"Hell no", I say. "I'm not gonna have my head shrunk by a machine."

More waiting, more thoughtful expressions.

"We're familiar with the case of Oscar Gray", Ms. Stedman says. "He has served his time for DUI manslaughter. Although tragic, you do understand that your sister's death wasn't intentional. Witnesses in the neighbourhood testified that it was an accident."

"Were the dolphins also an accident?" I ask.

"That was a separate incident", Ms. Stedman says.

"Oscar's a methhead", I say.

"Meth is legal", Ms. Stedman says, "as long as it's used in a sanctioned resort."

"I know", I say. "And that's all Oscar Gray cares about. He lives to get high while people like my sister die."

In the brief silence that follows, I notice Mr. Galen writing in his binder.

"Can you think of any other argument that would convince us to grant you the permit?" Ms. Stedman asks.

"Maybe", I say. "I can't live with the knowledge that Oscar Gray is a free man. Even if I don't get permission, I can't guarantee that I won't kill him."

For what seems like an eternity, I hold off the stares of the four members. Mr. Galen clicks his pen. My carotid artery is going haywire, trying to break through the skin. My hip throbs, and I shift in the seat.

Ms. Stedman turns toward the others and holds a brief whispered conference.

"Mr. Winkler, would you mind stepping into the hall for a minute?" she asks. "We have a couple of issues to discuss."

"Sure", I say, and make my way into the hall, closing the door behind me.

I lean against the wall, imagining the kill as it takes place. How fast will the Camaro be going when it strikes Oscar? Will his blood splatter onto the windshield? What if I only wound him? Will I need to back up and run over him a few more times? What if someone calls the cops and I

get stopped? In the media the new law legalizing murder was touted as being a liberating action for victim's families. But the more I think about killing Oscar Gray, the more I think about Illy.

"Mr. Winkler, you may come in now", Ms. Stedman says.

I re-enter the room and sit down. From the assured look on most of the council member's faces, I know they have made a decision. Mr. Galen, however, doesn't look too thrilled; in fact, he looks defeated.

"With some reluctance, your permit has been approved by a vote of three to one", Ms. Stedman says. "According to the law, you may carry out the murder at the stated time. If more time is needed, you will be allotted one week after to complete the action. But after one week, you will need to file a request for an extension. Do you understand?"

"Yes", I say.

"Do you have any questions?" she asks.

"Yeah", I say. "How many permits do you approve?"

"We're not allowed to divulge any concrete numbers", she says. "We can only say that it differs from each municipality and district. Anything else?" I shake my head. "In that case, I should mention that clean kills are mandatory. Torture is still a crime and carries a minimum sentence of ten years in prison." Ms. Stedman pauses, then curtsies with a tight-lipped grin. "Okay, that is all."

"Thank you", I say.

On Friday night I get into the Camaro and hit the freeway. Above, jet-propelled harriers roar into the sky beneath a crescent moon. Cara and I have an agreement that I'm to visit at least once every two weeks, preferably once a week. For Mom. Sometimes I think it's so Cara can check on me. Either way, I don't mind. If nothing else, it gives me a few hours of guaranteed safety on the hill.

Before the freeway begins to ascend the first hill, I see the turnoff for Morson. I get into the right lane and take the exit. In ten minutes I pull up alongside the house, next to the curb, and leave the engine running.

A lone spear of a pine tree stands in the middle of the front yard, in place of our old mature willow. The living room light is on, as is the light in Illy's old bedroom. The house has been repainted, with the same white base, but with light green, instead of orange red, over the window shutters and trim.

As the car idles, I turn away, staring at the steering wheel. Thinking. Two or three times a year, I drive by the house. Why? There is no *why* anymore. There's no way in hell I would tell Cara. I know what she would say: *Why are you torturing yourself? It's like picking at an old wound.* And I would say I like picking at old wounds, and she would give me this motherly look, one combined with empathy and frustration, that says I'm being difficult again.

The lawn looks well-trimmed. I roll the window down with the power windows button, and the aroma of summer pollen and ripe Bermuda grass floods inside the car. A shadow flickers from inside Illy's old room, for a second looming monstrous, then fading sharply away.

Illy used to summon me to her room to play with the animals in her *zoo*. I would be in the living room watching TV, or in the dining room doing homework, and she would try to sneak up on me, holding her hands like claws, pretending to be a chipmunk, raccoon, mountain lion, or bear. I always saw her coming, but pretended not to. And when she reared up with her straight blonde hair and gave her best imitation of a roar, I flinched with my best frightened pose as she attacked me. She would giggle and then her blue eyes would turn wistful and she would invite me to her zoo.

In her room the animals were grouped with various household amenities. Animals from the ocean were spread out on her bed while a laundry basket held the reptiles and the rest occupied an ottoman she'd dragged from the living room. She would immediately head to Gabby, a small midnight blue hammerhead shark, lying on her pillow. Even though Gabby was smaller than some of the other animals, Illy had put her in charge. The blinds were open and the sunlight glinted off the animals' soft synthetic fur. Gabby's green eyes sparkled.

According to Illy, Gabby was a fair leader, but never ruled by consensus. I would tease her, showing her the white manufacturing tag that said Gabby was made in Bolivia (China was still reeling from the Eastern Apocalypse three decades before) and she would laugh, totally rolling with the joke. I would ask her how she knew Gabby was a girl.

"She just is", she would say.

I also asked her what Gabby would do if the other animals rebelled. (I had to explain what *rebel* meant.)

"They can't", she said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"I won't let them", she said.

"So Gabby's not really in charge", I said, tickling her and drawing giggles out of her. "You are!"

I never went beyond that, I never told her the truth: that half the animals in her zoo, especially those of the ocean, were extinct. I never told her that the dolphins and whales were nearly gone, or that there were no more hammerhead sharks. They had died off, along with the Great Whites and most requiem sharks, before the French and Japanese scientists created the first artificial glacier.

I pull away from the house and find my way back to the freeway. The lights of harriers blink and beam above. The flashing lights of the sky police close in on an offending harrier two blocks away, a hundred feet in the air. Farther away, above the hills, I see what looks like a shooting star: a sky crash. Sky routes were designed to avoid residential areas, or so we're told. But that

hasn't stopped harriers and trucks from smashing down into houses off the hill, although those in the CZ's are protected by magnetic sky barriers.

In fifteen minutes I reach the Tunnel, the first security check for the hill. There are ten cars in front of me, but the line moves quickly. If I was a full-time CZ resident, I could drive right through in the fast lane. The stoplight at the side of the tunnel entrance turns green, and I ease along at five miles per hour, like the signs dictate. A rainbow of beams scan the Camaro from front to back, passing back and forth. If the technology's so good, I wonder, why do the beams need multiple passes? You'd think just one would be enough. Apparently not. Three years ago, a CZ in New York was hit by a dirty bomb. Two off the hill cities before that, several years ago, in Houston and Baltimore. Luckily, the L.A. area has been exempt.

In all, the scanning lasts two or three minutes. Then I get in line again for the second checkpoint: the interview. Which is basically a series of questions from an android or person. Believe me, one is not better than the other. In case of the human, you might get an asshole who doesn't like your attitude and holds you up either by asking ten minutes worth of questions or making you pull over to the side and wait for a half hour before letting you go on. Or, if you're as lucky as I was a year ago, the android suffers some kind of glitch and stops in mid-sentence with his mouth open. (If you have trouble envisioning this, just think of the figures in Madame Tussauds. You'll notice they don't say much.)

As I pull up to the checkpoint, I see that it's not only an android, but an A5. His widow's peak and the fact that he doesn't blink give him away. Party-time.

"How's it going, Andy?" I ask as he scans the microchip driver's license in my wrist.

"My name's not Andy", he says with a straight face, looking over the info.

"Darn", I say. "I always get you guys mixed up."

"Are you being sarcastic?" he asks.

"Me?" I say. "I don't do sarcasm."

He studies me for a second, trying to size me up.

"I'm composed of four living tissues ... "

"Yeah, yeah", I say. "Heard it all before, Andy."

"It's Travis", he says.

"Whatever."

He pauses again. "You should respect authority", he says.

"I know", I say.

The road barrier opens, and I drive through. The clean air, laced with Bermuda grass buds, ripples through the window. Outside, the massive palm trees and willows guard the battalions of yellow and orange marigolds. One direction leads to the city, the other to the residential complexes. I take the residential route, and in five minutes I'm standing at the front door of Mom and Cara's two-story stucco.

I press the doorbell button. Cara answers, smiling her wise, refined smile. She's thin, with a narrow nose, short red-brown hair and blue eyes. A steaming mist of pasta bellows from the kitchen. Then Peppy, Mom's Irish terrier, springs upon me, whining excitedly, pawing my jeans at the thigh, his bobbed tail wiggling out of control. I bend down, run my hand along his rich red and brown coat, and he laps my face with his anxious tongue. He's six years old and for some reason that I don't understand, loves the hell out of me.

Cara gives me a hug, then we pad across the plush silver-gray carpet of the living room.

"Your mom's in the kitchen", she says.

"Thought so", I say.

Peppy follows me into the kitchen, where I find Mom, clad in a white apron with chartreuse daffodils, stirring spaghetti sauce in a pot with a wooden spoon. In a plastic draining bowl next to it, steam smoulders from a heap of stringy pasta.

"Emile", Mom says, hugging me, her face lit with a kind grin. She has wavy, greying black hair and soft hazel eyes, the kind that could turn angry when I was young and misbehaved—like

the time I stole a pack of gum from Kroger's—but that have since been pacified by automatically injected doses of bliss via her SDI. She's not as thin as Cara, so I don't feel like I'm hugging a skeleton. She goes back to stirring the sauce.

"Want a taste?" Mom asks, holding up a spoonful.

"It's burning hot", I say. "And I don't want to give you and Cara my germs."

Mom scoffs. "Why do you have to be so sensitive?"

"Maybe I inherited it", I say. "Smells awesome, by the way."

After chatting about the usual—Dad, school, Eneca—I mosey back into the living room and sit with Cara on the sofa. Peppy jumps up and rolls onto his back between us, and I rub his hairy chest and play with his beard. There's a news program on TV, but Cara grabs the remote and lowers the volume.

"How's school going?" she asks.

"You know you're going to get a snarky answer, right?"

"Go ahead", she says, grinning. "Snark away."

"There's only so much you can learn from an android", I say.

"The new ones are practically human", she says.

"The A7's?" I ask. "Don't start."

"Twenty-four living tissues", Cara says in the same expert tone as the speaker in the Simulan TV ad.

"They'd like you to think they *are* human", I say.

"By 'they,' you mean the androids?" she asks.

"No, Simulan", I say. "The more human the androids become, the higher the price they fetch. Simulan's stock doubles in value, and they get more reps in Congress."

Images flash on the TV of men in yellow and white hazmat suits: the cleanup in Pakistan. We bombed the country back to the Stone Age, although some say it was already in the Stone Age. I guess harbouring terrorists doesn't pay after all, not according to Corporate Uncle Sam. I scared about three years off Cara by telling her I was thinking of joining the Army, and specifically the Hazmat Division. I mean, what else is there to do after high school? Since I live off the hill with Dad, I'm not eligible to attend a good college. No Stanford. No Cal-Berkeley. UCLA was demolished ten years ago, due to its being a waste of public funds or something.

"Have you thought any more about what you're going to do after graduation?" Cara asks.

"I told you about the Army, right?" I say.

Cara delivers one of her more austere looks. "Seriously."

"I applied to the University of New Mexico", I say.

"Oh", she says. "Did you get accepted?"

"Yeah. But I'm not sure I want to go."

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"I'm eighteen now", I say.

"And?"

"It allows me options I've never had before", I say. "Legal options."

Cara's eyes narrow with curiosity. "What are you thinking of doing?"

Before I give her another bullshit answer, Mom bails me out with her beaming sanguine face.

"It's ready!" she says.

After Illy died, I got into a ton of fights at school. God knows I made Mom and Dad's lives more miserable because of it. I was skinny, unprepared, and totally lacking in the sweet science, but the odds of winning never factored into it. Writhing inside me were two entwined serpents of anger and pain, and I needed something to distract me. So I slugged it out with the baddest, gnarliest dudes in fifth grade, and the occasional older sixth grader, ripping my shirts and cutting my knuckles on other kids' noses, cheeks, and foreheads, and getting my own face walloped in the process. Soon the Hispanics were calling me *el cabrito blanco loco*, and the blacks "Psycho Rocky", and the toughest among them came to play with their fists.

Despite the insanity of it all, I did learn a pugilistic truth or two. Half of all fights end after the first punch, and there were plenty of fights I knew I couldn't win, but I fought anyway. And believe me, it wasn't out of courage. My mantra was to make sure I always got in two punches: the first, and one more along the way. I still have a distinct scar on my lower lip, and sometimes a knuckle will throb with the phantom pain of bone-on-bone connection.

Nothing changed until a year and a half later, when I was in the sixth grade. It was one of the messier fights I'd had, with a psychotic kid named Shane, who at some point picked up a rock and started winging stony haymakers, with one or two scraping the top of my head. Dad was out of town, so the principal called Mom, who had moved to the CZ and was living with Cara, and informed her of my suspension. I was familiar with Cara by that time, having seen her about a dozen times on weekend visits and holidays, and she had always been nice to me, inquiring about school and my hobbies, telling me that she would listen if I ever wanted to talk to her about anything, but I hadn't known what to make of her as far as our relationship was concerned. Was she a second mom? Was I supposed to think of her as a relative? Or was she a friend? An acquaintance?

When Mom and Cara showed up, Mom looked typically sad and concerned. Since I'd been in a number of fights already, she'd probably become immune from the shock, but Cara hadn't seen me like this. I must have looked like a demon: my shirt was torn at the sleeve and collar, the knuckle above my middle finger was swelling, and my face and tousled hair were smeared with snot balls and blood. (The bastard Shane had even pulled out tufts of my hair!)

"Emile?" Cara said in disbelief, the muscles in her face trembling. She immediately came toward me, bent down, and hugged me, sobbing.

In that moment something within me clicked. Normality was rekindled. I was reintroduced to something our family hadn't known since before Illy's death. Was it emotional honesty? I don't know, but I started crying. Wailing. A mournful howl of pain and horror and grief and the culmination of a thousand nightmares married to real life tragedy. The secretary, Mrs. Harris, looked terrified. I stood there, in Cara's embrace, dousing her with a slobbery deluge above her collarbone.

"It's okay, baby", Cara said, one hand cradling the back of my head, the other patting my back. "Let it out. Let the poison out. Don't keep any of it inside."

For the rest of the night, I notice traces of concern in Cara's demeanour, but she doesn't confront me about whatever suspicions she might have. She's generous enough to let Mom own the time I have to visit.

After dinner, Mom pulls a chocolate cake from the oven, where it has been warming. Seventeen blue inverted teardrop candles stand on top, with the centre candle a replica of Volcana wearing a brown leather jacket and holding her Gibson electric.

"Volcana", I say with enthusiasm, turning to Cara. "Nice touch. Where'd you find that?"

"I have some connections", Cara says, grinning. "And let me tell you, that little candle cost a pretty penny. The Corps are banned, you know."

"The best things are", I say. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Together, they light the candles, and Peppy's ears perk up. He tilts his head, staring up at the cake from the floor.

"My baby has become a man", Mom says.

"My baby, too", Cary says, smiling.

"Make a wish", Mom says.

Cara watches me curiously, almost suspiciously, but Mom has no idea what I'm wishing for. Suffice it to say, of the three of us who survived Illy—Mom, Dad and me—I might have needed the SDI as much as Mom. Mom and Dad have never shown any inclination for homicide. I blow out the candles, all eighteen in one easy breath. While we sit eating our dessert, the cake sits too close to the table's edge, and Peppy stands up on his hind legs and takes a monstrous bite out of it.

"No!" Mom says, pushing Peppy away from the table.

Peppy gulps down the piece of cake, his eyes bulging with shocked delight, his mouth and beard coated with dark brown chocolate icing. He licks his lips, reaching for the icing, and I can't help but chuckle.

"It could hurt him", Mom says.

"Dogs love chocolate", I say.

"Emile", Cara says in her gentle parental tone. It's moments like these, when Cara is challenging me to grow up and leave puberty in the dust, that she seems more like a parent than either Mom or Dad. I mean, since the implant, Mom hasn't gotten onto me about anything, and Dad never berates me unless I insult Eneca.

"It's icing", I say. "Hardly pure chocolate. And I didn't give it to him. He got it all by himself."

I thank Mom for the dinner and cake and then help with the dishes, something Cara has conditioned me to do. Then Mom goes to her room to lie down while Cara and I keep talking.

"You can't tweak Mom's levels just a little?" I ask. Mom's serotonin and dopamine levels can be adjusted remotely, and I've sometimes wondered if a decrease in the levels would bring back more of her old self. Before Illy died, she was more humorous, more spontaneous and

temperamental. She would snap at me for eating ice cream straight from the carton with a spoon, or dipping my finger in the spaghetti sauce for a taste.

"It's not recommended", Cara says. "No psychologist thinks it's a good idea. Even with monitoring, there's some fluctuation in her levels, and they can drop too low."

In other words, I need to accept Mom the way she is, or not at all.

"I just wish ... ", I say.

"I know", Cara says. "People change. Sometimes they get sick, and we can't stop thinking of them the way they were before the illness. We have to accept them the way they are in the present and love that version of them."

I nod, trusting Cara's wisdom. Still, something gnaws inside me, wanting things to be different. I give Cara a goodnight hug and she pads up the stairs to her room.

When I was six, Mom began making Illy give me a hug each night before we went to bed. Illy had her own bedroom, but we slept in identical Sealy twin beds. Bedtime was nine p.m., and sometimes we went to bed at the same time, but on others Mom or Dad would take Illy into her room earlier to read her a story while I spent my last sweet night-time minutes in the living room watching TV. Mom was already grooming me on *Star Trek* and her TV favourites. There was something unique, calming, in the peculiar, electrically charged sound of Captain Kirk and his crew being beamed up to the Enterprise. I was also able to watch other classics like *The Simpsons*, about this delinquent kid Bart and his idiot dad. Then there were contemporary shows like *CEO Kid*, about a twelve-year-old who runs a robotics company, and *America's Next Bio-Engineer*, where contestants of all ages compete to design and grow the most interesting animal, like a *taramster* (a tarantula combined with a hamster ... yes, as scary as it sounds).

Illy was just two at the time, and even though I already loved her (her being my sister and all), she still seemed something of a noisy smelly baby. In those days Mom was normal, the one who was on top of things, and everything worked according to schedule: wake-up time,

breakfast, school, dinner, TV/homework, and bedtime. The aroma of chocolate trickled from the kitchen. Mom would give Illy and me a brownie or a chocolate chip cookie, and the rest she Saran-wrapped and dropped into all of our lunchboxes. Dad was living the life, as well, earning good money as a chemist, receiving promotions at work, and taking us on holidays to Hawaii and Florida. Smelling of aftershave, he occasionally carried Illy and me to bed, one at a time, when the clock reached nine p.m. We were usually pretty tired by then, so he didn't carry us kicking and screaming, but instead, mimicked the sound of a harrier engine as we giggled along the ride.

Often I would be sitting in front of the TV, on the plush carpeted floor, and Illy would come scampering toward me, dressed in white one-piece pyjamas dotted with little green and purple elephants, with her scissoring peachy legs. She would reach out and grab my shoulder and neck and lean her head against my collarbone, her hair slightly damp from her bath an hour before, and I would capitulate with a hug of my own.

In the beginning I went through the motions, because it was something Mom was making us do, but with each passing night, as Illy gained more distance from her terrible two stage, I began to view her not as a runt but as a cute, sweet peculiar being who shared my parents and blood. Soon there was a real warmth between us, something that began, I think, one night when she lay her head on my shoulder, closed her eyes, and smiled, resting momentarily in angelic bliss, and I realized that she loved the hugs, and therefore loved me, and that she personified something that was good in life, an innocence, a sweetness, and I couldn't help but love her back, and before long, when she turned three, I looked forward to our nightly sign-offs, unable to sleep well without them, never imagining she might depart one day into a more permanent night-time.

I stay up late, quietly watching TV in the living room. Peppy is sprawled across my lap, enjoying the best massage a dog ever had. I cleaned the chocolate from his beard with a warm wash rag, but some of the moist hair is still clumped together.

I come across Sinaloa TV, the Mexican channel everyone at school talks about. The women fights, and the executions, are the most popular. The Cartel, which officially runs the government

of Mexico and is the only current legitimate political party there, likes to remind people—via firing squad, hanging, and other means of execution—what happens when you double-cross them. Sinaloa TV also has torture features: a guy having a finger or a toe lopped off with a hatchet, cigarette burnings, and other bloodlettings.

The fighting show "Blades of the Cage" is currently on. Somewhere in the state of Sinaloa, in an octagonal cage, a pygmy is fighting a towering seven-foot-five-inch Sudanese man. Both are armed: the Sudanese man with yellow nun chucks, the pygmy with a sickle-shaped blade. The smaller man bobs and feints while the taller opponent jerks back cautiously every time. Just when I'm starting to get tired of the inaction, the pygmy takes an aggressive swing at the tall man's ankle, slices it open, and the Sudanese man hobbles a few steps and falls, blood smearing the canvas. My adrenaline surges, and I quickly change the channel with the remote, avoiding the gory end. Cara would have a cow of epic proportions if she caught me watching the stuff. Because she knows my tendencies, that if left unchecked, I might stay up all night, she'll occasionally wander into the living room, during the early morning hours, to make sure that I go to sleep.

On National Geographic Ryan Cousteau, the great grandson of the famous French ocean explorer, is searching with his team of marine biologists off the coast of Australia for signs of the Great White Shark. Most biologists think the Great Whites are extinct, but Cousteau keeps searching.

"It's unthinkable that a society as developed as this could be prone to shark culling", Cousteau says in his French accent, standing on the deck of his research vessel. He's wearing a black wet suit and adjusting the strap on his snorkel. Nearby, on a wooden bench, a small silver oxygen tank is strapped to a diving vest. "But that's exactly what Australians did at the start of the Century. Now look where we are."

Cousteau also seems pissed about the destruction of the Great Barrier Reef. The before and after pictures tell the story: one of the reef flourishing with marine life, the other a brown scar on the ocean floor where coral once thrived.

Peppy dozes off and his jowls and eyes start twitching. At this moment, while the TV flickers in the dark, I realize how much I love this dog, who functions like a living teddy bear for those of

us who have few close relationships. I stroke his beard, pat the hair on the side of his head. Coming here the last few years has given me a spark not because of Mom, and not even because of Cara, but because of a dog. He understands my loneliness, I think. My emptiness. More than anyone else, he knows.

I scan the channels. CNN: a dirty bomb hit Paris. Over 200 killed from the conventional explosion, with hundreds more estimated to have been poisoned by radiation. People scattering in a mayhem of confusion, ambulance sirens whining, EMTs in hazmat suits carrying shell-shocked victims.

On Fox Sports, an ad for Proposition 183. Cardell King, the balding, husky promoter for *Freedom Cage* (a TV show where contestants, usually crudders, fight in a cage for a chance to move their families onto the hill), strolls toward the camera in a short-sleeved collared shirt, boots and jeans.

"They live their lives in service", King says. "It's time to repay them."

As King walks away, the blue letters of Prop 183's slogan flash on the screen: Human Blood: Androids Deserve Nothing Less.

They *will* be human before long, I think. God made man. Now man will make man.

The ad finishes, and the network returns to live coverage of *Freedom Cage*, the highest rated show on TV. Two heavyweight fighters, one black and one white, both covered with tats, begin round two. Tiny needle-like spikes are embedded on their elbow pads and knuckles of their grappling gloves, and when a shot lands clean blood spurts from the wound. By the end of a fight, the fighters slip awkwardly on the blood-strafted canvas. And people can't get enough of it: the more blood, the better. It's the highest rated show on TV.

The two fighters take cautious swings at the other. Then the black man swings wildly, misses, and the other fighter head butts him, knocking him backward into a sprawl against the cage. The crudders in *Freedom Cage* would be just as happy to live in my neighbourhood: anything to escape the Underground.

Running through the channels again, I pass Sinaloa TV. Two women are stabbing each other frantically with four-inch blades, their bodies soaked in a red nightmare. I leave the channel in the dust, I can handle only so much blood.

What about Oscar Gray? my conscience asks.

That's different, I tell myself.

How so?

He's scum, he has it coming.

You sure about that?

Yes, I am. So shut up and crawl back into your hole.

I stop on CNN. A program about the Eastern Apocalypse. A reporter wearing a hazmat suit and mask is walking through the rubble of Beijing, which was nuked by North Korea. None of the country is habitable, the reporter says in a filtered voice. Both Koreas and China were reduced to ash and rubble. The dictators and commies bit it, but so did their civilian populations. Taiwan and Japan survived, thanks to the US's deployment of the Lassiter Dome, a magnetic radiation shield.

Oscar Gray creeps back into my thoughts. I retrieve my sketchbook and a pencil from my backpack and begin the final sketch. Peppy paws at my drawing hand, desiring it for him and him alone. I sketch as I envision what is to come: the night, the neighbourhood, the Camaro, the pickup, and the convict himself. There will be blood, and Illy's killing will be made right.

When the sketch is done, I lean my head back on the sofa's backrest and nod off. Sometime later, Peppy's dreamy whimpering and fluffy scissoring legs wake me, and I turn off the TV, grab Peppy's leash and take him outside for a walk. When we come back inside, Peppy cuddles up beside me on the king bed in the guest bedroom, and we sleep in peace.

Have you ever wanted to kill anyone? Have you stood on the ledge of vengeance, looking into the chasm of murder, your blood boiling at the kill?

It's Friday night, 9:45. I'm parked down the street from Oscar Gray's house, as usual. I've cracked the window open, and a summer rain aroma seeps inside, although it has stopped sprinkling. It's quiet. Minutes earlier, I set a sawhorse No Parking sign on Oscar's driveway and a dozen orange cones along the curb. I think of the slipperiness of the road, hoping the Camaro's tires will hold up.

Closer to ten o'clock.

As I'm learning firsthand, there's a big difference between wanting to kill someone and actually following through with it. I have no doubt I can do it. No doubt I *will* do it. But pulling the trigger, setting the bomb, or hitting the douchebag with the car is insanely different from just thinking about it. Even Dr. Glasgow knows that. He knows all about Oscar Gray and why I want to kill him. Our last session got kind of heated.

"I don't want to sound like a stuttering android", Dr. Glasgow said, sitting on a brown leather chair in his office. "But are you going to be able to go through with it? Will you be able to take this man's life?"

"The question is", I answered, "How could I not go through with it? It's all I've thought about for eight years. I've imagined it a million times."

"A million fantasies can't pull the trigger", Dr. Glasgow said.

"Whatever", I said, and turned Glasgow off.

One house over from where I'm parked, a skinny old woman in a lilac gown watches me from her porch. I've seen her before, on the porch and in the front yard, the type who spies on everyone because it's in her blood. Big friggin' deal, I've got a murder permit. I'm allowed to be here, doing what I'm doing. Or what I'm about to do. But if she calls the cops, it could delay my plan for Oscar.

The minutes creep along, closer to ten o'clock, and the woman keeps watching. Will I execute Oscar Gray beneath Granny's keen eye? The thought puts a damper in my concentration. But then I realize the old woman has probably seen worse, especially since the dismantling of public police, and then with the sweeps.

A few minutes before ten, the old woman climbs back up the porch and disappears inside her house. No longer distracted, I settle back into my pre-war psyche. The hour is upon me, I think, recalling the Shakespearean language in English class. Or was it *thee*? Anyway, fuck it. Here I am, in the moment. No cops. No rain. No granny. Nothing to fear. Just plain old red-blooded revenge, like the law condones.

Oscar Gray's pickup turns onto the street a hundred yards ahead. The way it's creeping along, the headlights and grill form a batshit crazy grin. The vehicle slows at the driveway, cuts its wheels, and pauses. The pickup turns into the driveway ramp, then backs up and parks at the curb on the opposite side of the street.

Don't chicken out, the voice says.

"No problem", I mutter.

When Oscar cuts the headlights, I start the Camaro's engine. Eight years of agony. Eight horses of reckoning. The pickup door swings open and Oscar Gray steps out in jeans and a black t-shirt. At medium height and husky build, he has a pale complexion with long, greasy-looking red brown hair and beard.

I ease from the curb, rolling like metallic death onto the street. Oscar looks at the headlights, I pick up speed, and when he reaches the middle of the street, I gun the throttle. He pauses, looking like a thief caught stealing. He jukes toward his pickup, and I turn in that direction, and then he darts in the opposite direction, sprinting for his own front lawn. I jerk the wheel toward him but just miss hitting one of his legs, and the Camaro climbs the curb as Oscar reaches his lawn. I steer the car back onto the road and gun it down the street, looking in my rear view mirror to see Oscar reaching his front door and slipping into his house.

I slam my palms against the steering wheel. "Shit!"

I leave the neighbourhood and take a long route back to the freeway. My hands are shaking and I'm calling myself names. How could I have been so stupid? Faked out by a methhead. I think about the DOR's instructions in the online approval letter. If I fail to kill Oscar on the first attempt, I can try to finish the job within three weeks.

As I get closer to home, my nerves gradually begin to chill. I figured murdering someone would be easier, at least once I decided to go through with it. Maybe the key is to kill the person without giving them any notice at all. I mean, the dude saw my Camaro barrelling right at him. If I killed him before he saw it coming, like a sniper, then he would have no option to fake me out. But on the other hand, the angrier part of me wants to see the fear in his eyes. I want him to know that I'm going to kill him, just before I do it.

When I get home, Dad and Eneca are drinking wine and watching a movie on H-TV. I'm not exactly in a sociable mood, so I try to wander past them without saying anything. But Eneca looks at me like she knows something is a little off.

"Out having fun?" Eneca asks.

"Sure", I say, and go to my room.

Over the weekend, I think of my failed murder attempt. Because he'll know something's up, and because he'll bug the hell out of me to find out what happened, I put off another session with Dr. G. Besides, I don't need to unload my frustration on an AI shrink. What I really need is another plan—a better plan—to kill Oscar.

As I listen to The Corps, I brainstorm about the different ways to do it. Even though the DOR approval letter recommends following through with the proposed method of killing, it doesn't say it's mandatory. I could use a gun. Since I'm eighteen, I can buy one legally from a retailer or pawn shop, but it would be cheaper and faster to get one from someone at school or on the black market. A laser gun is out of the question due to a certain cash flow problem. But when I think of the potential hazards—Dad finding the gun in my room or in the car, Eneca possibly having

some secret ability to detect firearms, or just plain shooting my foot off out of clumsiness—I have to think of another option. But nothing seems like a good idea. Not fire. Not using a knife or blunt object (not as the primary weapon, anyway). Not electricity. In the end I find myself where I started, wanting to run the bastard over with the Camaro.

Oscar won't let me get the drop on him at his house again, which means I'll have to take him out somewhere else. He's probably laying low for a few days. I imagine him checking into a hotel, presenting his I.D., failing to smile, stinking of body odour. Even if he stays away from his house, he's not going to give up his habits. In addition to his cravings for 7-Eleven and Taco Bell, he feeds his meth addiction at The Hamer & Hamer Resort. When I've tracked him there, I've been careful to keep my distance. He goes often, at least twice a week, every Friday and usually on Sunday or Tuesday. Making the hit on Sunday seems too soon, and Friday seems redundant. Which leaves Tuesday.

On Tuesday I don't bother with homework. Once I get home, I go over my new plan for killing Oscar Gray. He likes to park on the third row from the building's east wing. At around 9:30 p.m., he usually emerges from a side door and strolls across the parking lot from rows one to three. I've sketched a map of the Hamer & Hamer Resort and drawn arrows from my preferred entrance to the parking space that, according to Google Satellite, has been available every night for the past four nights. In case something goes wrong, I've got a Cold Steel Brooklyn Crusher baseball bat in the back seat.

At 8:45 p.m. I leave for the Hamer & Hamer Resort. It usually takes me about thirty minutes to get there. While I'm on the freeway, I receive a classic text from a number I don't recognize.

Watch your ass, it says. Oscar Gray is on to you.

Me: *Who is this?*

SOW.

Holy shit, I think. Could it really be SOW? Why would they be texting me? I mean, I'm not surprised that they would have inside info. They've probably got a nerd squad hacking into government systems, etc.

Me: *Why do you care?*

SOW: Maybe we don't. Or maybe we have a penchant for eighteen-year-olds who get in deep doodoo. Be careful, not careless.

What the heck? I think.

When I reach the resort, I find the parking space and pull into it. I'm seven rows from the side of the building, shielded on one side by an SUV. I look around for Oscar's pickup and spot it on the third row. Keeping aware of my surroundings, I wait and watch for the resort's side door to open. The minutes pass. It's 9:25.

From out of nowhere, a guy wearing black gloves, a black windbreaker and navy blue ski cap pops up at my window, tapping it with the barrel of a pistol. It's Oscar Gray. I nearly jump out of my seat as my heart hammers with the sense of defeat.

"Get out of the car", he says in a gruff, no-nonsense voice.

My insides expand into a gorge of hopelessness. I open the door and get out.

"Walk", he says, gesturing with the pistol.

I do as he says, following his directions. We walk around the main entrance and enter the resort building through a side door. I hear music from a live blues band, but all I see is a carpeted hallway that runs into a tiled walkway.

"Keep going", Oscar says.

When we reach the tiled walkway, I see a bar where people are drinking and listening to the band, which is perched on a small stage in the corner.

"This way", Oscar says. I pause, daring him to make a move. "I'm not fuckin' around, kid. If you want to end things here, we'll end it now."

I get moving again, this time down a dim hallway that seems to lead to a storage room. Oscar gestures toward a door.

"Open it", he says.

I open the door and go inside. Oscar closes the door behind him and takes a seat in a desk chair behind a desk that says Accounts Payable. He gestures with the gun to the chair across from him, and I sit down. He shoves the gun inside his jacket.

"I know who you are", he says. "You're the girl's brother. Let me guess. You got a murder permit." He waits for me to answer, but I don't. "No one can let anything go nowadays. People are like king cobras now. Never forgetting. Chasing their enemies across continents for shit that happened a lifetime ago." He looks at me like he's waiting for me to say something. He gazes at the desk and sighs. "These murder permits. You seen the murder rate lately? Why do you suppose they would legalise something like that?" He shakes his head. "Cremation services and euthanasia are going through the roof. If you want to invest in something, pick one of those two. That's my advice."

"You were high", I say. "You ran over a little girl. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"I know you want it to", Oscar says. He looks as though he might be forming an apology in his mind. But then waves his hands cavalierly. "That stuff happened a long time ago. Girl shouldn't have been out in the street. The stuff's legal now, anyways. I did the time."

"Not enough", I say.

"Here", he says, pulling the pistol from his jacket and releasing the clip. "Let me help you move on." He takes a bullet from the clip. "See? Real bullets." He reinserts the bullet into the clip and shoves the clip back into the gun. He pulls back the action. "You think you got the balls to kill someone face to face? Go ahead." He places the gun on the desk where I can reach it.

I stare at it. Slowly, I take the gun in my hand, and it immediately feels heavy. The steel handle has a rough grip. I hold it out in front of me, pointing it at Oscar, who looks into my eyes, unafraid. I put my finger on the trigger and consider pulling it. I grip the pistol hard. My hand starts shaking, and I put the gun back down on the desk. Oscar smirks, then takes the pistol and puts it back in his jacket somewhere. A few seconds pass.

"Aren't you the least bit curious how I found you?" he asks. He pulls a piece of plastic the size of a black beetle from his pocket and holds it up. "GPS tracker. An oldie but goodie."

The door opens abruptly and a tall black man wearing black slacks and a white long sleeve shirt enters, startling both Oscar and me. The man has a brass nametag that says Melvin.

"What you doing in here?" Melvin asks.

"You gotta be shittin' me", Oscar says. "You don't recognize me? I'm in here every other day."

Melvin relaxes, letting his body go slack. "Excuse me if I lack a certain etiquette for methheads. I don't know what your business is, but you can't be in here."

"Who says?" Oscar asks.

"The fairy freekin' godmother, that's who", Melvin says. "Now get on up out of here."

I rise from my seat and move toward the door. Reluctantly, Oscar gets to his feet and does the same.

"I'm gonna go to management over this", Oscar says.

"You can go to management, your grandma, and the Methhead in Chief for all I care", Melvin says. "This ain't your office. Now get out before I lose my patience!"

"You and me ain't finished", Oscar says, glaring at Melvin.

"Oh, for your sake we better be", Melvin says.

Melvin escorts both of us to the side exit. Then Oscar asks to talk to management, which allows me to leave.

As I sit in the car, I try to process what just happened. I could have killed Oscar. Why didn't I? After having listened to him, I don't like him any more now than I did before. The bastard wasn't sorry for killing Illy. Not even a little. I think of how the gun felt in my hands. Foreign. Heavy. The steel handle grainy and awkward. It wasn't my gun. I don't want Oscar to call the shots, literally. For real vengeance, I have to be in control. I have to be the one who says how, where, and when he's going to die.

I start the car, back out of the parking space, and pull into a spot just inside the perpendicular lot of the main entrance. Even though I can't see the full side of the building anymore, I can still see the people who emerge from the side as they enter the parking lot. A few minutes pass. Then a half hour. When he finally exits the building forty minutes later, ambling with a fidgety, unbalanced gait, I know he's been hitting the meth.

I start the car, cut the lights, and creep toward the side parking lot, rolling to a stop before the third row. As Oscar reaches the second row, I lose him for a second, but it doesn't matter: the Camaro was built for speed, and in such matters, for death. I take in a deep breath, floor the gas, and steer the car toward my least favourite meth addict. Just as he reaches the space between the second and third rows, the Camaro crashes into him, crushing his hip and flipping him over the car, sending his bulky body to a fleshy, somersaulting slap on the asphalt.

I stop the car, leave it running, and get out. For less than a minute, I stand over what's left of Oscar. Lights from the parking lot and resort illuminate what's left of him. Blood is pooling beside his head. His eyes are staring into the dark, his mouth slightly open, his lower lip protruding, like a fish's. Altogether, a wistful expression, like he forgot something and was going back to retrieve it. A wallet, maybe. Or a meth pipe.

"Die, you shit", I say.

But I know he already has. If there is a hell, I pray that he's in it, that he's the lowest organism in the order of the damned. I get back in the Camaro and drive away.

They say revenge can't bring back your loved ones, that it doesn't change anything. But to be honest, knocking the life out of Oscar has kickstarted my heart, to borrow a phrase from Motley Crue. On the ride home, I jack up the volume to songs by the Corps, and I shout battle cries of victory, momentarily imagining myself as some kind of Apache warrior who has avenged his family's slaughter.

After I park in the garage, I check out the damage to the front bumper. Worse than I thought. There's a deep dent that spans a foot across. $\text{Rate} \times \text{time} = \text{distance}$. How fast must a Camaro travel in order to strike and flip a 200-pound meth addict convicted of hit and run vehicular manslaughter completely over the car?

I go into the kitchen via the garage door, grab a can of Nostalgic Coke, and find Eneca making Dad's lunch for work the next day: a BLT sandwich. The floor smells like Lysol, and I spot a drying streak the size of a ruler from Eneca's mopping.

"Eneca", I say with more enthusiasm than usual, and smile.

There's a twitch in her expression, mostly in her eyes, of curiosity, like she knows something is a bit off with my demeanour, and I wish I could tell her—I have a panging urge to tell *someone*. But what exactly would I say? *The bastard's dead?* Or *I just murdered someone, but it's okay because I have a permit*. Or what about this one: *Guess who kicked the bucket?* Who am I kidding? I can't get bogged down with such nuances. Besides, why should I share my joy with anyone else? I'll keep it to myself.

When I get to my room, I sit on the bed, thinking about what I've just done. A life is gone. The life of a criminal, but nevertheless a life. If I'm capable of murdering Oscar Gray, does that mean I possess the potential to murder someone else? The thought brings me down a notch from the high I experienced before. Now I feel like watching Sinaloa TV and slamming a few beers.

I wander back into the kitchen, open the door to the fridge, and am greeted by cool dairy-tainted air. While scrounging along the lower shelf for any signs of beer, I detect the luminous mantis green hue of Eneca's gown shuffling gently toward me.

"Stalk much?" I ask.

Eneca grins. "You're excited about something."

"Well, school *is* almost over", I say. "The Army's calling, making a strong push for my services. When you think about it, it's the only venue for people like me to mess other people up and deal with the alienation we feel off the hill."

"No, it's not that", Eneca says, looking into my eyes. "Your endorphin count is higher than normal."

"Endorphin count?" I ask. Since when could androids count those?! I rise to my feet. "Okay, Mrs. Freud. I'm eighteen now, and I've never given you permission to psychoanalyse me."

She grins again. Why do the A7s have to be so polite? They'll stab you with a knife and smile. The fridge's light illuminates her makeup, reminding me of her beauty. I'm caught off guard by my own inkling of attraction to her. I know affairs between stepchildren and stepparents are frowned upon, but Eneca's an android, so how would that work? Does it make an awkward situation even more awkward, or less?

I close the fridge and start to pad off toward my room.

"Did you want a beer?" she asks, re-opening the fridge door and reaching into a secret nook and pulling out a bottle of Coors Light.

"Thanks", I say, taking the bottle.

"If you want to share your good news", she says, "I'll keep it between us, and I won't judge you."

"Okay", I say.

On the way to my room, I ponder her offer. What's the value of an android's word? I wish I knew.

In my room, I turn the TV on and find Sinaloa TV. For a moment I consider the VR mode. Some students at Dick Cheney High say watching Sinaloa TV in virtual mode can literally kill you. You wouldn't literally get stabbed, or bludgeoned, or choked, but your brain would receive signals that such violence was being done to you, and you could suffer a stroke or heart attack. Whatever. Still, the rumour is enough to fend me off VR mode for now.

A TV anchor (i.e. cartel spokesman) wearing a dark blue suit and tie is delivering the "news" in good ol' Espanol. My Spanish isn't great, but since I've taken two years of it, I can comprehend several words and phrases, like *loco en la cabeza*. Pictures like the current one, flashed over the anchor's shoulders, also help: the AVW (Armed Virtual Wall) separating the US and Mexico. The anchor goes off screen, but prattles on, as video shows Mexican military carrying wounded soldiers on stretchers toward a helicopter.

With America's legalization of controlled substances, the cartel demands its share of the US market, but the Corporate Council, in its support of Big Pharma, won't let pharmaceutical companies buy raw ingredients from Mexico, so the cartel undercuts US prices and tries to slip them across the border via tunnels and *receivers* on the US side. One problem: the AVW. Not to mention ten US military bases along the border; from these, the Seals and Special Forces conduct ops to take out traffickers and their Mexican military escorts.

I change the channel. CNN. Fox News. CBS. ABC. NBC. Yada yada. More civil wars. Children starving in poor countries with billionaire dictators. Radiation poisoning in the East. Massive thirty car sky crash in Paris. The U.K. Prime Minister sacked. The Aussie Prime Minister sacked. Thousands in Lesotho killed by a new drug-resistant virus. Same news every day. Who cares? I turn the TV off and am left staring at the unopened bottle of beer.

Has my euphoria emptied already? I wonder.

A cold bead of condensation slides down the bottle, onto my hand. There will be no beer tonight, I decide. I'll celebrate my retribution soberly.

I return the beer to the fridge. When I get back to my room, I open the closet and pull a shoebox from the top shelf and take it to my bed and sit down. I hold the shoebox on my lap and open it. Inside, Gabby, Illy's old hammerhead shark, looks up at me with her green marble eyes. Her midnight blue coat is clean, not much different than eight years before. I pull her from the box and hold her up to my nose and smell her. Not dirty at all. And then, for an unspecified amount of time—it could be one minute or ten minutes—I sit on the bed, holding the fluffy toy shark, staring across the carpet. I'm not sure what I'm feeling. Peace? Tranquillity? Reflection? I don't know that it's any of them. Can't wait to hear what Dr. Glasgow says. If he mentions Gabby being a representation of such and such, I'm going to punch him. He'll say I'm angry, and I'll say damn right.

But then, at the end of my spacing out, a gust of sadness washes across me, and I'm reacquainted with the source of my yearning: Illy. Since new cemeteries and grave plots have been abolished (part of the government's Land Reclamation Act), I can't talk to Illy over her grave like people used to. The touch of Gabby, however, is enough.

"I got him, Illy", I say. "I know it won't bring you back, but he had to pay for what he did. An eye for an eye, right?" I squeeze Gabby, thinking of what else to say. "I miss you." My eyes are watering, I'm such a baby. "Dad misses you, too. And Mom. She's not the same, but she couldn't handle it when you were gone. The truth is we're all messed up." I'm crying freely now. There better not be a friggin' spy cam in my room. "I guess we can't live without you. By the way, Dad has an android girlfriend. Legally, she belongs to him, but there's talk of android freedom and rights. Do you believe that?" I shake my head. "She smells."

Then I space out again, but this time my mind isn't blank. I'm thinking of Illy's face. And her smile. After a few minutes, I put Gabby back into the shoebox, close the lid, and put the box back on the closet shelf.

That night I dream I'm waiting at a crosswalk in downtown L.A. The light across the street says "Don't Walk" in red letters. Illy walks up to it and stands looking at me from across the street. The sign changes and now says "Walk" in green letters, but neither Illy nor I walk across the crosswalk, we just stand where we are. My heart burns with the yearning to walk across, but my feet won't move. I'm left with Illy's blue eyes peering at me.

In the morning Dad pays me special attention. He's staring at me, waiting patiently as his molars grind his crunchy bacon. Eneca sits across from me, buttering her toast to perfection, leaving no corner unbuttered.

I poke one of my fried eggs with a fork and the dark yellow yoke bleeds onto the peppered egg white. I dip a piece of darkened bacon into the yoke and take a bite. Have I mentioned how no one, not even the breakfast cafes on the hill, makes bacon and eggs as well as Dad?

"Glaring should be a crime", I say.

"How'd you get the dent in the bumper?" he asks.

"I hit a deer", I say. "Or some other animal."

Dad keeps looking at me. Most parents might ask where I was driving, taking into consideration pertinent factors such as wildlife habitat, or the lack thereof. But not Dad. No, he doesn't ask questions like these to ascertain the facts. His chemist mind has already mapped out the details. He takes a drink of coffee, looks into his coffee mug.

"Cara called me a couple days ago", he says. "She sounded a little concerned about you."

Concerned, I think. The infamous grown-up word. Just an indirect, cowardly way of saying *You've done something I don't like*, or *You're scaring the shit out of me*.

"Did she say why?" I ask.

"No, not specifically", Dad says. "But whatever it is, Emile, if it is anything, try to consider the long-term implications."

"Long-term as in?" I ask.

"The next day", he says. "Or week. Or month."

"Or year", I suggest.

"Let's not get that far ahead", he says. "Let's stick with the basics for now. Just keep karma in mind."

"I've got a PhD in karma", I say, looking intensely into Dad's eyes.

"I hope you do", Dad says, and leaves it at that.

Eneca is sprinkling some cinnamon from a shaker onto her toast.

"Since when do you like cinnamon?" I ask.

"I heard it's good for you", she says, and bites into the toast.

Good for *humans*, I think. But I don't say anything. Since our talk last night, and her offering me one of Dad's beers, I feel less like harassing her. *Her*. Wow, I said the feminine pronoun. That must mean Simulan's (and therefore the government's) propaganda is working.

Dad knows I hate interrogations. He could ask me a lot more pointed questions, and I could give more nervous, but pointed, answers. In the end, he probably figures the cops or school admin will contact him if I cheated, lied, stole, urinated in public (I think it's still a crime, but not sure), broke something or someone. Authority. The dilemma never goes away. I inhale the breakfast in two minutes, push in my chair.

"Thanks for breakfast, Dad", I say, grabbing my plate to take into the kitchen.

"Thank Eneca", he says.

"What?" I ask, confused.

"She cooked it", he says.

I look at Eneca. She grins.

"Wow", I say, still in disbelief. "Thanks, Eneca."

"You're welcome", she says.

In government, the class right before lunch period, my insides start to rumble with hunger. I'm sitting behind Amanda Gutierrez, a homecoming queen candidate last Fall, taking in the desert wildflower scents of her long black hair while our government teacher, Mr. Gardner, an A6 who looks to be in his early fifties, spins Reagan's Trickle Down Theory about how tax breaks for corporations allow them to create more jobs, pay higher salaries, keep jobs in the US, spank their silver spooned monkeys, etc.

"Under the old two-party system", Mr. Gardner says, "taxes were viewed as punishing measures, aimed at the very sources of economic growth. But since the establishment of the Corporate Council, corporate taxes have been virtually abolished."

Amanda's one of the few girls cool enough to talk to me. I guess the others have kind of figured out I'm a little on the loner side. It's not that I have anything against friendship, or companionship, or that I don't value either, but I don't seek them out as a preoccupation. No, that would be Adam McCarty, the class president, who's sitting on the other side of the room, drawing giggles from the actual homecoming queen, Tara Massengill. Adam's a slightly chubby class clown/prankster type who wears a ponytail and is always called to the office to shave his nasty, burgeoning dog shit-coloured goatee (no facial hair allowed at Dick Cheney High). If you guessed Tara is not only the butt of those never-dying dumb blonde jokes but who also has a body every football player wants to get into, you would be correct. Pure proof that IQ plays no factor in the Homecoming Queen balloting. Her hillbilly laugh at one of Adam's jokes makes me think of chilli and the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

"Come on", Amanda says, noticing my disdain. "Have a heart."

"I'll get one from the same place that gave her a brain", I say.

Amanda tsk-tsks and shakes her head. "What happened to your car?" she asks.

"You don't want to know", I say.

"It's that Sinaloa TV again", she says accusingly.

"Speaking of, you wouldn't know anyone who does body work, would you?" I ask.

"Oh", she says, like she suddenly has a bad taste in her mouth. "Stereotype much? So because I'm Hispanic you think I know someone who works on cars?"

"I didn't—" I say.

"If you're gonna take a dump on my culture, just pull down your pants and do it!" she says.

"Pull down my what?!" I say.

Then Amanda's eyes enlarge with fright and she suddenly turns around toward the front. Before I can locate the source of her fear, I feel a sharp poke of electric current in my left arm, causing me to flinch and yell. Standing beside me is a Dickbot, with a circular red light moving back and forth across its black visor, a tiny metallic arm extended toward me.

"Son of a bitch!" I say.

A few of the other students roar with laughter—including Amanda, who is practically yelping—with the others working hard to stifle their chuckles, knowing they could be next. Mr. Gardner clears his throat, looking in my direction.

"Your name, Emile Winkler, has been recorded", the Dickbot says. "You have lost one demerit. Your language is not appreciated."

"Up yours", I say, rubbing my arm with my right hand.

"Language", the Dickbot says as it rolls down the aisle and vanishes into the hallway.

When Mr. Gardner gets back on the lecture horse, Amanda turns around again, suffocating from the giggles. After a minute, she finally calms down.

"My cousin Berto", she says.

"Berto?" I say.

"Yeah, Berto Lovejoy", she says. Then she laughs. "I know, it's funny, isn't it? His mom's the gringo. No habla espanol, y no cocina la comida mexicana. So forget about asking for tamales." She turns back toward the front, thinking Mr. Gardner noticed her. Then she turns back around.

"Amanda", I say, "where can I find this dude?"

"He's a vato, not a dude", she says. "Food court. Lunch period."

"I can't recognise the vato", I complain.

"I'll be there", she says reassuringly. Then, as an afterthought, she says, "Berto's a little like you. You know, on the melancholy side? No offense." She grins and reaches back and pats my hand. Isn't that one of the signs of flirtation? But didn't she just insult me? I mean, depression is not exactly a virtue.

Girls. Solving their mystery is on par with curing schizophrenia. Not that the two are related. (Please, no hate mail for this hombre.)

In the food court I grab a fountain Coke (Coke's back in the schools! God bless you, Coca-Cola Corp!) and foot-long burrito from The Tortilla Factory and look for Amanda. A few big sips of Coke, some caffeine in the blood (or the anticipation of such), the knowledge that Oscar is dead and headed for laser cremation, and I'm ambling along with an actual bounce in my step. As I pass a table of football jocks, Scott Hoyer, a team co-captain and star receiver, nods at me. He's kind of tall, slim, with wavy dirty blonde hair, an easygoing demeanour, and a black Corps t-shirt. Since I came up with him in middle school, Scott has always been cool to me.

"It's the dude with the dent", Scott says. "You hit a crudder or something?"

"Maybe", I say.

"It growls, but no wings", he says.

"It's a Camaro", I argue. "An American classic."

The other players laugh.

"So is my jock", says Stacy Forsett, starting running back. "Get some jets."

"As soon as your mom pays for my services", I say, walking away to the tune of Scott's hyena wail.

Stacy isn't very big, but he's a tough, hard-nosed ball carrier who likes contact on the field. I know because, believe it or not, even though I'm not the kind of guy who usually goes to football games, I attended the homecoming game against Ventura, in which Dick Cheney High came up a little short, 56-7. (And guess who scored our only touchdown? Stacy, of course. And whatever happened to choosing a beatable opponent for homecoming, this miserable bunch of gridiron excuses will never know.) The larger point being that, unless Stacy is coming up behind me in my blind spot—he's not, I just double-checked, it's cool—he probably wouldn't let anyone else off so easily with such a putdown. That might be because I kicked Stacy's ass during our sophomore year in the P.E. locker room. Oh, did I fail to mention that I still get into fights once in a while? I find it keeps me honest. And humble. You know, to make me remember I'm not too good to get my hands dirty, that kind of thing.

I circle the row of tables and find Amanda sitting with a group of friends and a slightly burly guy who I assume is Berto. He looks at me with the dark fearful eyes of a cow.

"This is the guy?" Berto asks.

"This is the guy", Amanda says.

Everyone is looking at me, and the attention makes me uneasy. But then Amanda introduces me to Berto, who is finishing off some tamales and Spanish rice in a Styrofoam plate, and I sit down across from him. I unwrap the foil of my burrito and take a bite. On the nearby wall the Student Club for Android Rights has put up a poster that proclaims "Androids Are People Too!"

"Need some body work?" Berto asks.

"Yeah", I say, and I describe the make of the car and the dent.

"Camaro", he says. "Kickass."

"What would it cost?" I ask.

"You any good at algebra?" Berto asks.

In my book, people who can't do algebra are Neanderthals, but I keep this trinket to myself as always. Berto and I agree to trade our skills. Then Amanda's friends warm up to me, asking me where I live, what my dad does, and who I'm taking to the prom.

"The prom", I say disparagingly.

"You're not gonna go?" asks Sandy, who's cute but short and chubby.

"I haven't gone the last two years", I say. "So why now? Are all of you going?" I make eye contact with Amanda.

Berto shrugs, and Amanda's friends nod. Finally, we wait for Amanda's answer.

"I'm going with my boyfriend", she says.

Shit, I think. *My boyfriend*. The most toxic word combination known to young males. I hate it when girls toss this out there so casually, so haphazardly, like they're asking you to pass the ketchup. If they kicked you in the cojones as they said it, it would be more fitting. Have they no shame? (Yep, Shakespearean English). Amanda's revelation almost throws me back to my dejected pre-running-over-Oscar mode.

As I'm lying on my bed, listening to a Corps song called "Market Bungholio", an intrusive thought of Illy hits me, and I stop the song. I think back to the day she was killed. Revisiting the scene is a waste of time, Cara says, a point Dr. Glasgow agrees with. Then they start in on amelioration.

It was a Friday. Driving a Mazda harrier hatchback, Mom had picked Illy and me up from Graham Elementary and dropped Illy off at the Carvers, who were good friends with Mom and Dad and whose daughter Candice was Illy's best friend. Illy rolled a mini light-green porcupine suitcase behind her along a concrete walkway toward the front door of the Carvers' house. Then she turned and waved to me and Mom, and disappeared inside the front door as Mrs. Carver held the door open and waved to us.

An hour after we got home, we received the call from Mrs. Carver, who told Mom Illy had been struck by a pickup while playing in the front yard with Candice and her brother Aaron and had been taken to the hospital. Dad was at work, so Mom raced in the Mazda to the hospital, crying along the way, mumbling a disorientated "My baby" over and over and enough bits and pieces such as "accident" for me to form a general impression that something very bad—in fact, life-altering—had occurred. A large SUV slammed on its brake, narrowly stopping before impact from the side, as we zoomed through a red light. It's difficult to explain what I was feeling. On one hand, I feared something catastrophic had occurred, but on the other, I was both curious and frustrated about Mom's behaviour, because she wasn't making much sense. I kept asking her for information, trying to get more details, such as what happened, was Illy involved, or did something happen to Dad, but Mom responded with the same opaque frightened expression, and she continued crying.

In the hospital we waited near the operating room. Dad showed up, walking hurriedly down the hall, asking a hospital worker questions. I didn't learn the full details until weeks afterward, when Dad was finally able to talk about it. For the most part, Illy had been killed at the scene, struck somewhere along the sidewalk curb or edge of the street. However, Thompson Hospital had the latest medical tech, including a machine produced by Boston Medical Labs that, if multiple regions of the brain showed activity, could convince the other regions, or at least a significant portion, to respond in a manner that would not only keep the person alive, but allow an existence that would approximate normality. The patient's cognitive abilities might be limited, as in the case of someone who survives a stroke, but still, he or she would live, and that was the trifle of hope doctors had for Illy, since the neurosurgeon had detected a faint trace of brain activity in the occipital lobe.

The neurosurgeon, an Asian woman in light blue scrubs, emerged from the OR, removed her surgical mask, and reluctantly approached Mom and Dad. Her eyes conveyed a heaviness, and just before she spoke, a thick tear slid down her cheek.

"I'm sorry", she said, her voice nearly cracking.

And then Mom began wailing.

On Friday night, one week after turning my little sister's killer into a human pancake, I do what most murderers do: return to the scene.

It's nine p.m., an hour earlier than usual. After Berto's body work and tune-up, the Camaro is looking, and running, better than ever. I cruise down the street, not knowing what might have changed since I ran Oscar down. His pickup is parked in the driveway, but the lights are off in his old house. I pause in front of the spot where Oscar landed on the sidewalk. No sign of him now, or of the blood. Someone must have cleaned up his meth carcass.

I drive down the street, heading towards the hill. I roll down the window, breathe in the scents of a distant fire and nearby skunk. After I leave Oscar's street, I come to a stoplight before the freeway entrance. I'm the only car at the light until another jetless old car, a blue Dodge Challenger, rolls up beside me. The passenger side window rolls down and a young woman with wavy black hair and designer shades looks my direction. She lowers her shades, gets a clearer glimpse of me. Her eyes look Asian. Is she flirting?

The Challenger roars as she guns the throttle, and I respond in kind, filling the L.A. air with intoxicating exhaust. Maybe she *is* flirting. Or maybe she wants to race, which wouldn't go over well with Dad, seeing that I just got this antique patched up. I hate to admit it, but the Challenger sounds meaner, with a lower, hungrier growl that makes the Camaro sound like a juvenile.

Just when I'm starting to embrace the situation, when I let out the smallest trace of a grin, the young woman points a big black Smith & Wesson laser rifle at me, the tip of its barrel winking through her passenger window. Fortunately, instinct takes over: my foot stomps on the gas pedal and the Camaro lurches forward and as the laser rifle emits a high-pitched squeal and I see with my peripheral vision a searing blue-green beam of light shooting into the Camaro. Although I've seen them on TV, it's the first time I've seen a laser discharged in person. I'm well through the red stoplight and onto the freeway entrance before I realize the laser has missed. My heart is rampaging and I'm breathing like a humping jackrabbit, my hands and feet jittery. My seat is warm and there's a peculiar blended odour, from the steaming rip in the passenger seat and a fist-sized dark smouldering spot on the passenger door, of ozone and burnt upholstery. I'm gunning the throttle, pushing the speedometer past 100 mph and veering onto the freeway. And uttering

vile cuss words that would make a priest shout "The power of Christ compels you!" while flicking holy water at me.

It's hard to drive a hundred mph and keep your eyes glued to the rear-view mirror, but I'm doing the best I can, managing to stay in my lane. A few miles down the freeway, I exit and park along the curb of a quiet residential street. I dial 911 on my cell phone and am connected to a dispatcher for Joust Security. I give her the rundown, including my location and that someone in a old blue Dodge Challenger just took a shot at me with a laser rifle, and she asks me to calm down and come to the nearest JS station to file a police report.

I swing back onto the freeway in the opposite direction. The burnt smell fills me with a touch of nausea. Police, fire, and ambulance sirens whine from the city, some in the nearby vicinity. Fifty feet above, a police harrier zooms in the dark river of night, weaving well below the safety zone. I wonder if any are hunting the blue Challenger, the girl who took a shot at me.

At the JS station, a pan face has me fill out a form. Then an officer, a fifty-something-year-old spectacled man with a moustache, Sergeant Davies, interviews me in a small room, asking me the expected: did I get a good look at the shooter, do I have any enemies, and am I in trouble with organised crime. He draws in a sizeable breath, removes his glasses and looks away from his monitor.

"It says here you took out a murder permit a couple weeks back", he says.

"Yeah", I say.

Sergeant Davies looks down at the report, then back up. "You turned eighteen. So you decided to get back at someone."

"It's not that simple", I say.

"Isn't it?" he asks. He looks at the report again. "There could be complications."

"What kind of complications?" I ask.

"You tell me", he says. "You're a smart kid. What's Newton's Third Law of Motion?"

"Come on", I say. I sigh. Finally, I give in. "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction."

"So things like murder have a way of coming back on the murderer", he says. "Think about it." He gives me his card and says he'll look into it.

When I get home I park the car and take inventory of the damage. The laser penetrated both seats from the side, leaving black scars as it entered and exited, but it didn't make it all the way through the door. Even if I could cover up the damage, the burning scent would linger.

Shit, I think. How to keep this from Dad? He was already onto me about the dent. Even if I cover this up, he'll find out about it. He always does.

Inside, Eneca is pouring glasses of wine for her and Dad, who is sitting in the living room, watching a movie. The aroma of meatloaf hangs in the kitchen, and I'm thankful, hoping it will cover the burning smell I'm carrying from the car.

I say hi to Eneca and reach into the fridge for a Nostalgic Coke. I open the can and take a drink, and a smooth wave of serenity washes through my body, combating the fight or flight anxiety, reminding me of the way I felt when Mom and Dad were together, when Illy was alive. I take the Coke and start to go to my bedroom.

"Emile", Eneca says.

"Yeah?" I say, turning back toward her.

"The back of your shirt is burned", she says.

I reach back and feel the warm, charred fabric along my shirt. If Eneca can detect my endorphin count, wouldn't she know the source of the shirt's burn?

"If you need help—", she says.

"And how would you be able to help me?" I ask.

She grins. "I would figure something out."

What does that mean? I wonder.

"You're not—" I say.

"I won't tell your dad", she says.

"How do I know?" I ask.

"Every relationship I have is conducted in confidence."

"Does that mean you could cheat on Dad and keep it a secret?" I ask

Eneca laughs. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because I also have ethics."

If a true Biblical hell exists, it can't be worse than the night of Illy's death.

The revelation at the hospital was an ice pick in the heart: the unveiling of truth, the ceased existence of our family's youngest, lined with sterile white tiles and a hallway to the morgue.

The moments afterward, however, were a different kind of bloodletting. We were more than broken, our souls crushed. At home, the three of us trudged up the steep cliff of mourning. I sat on the couch, stunned, while Mom cordoned herself off in her bedroom, her pain shifting in audible waves: moaning, sobbing, wailing. Dad poured himself some vodka in the kitchen and moved about the house, glass in hand, from the study to the bedroom and the bathroom and dining room and then the garage, persistently dabbing at his eyes. At times I could hear him trying to comfort Mom, when ironically he needed comfort as much as Mom and I. At one point he sat down beside me, put his arm on my shoulder.

"How you doing, kid?" he asked, his voice quivering, his breath radiating with alcohol.

I looked at him momentarily, then looked away. Either I was too numb to acknowledge his empathy, or I took it for a pseudo show of commiseration. Even now I don't know the answer.

My Aunt Allie, Mom's older sister, and my cousin Janice flew in their harrier from San Francisco. Aunt Allie, who was a paralegal for a top law firm, was thin and had a narrow face and usually wore nice skirts and shoes. She jumped through every hoop in the circus to comfort Mom; for much of the night she held Mom in her arms, caressing her like her own child. Janice was seventeen, a little overweight, and probably my favourite cousin. She was always asking if I had a girlfriend yet. When we visited them, she had baked chocolate chip cookies and other sweets and made the World's Best Iced Tea. That night she helped Aunt Allie cook dinner.

"Emile", Janice said, sitting beside me on the sofa, "there's spaghetti in the kitchen if you're hungry. If you want, I can fix you a plate and bring it to you. There's also iced tea. I'll make you a glass and sweeten it the way you like it."

But even Janice's charm seemed impotent. The TV was on, but I wasn't really watching. It droned on meaninglessly. The stock market was up. The President was praising the Corporate Council. Nothing could assuage our grief. We needed time, and therapy. And amelioration. And one of us needed an intracranial implant. Whoever said *Everything falls apart* was right.

The next day, on the drive to Mom and Cara's house, I continuously look in my rear-view mirror, wondering when the blue Challenger's going to reappear. It's a small shock when I reach the CZ checkpoint incident-free, with five cars in front of me, and what's even better, I get the same uniformed pan face I had last time.

"Another day, another dollar, eh, Andy?" I say.

"My name's not Andy", he says, scanning my wrist and checking my info.

"I keep forgetting", I say. "You prefer the formal. Andrew."

"My name is Travis", the pan face says. He looks at me, expressionless, then refocuses on my ID.

"Why would a pan face—uh, an A5 like yourself—be given a name like Travis?"

He looks at me again. For about five seconds he holds his android glare, and I think he's going to short circuit or overheat.

"Your sarcasm is not appreciated", he says finally.

"I know it's not, Andy", I say. "But you'll accept it because that's how you're wired. An A6 or A7 wouldn't, but you will."

"I am composed of four living tissues—" he says.

"Just push the friggin' button, Andy", I say.

The pan face pushes the button, the red barrier opens, and I enter the security of the CZ.

At Mom and Cara's place we eat chicken enchiladas (Mom's cooking again), followed by my own exclusive helping of chocolate ice cream and natural style peanut butter, which I eat in the

living room and guard from Peppy. Chance Dondlinger, the head of Blue Work, an oppositional group, is debating a pro-corporation columnist on Fox News.

"Government planners have a responsibility to create jobs that the average person can perform", Mr. Dondlinger says. He's young, not more than thirty-five. He's overweight, but not grotesquely so, and even though it's difficult to tell on TV, he looks relatively short, with a square head, chubby face, and thick brown hair parted to the side. His thin-rimmed glasses, along with his well-spoken arguments, add to his air of intelligence. "You can't just replace everyone with robots and non-human entities."

"Corporate management has a responsibility first and foremost to its shareholders", the columnist counters. "They don't owe anything to anybody else, except to those within their own company."

Cara sits down beside me. Her demeanour, as well as the lean look in her eyes, suggest she has something serious on her mind. I've been expecting this.

"You killed him, didn't you?" she says. More of a statement than a question.

If I were more normal, like one of my classmates, I reckon I would react with shock at the bluntness of her statement. And I do admit she is more straightforward than usual, with even an ounce of confrontation in her voice. But whatever surprise I feel quickly dissolves when I'm reminded of Cara's embracing of truth.

"Is this where I play dumb and pretend not to know what you're talking about?" I ask.

"You couldn't let it go", she says. "Not many people can."

"He had it coming", I say, looking into her eyes.

"We all have it coming", she says.

I hear Mom humming the hymn "Bringing in the Sheaves" in the kitchen as she mops the floor.

"Would you rather I had the implant and live like a sheep in Happyville?" I ask.

"Is it worse than living with your angry self?" she asks.

"I prefer my angry self", I say. "It's the real me. I can't be anything less than that."

"So you choose to be a murderer", she says.

I sigh. I'm not going to win this argument. The voice of wisdom and experience will triumph.

"Oscar chose his own death when he killed Illy", I say. "I delivered the punishment. Legally."

"Legality under this government doesn't count for much", Cara says. "Meth is legal."

"You know I'd never do that", I say.

We stare at the TV. I pick up the remote, change the channel. President Salazar, more of a figurehead than anything else, is holding a press conference. Since coming into power, the Corporate Council holds more power than the other three branches combined. Mr. Gardner even insinuates this in his lectures. Before 2076, when the Corporate Council Act passed both houses of Congress and established the Corporate Council, presidents had real power and corporations wielded their power indirectly, mostly through lobbyists and campaign donations. Corporate power under *Citizens United* was gradually expanded until, eventually, the corporations decided to ditch the lobbyist middlemen and form direct representations within government. Donovan Gershon, Chair of the Corporate Council, as well as the representative for US Oil (the association for the various US oil companies), wields the real power. Ms. Kinerson, sporting the sourest of grins, used to refer to him as *A good ol' Godfearin' white guy like the rest of us*.

"Did you ever think that maybe Oscar Gray had changed his life?" Cara asks.

"Yeah, right", I say. "With an arrest record like that?"

"I know about his other arrests", she says. "Were any of them in the last two or three years?"

I shrug. "Even if he had changed, he set his own death in motion eight years ago."

"I hope you didn't just do the same", Cara says, piercing me with her wise, worried eyes.

Mom takes a seat on the other side of me and hugs me, but I can't relax. With my head on Mom's shoulder, I'm still looking at Cara, weighing the gravity of her words. She doesn't know about the young woman with the laser rifle, but it doesn't matter. She knows I'm in danger.

The next week I'm strolling down the hallway at school, books in my hand. Second period has ended, and Newton's Law of Motion is doing doughnuts in my head:

$$\text{Force} = \text{Mass} \times \text{Acceleration}$$

If I could only shut up my unconscious, tell it to stop calculating problems based on this formula. But the mind doesn't work that way. Much of my dream space and time has been wasted solving such problems from physics and calculus, and also hearing my A7 physics teacher Mr. Chen's much-repeated phrase, "No apply, you die." For some reason, Simulan designed some androids with Chinese features who speak Chinglish. I doubt students of Chinese descent are fond of it, but Mr. Chen's admonition gets a rise from the rest of us every time.

I stop by my locker, open it, and shove in my three-inch thick physics book. Why can't publishers produce a smaller book? Or why not divide the book into two volumes? Arrrgh, the geniuses who make the world's decisions. Calc and physics back to back. Why torture myself with this shit? It's about as useful as asparagus, the most bitter, vomit-inducing agent known to man.

When I close the locker door, I perceive, through my peripheral vision, a stationary figure standing at the opposite end of the hall. The mind is funny like that. It notices aberrations, the unique, those who are different. And it locates the dangerous, especially if it has encountered it before. Through the trail of students, behind those strolling to class and those leaning against the walls and lockers, stands the young woman from the blue Challenger. Standing 5'7", athletic, in hole-in-the-knee jeans and a black t-shirt. Same dark eyes. No shades. Slung across her neck and shoulder is a miniature backpack that's too small to carry a textbook but large enough for many varieties of handguns.

I tighten the grip on my calc book and amble toward her. Mr. Nichols, a black A7 history teacher, is standing next to his class door about twenty-five feet from her, but I'm not walking toward her taking any consolation in this fact, because I know that if this young woman is determined to kill me in front of these students, she'll do it, especially if she's a hired assassin or belongs to a gang (yep, still got 'em, just like cockroaches). Nor is it because of her age. Even

though she looks to be near eighteen, a third of all shootings these days involve people eighteen or younger. I admit, the crowd does factor into the potential for my salvation, but it's still not the reason I'm sauntering toward a possibly loaded gun.

"Fear works through deception", Cara once told me. "It tells people they are too powerless to overcome it, so most people don't even put up a fight. They believe the lie, and fear wins out."

"So what do I do?" I asked.

"Don't believe the lie", she said.

"That helps", I said sarcastically.

"Okay", she said, "when you're afraid of something, run right at it and punch it in the nose."

"This from the nonviolence advocate", I said.

"For illustrative purposes only", she said.

As I reach Mr. Nichols' door, the young woman steps to her right toward the entrance doors, and when I reach the doors I peer through the transom windows, but all I see is the lawn, the parking lot, and empty sidewalks.

After school I meet Berto at the body shop. The car is parked out back, on the ground lot. Berto pokes his head inside the car and examines the damage.

"Daaaang, fool", he says, poking his finger inside the holes of the seats. "Someone take a shot at you? If you're in trouble, I know someone who knows a guy whose cousin can get you a laser for cheap."

I follow him inside the building, which is not so much of a building as it is one of those corrugated metal structures. The weakest L.A. dust devil would rip this shithole down. The smell of burning metal makes my nose wrinkle, and a machine screeches from the opposite end of the

building, where a Santana-looking dude with yellow lens goggles and a gnarly gray and black goatee is sanding the top of an ancient Camaro that I'd guess dates back to the 1950s.

Berto leads me to a vending machine standing in the corner. Inside the machine are the best marijuana joints, snacks, and cans of beer. An Eli Lilly joint runs twenty bucks, the same as a Coors Light.

"Want a joint?" Berto asks.

"Why you asking me?" I ask. "I don't do that shit."

"Why not?" Berto asks.

"I like to keep hold of the steering wheel", I say.

"What?"

"Never mind", I say. "VR weed's good enough. You gonna light up?"

"Naw", Berto says. "My mom's Catholic. She'd beat my ass."

"You gonna join the Vatican Army?" I ask. In addition to carving a swath of territory in Europe equal to half the size of France, the Vatican has formed an army of half a million soldiers equipped with tanks, missiles, and fighter jets.

"The army's for fools, homes", Berto says.

I settle for a Nostalgic Coke. I feed the machine a twenty dollar bill and it dispenses a red and silver ice cold can. I open it, take a drink and am immersed in a wave of euphoria so intense that I almost start to tremble. For a moment I can feel Illy's tiny hand in mine. Then I'm looking into Berto's large black eyes.

"Dude, what was that?" he asks. "Your eyes rolled back."

"Coke makes a killer Coke", I say, blinking my eyes to help me see more clearly.

"I've never seen it do that to anyone before", he says. "You need the implant, cuz."

"No implant for this hombre", I say.

He gives me the breakdown of material costs: \$2500. One or two days' worth of my summer salary mowing lawns. Too sweet to be true. Then he pulls out a white folded paper from his back jeans pocket. A bright red sixty-eight, neatly written, glistens at the top.

"Before you go, can you help me with this?" he asks. He points to an algebraic problem asking to substitute a numerical value for y and solve for x .

First, you have to be smarter than the pseudo pencil lead, I think.

"I know you think I'm dumb—" he says.

"No, I wasn't thinking that", I say, wearing my best poker face.

I show him what to multiply and divide to solve for x , but even after my explanation, Berto looks perturbed, his face wrenched up like he ate some mouldy guacamole. I go back over the equation, more slowly this time, with Berto's confused grimace greeting me again at the end.

"Come on, Berto", I say. "It's not like it's android science. It's just algebra."

Twenty minutes later, Eneca arrives on Dad's Harley (another benefit of having an android spouse) wearing jeans and a blue t-shirt. Mom would never think of even getting on a bike, much less drive one. And a Harley? Seriously, it's unthinkable. Mr. Fu Manchu lifts up his goggles and stares at Eneca as his sander slides away briefly. Poor male humanity, conned again.

It will take Berto at least three days for repairs this time, and likely three weeks for me to make any progress with him in algebra.

"Who's the chick?" Berto asks as she rolls to a stop.

"My dad's girl-thing", I say. Again unable to solve the equation, Berto looks blank.
"Android."

"Seriously", he says.

"Yeah, seriously", I agree.

"I'm guessing your dad's not a big sleeper", he says.

"Well, I don't know", I say. "The way they go at it, he needs to rest afterwards."

Berto nods as, finally, this seems to make sense.

Steadying the bike, Eneca hands me a helmet, and I slide the bulky thing on. I have trouble getting the chinstrap to click into place, and she adroitly snaps it shut with her index finger and thumb. I've never ridden with her on the bike. The last time Berto worked on the car, he gave me a ride home and Dad took me to school the next morning in his harrier. I swing one leg over the back portion of the black leather seat. Eneca looks at me, waiting.

"Where do I put my hands?" I ask. I reach for the back end. "I'll just hold—"

"No", she says. "You could fall off."

"Then where—"

"You know where", she says.

Eneca lets the clutch out and the bike starts rolling over the hard ground. Slowly, I place my hands around her waist. When we reach the street, Eneca twists the throttle and the Harley charges down the street with a deafening racket, my hands clutching Eneca's sides. We ride for a few blocks before hitting a stoplight. Eneca steadies us at rest.

"You want to play it safe or have some fun?" she asks.

What does "fun" mean to an android, I wonder.

"A little fun never hurt anyone", I say.

"Not unless a raging driver takes a shot at you", she says.

The light turns green and Eneca guns it into the a brief wheelie and we race past the cars and pickups in front of us, onto the freeway entrance, where Eneca overtakes a Benz and we weave around and in front of traffic, my heart kabooming as fast as the Harley's rpms. After a few minutes of this, we exit the freeway and hit another stoplight.

"Have you ever gotten a ticket?" I ask.

"What's a ticket?" Eneca asks.

"Hm", I say.

"I can smell patrol cars on land or in sky from miles away", she says. After a few seconds, she asks, "How's the VR shrink working out?"

"Same ol'", I say. "You gonna give me your shrink sales pitch?"

She appears to think about it. "I'm cheap."

"Yeah, you are that", I say, drawing a twist of her head and a look of slight disapproval.

I wonder if she knows I killed Oscar. Cara knows. But Cara knows me inside and out. Eneca's an android. This whole time I've believed they were inferior to humans, but the A7's are still new, and I haven't discovered all their specifications. Now with Oscar dead and disintegrated, I might give amelioration a try.

At the last stoplight the light turns yellow and Eneca speeds up to get through it and I pinch her waist. Her chin reflexively twitches toward me: she knows I'm flirting, she has to. I don't think Dad would mind, not that he'll ever know.

The day of Illy's funeral, Mom had stopped crying. Now she looked sullen, empty, distant. Aunt Allie and Janice were still looking after us. Now that I think about it, they were worried about Mom. They couldn't leave, not with Mom in the state she was in. Dad and I were troubled enough, but Mom was on the brink. Something had broken inside her, never to be repaired. She sat on the edge of her bed, looking at the floor, hands in her lap, her hair dishevelled, and when Aunt Allie was finally able to coax her to the dining room, she sat at the table, staring across its surface. Aunt Allie had to help her change her clothes and, after several minutes of pleading, managed to get Mom to stand up so she could fit her with some clean light brown pants to go with a maroon blouse.

The service was held in a moderately sized Baptist church that we had sometimes attended. Even though Dad kind of kept to himself and his work, by nature Mom was outgoing, kind, and sweet, and loads of people knew her, which is why the pews were packed with friends and neighbours. We sat on the second row from the front.

When we had walked in, Pastor Haynes, an elderly black man with salt and pepper hair, took me aside and asked me how I was holding up. He told me about the soul and how it lives forever, that our earthly bodies are temporary. There was a grandfatherly quality about him. His attention was devoted to me, his eyes full of compassion and wisdom.

"You'll see your baby sister again", he said, "I promise you. This world is poisoned. There's a better one to come, a world where no one dies or gets hurt. This ol' world belongs to man. Man craves money and power, and he'll do almost anything to get it. It's full of pain, greed, and evil. But there are good folks, too. That's where you and I come in. We can fight back, we don't have to take it lyin' down."

"How do we do that?" I asked.

"By knowing the truth", he said. "By keeping it in here." He made a fist and put it over his heart. "And shouting it from the rooftops wherever we go."

When Pastor Haynes gave the eulogy, I was surprised at how much he seemed to know about Illy. Her classmates at school were saddened at her absence, he said, and their teacher, Mrs. Hartford, was grieving as though having lost her own child. He mentioned Janice's nickname for her, Cookie Monster, on account of her craving for Mom's chocolate chip cookies. He even knew about Gabby, the hammerhead shark I'd given her. This made me break down, and I didn't stop crying until the music, when Pastor Haynes' granddaughter Tarissa, who was in college, started singing a hopeful rendition of "Shall We Gather at the River."

There supposedly hadn't been a viewing on account of the blunt trauma to Illy's body. Still, something within me needed to see her, at least what remained, to look at her a final time and say goodbye. After Tarissa's song ended, people stood up and began dispersing. I slowly walked down the aisle and stood in front of the coffin, which was composed of white marble and accompanied on each side by vases of bluebonnets.

I stared at the coffin's contour. After a minute or two, I reached under the top section of marble and found the groove. Then I lifted the casket lid and pushed it open. Half expecting a discoloured mixture of pale white and blue, I was surprised at what I saw. There, lying peacefully in a white dress and shiny queen blue shoes, was Illy, blonde hair brushed and face made up, the flesh of her arms and legs a surprising shade of peach, looking as though she were dreaming and might wake up.

Four days later, after school, I pick up the Camaro from Berto's shop and am cruising down the freeway, recalling the graduation rehearsal in the football stadium the day before, how, amid the smell of gunpowder from a shooting just blocks away and the plaintive whine of police and ambulance sirens, Amanda and her boyfriend Emelio had a minor problem of staying out of each other's arms.

Clad in denim cut-offs, Amanda's legs flashed smooth and cocoa-coloured. I started contemplating life, and for a moment I felt sad, not knowing why, but then as I looked for answers, I felt sorry for myself, not because of Illy or because Mom and Dad had split up and dealt with their own struggles, but because, in spite of such conflicts, I couldn't find any silver linings in my life. I didn't have an amazing girlfriend like Amanda, or even an amazing friend outside of Peppy.

But then something fierce within me, like some religious doctrine, began surging against the voice of pity. I recognised its source: Cara had taught me to challenge my negative thoughts and feelings. I began to think of what I *did have*. Mom and Dad were alive, and both had someone special to live with—to love and help take care of them. And I had Cara and Peppy and a weekend refuge on the hill that most off the hill students would kill for.

So in that brief whirl of tumultuous emotions, I fought the forked tongued negatives and let the positives flourish. Suddenly I was able to look at Emilio without envy, and instead, I saw beneath his tats and pseudo-gangster exterior, and recognised a guy like myself, someone who appreciated Amanda for her witty personality and good sense.

As I'm mulling over yesterday, the familiar roar of a V8 GT engine charges beside me in the adjacent lane, and before I even see the Challenger or hear the high-pitched discharge of a laser, a thin ray of blue-green light punctures the window beside me, zeroes past the side of my head by inches, and exits in a small dark spot through the front windshield. Like a separate little animal, my foot immediately pounds the gas pedal and my mind goes into "flight" and again all the dozens of cuss words spit from my mouth, most of them preceded by the word "holy", as I break away from the Challenger, veering around a Lotus and a hundred-year-old Ford pickup

(which disproves the old Found On Road Dead joke) and a blur of other vehicles until I catch an exit and parallel park on a residential street.

I stare at the steering wheel in thought. My forehead is damp with sweat, and the bomb in my chest is about to explode.

Calm minds leave the others behind, I think. Something my fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Jeffers, used to say virtually every day. But it's a whole other ballgame when someone's shooting at you.

Two houses away, a diapers-wearing toddler with a beaming red face scuttles across the lawn, but his mother, dressed in a light blue work uniform and thick white apron, runs after him and scoops him into her arms before he reaches the sidewalk. The boy screams as the mother carries him toward the porch, back to safety. Is that what Cara has tried to do for me? I wonder.

I'm eighteen, about to graduate in three days. My classmates and I are sure of ourselves, believing we have the world at our fingertips. Or maybe we have a confident apathy. The world can't be as bad as school, we reckon. Only good experiences await. Things like making real money, getting our own place, and finding a partner. None of us thinks of danger or death.

I call Sergeant Davies on the phone.

"Yeah", he says.

"This is Emile", I say. "Guess who just took a shot at me."

"Numero dos?" he asks.

"Well, it wouldn't be numero uno, would it?" I say.

"I hear you", he says. "I'd be pissed off too if it was happening to me. I've been looking into your case. Even went into Chinatown. No one who owns an old blue Challenger matches the description of the shooter. The funny thing is, I tried to get hold of various surveillance within a twenty-mile radius of your location around the time of the nine-one-one call? I was denied access, which a few years ago was unusual. But it's been happening more often lately. I've been talking with other people I know in police and sheriff departments. Someone's shutting us out.

Could be FBI, Department of Homeland Security, who knows." Davies pauses, then exhales a breath of tension. "You got a gun?"

"Hell, no", I say.

"This is America, kid", he says. "Guns save more lives than CPR. Get yourself a piece. Then don't leave home without it."

"You're a monster help", I say cynically.

"I really am trying", he says. "I've even gone a couple of routes that could get me in trouble. I don't know what the hell's going on, but it's frustrating for all of us. Look, give me a call whenever you need. If you know something's going down and I can get to you in time, I will. Unfortunately, assassins and killers aren't renowned for giving a heads up. And Emile?"

"What?" I ask.

"If this girl comes up on you again, fire a round or two at her. Killers think they're invincible until someone starts shooting back."

"Killer advice", I say, and hang up.

At the Department of Retribution, I enter through the front doors and encounter the same uniformed guards as before. It's a quarter till five pm, which means they're closing soon. There are two men hanging around the checkpoint, a fifty-something-year-old man who looks two inches removed from Crudderville, and a fortyish Hispanic wearing an Angels cap, giving me what-the-hell-are-you-looking-at faces.

"Where's your paper?" the shorter guard asks, one hand resting on his rifle's handle.

"I don't have one", I say.

"No paper, no access", he says.

"This is regarding my last appointment", I say. "I need to talk to the Council."

"Not allowed", the tall guard says, shaking his head.

I balloon my cheeks. What now? What might the Neanderthals be able to do? I glance back at the two men sitting down. They don't look any friendlier than before. I turn back to the guards.

"Just curious", I say, "are there a lot of people like me who come in late, after their appointments, and want to talk to the Council?"

"You mean folks wanting a follow up appointment because things didn't go exactly as planned?" the tall guard asks.

"Something like that", I say.

"It hasn't exactly been as hectic as Walmart or anything", he says, "but yeah, there have been a few who came back."

"Thanks", I say, and exit the building, heading back to the Camaro.

I sit in the car, waiting—something I'm good at. Time passes. 5:00. 5:10. 5:20. I should be a cop, I think. Stakeouts would be my thing. I've got a ton of experience.

Then, from behind the building, I see Mr. Galen, clad in slacks and a short-sleeve shirt and tie, walking toward a silver granite Camry harrier along the building's side. I get out of the Camaro and jog toward him, reaching him just as he sits down and closes the door. He sees me through the window and I stand there calmly, showing him I intend no harm.

"I need to talk to you", I say.

Through the window, I see him thinking about it. He's facing forward, his finger near the ignition button, but he hasn't pushed it yet. He pulls his hand away from the button, leans back against his seat and sighs. Then I hear the door open, and Mr. Galen, the former principal of Dick Cheney High School, gets out of the car. Standing, he seems a more imposing figure, much like he had been as principal. His breaking up of fights was legendary.

"I'm afraid to ask", he says. "What is it?"

"Someone's trying to kill me", I say. "A girl close to my age. She's taken shots at me with a laser rifle."

"Geez!" Mr. Galen says in disgust, turning his head and looking at the ground. "This goddamned government." He asks about my family's private police carrier and I give him the rundown about Sergeant Davies and his investigation. "You got a gun?"

"Why does everyone ask me that?" I ask. "No. Do you know what's going on?"

"I'm a federal employee", Mr. Galen says. "I can't talk about it. And whatever is going on, I sure as hell can't stop it."

I can tell by Mr. Galen's reaction, as well as his nervous behaviour, that my situation bothers him, but that doesn't mean I can let him off the hook for firing Ms. Kinerson.

"You have to know *something* about what's going on", I argue. "Why would you take a job like that, anyway? Do you get some sick thrill out of giving murder permits?"

"You watch your mouth!" Mr. Galen says, tensing up and leaning toward me. But then his good sense takes over and he eases up and backs off. For a moment he says nothing. He runs his hand over his scalp. "I took this job because I thought I could be of some use. I thought I could prevent what's happening."

"But you can't be more specific", I say.

"No, I can't", he says. "I could get arrested just for talking to you right now."

"Then why talk to me?" I ask.

"Beats the hell out of me", he says. "It could be the fears and questions that keep me up at night. It could also be the reason why I became a teacher and a principal. I wanted to help kids."

"If you wanted to help them so much, why did you fire Ms. Kinerson?" I ask.

"I tried to keep Ms. Kinerson", he says, practically growling. He calms down. "I kept her as long as I could. Then the district mandate came. It said we had to let go of our remaining human teachers and replace them with androids. I still have a copy of it in my study at home. It cited

cost control as the reason. It also required us to change certain textbooks. They didn't tell us why, but I could do my own research. The new history and government texts were corporation friendly. The new science texts treated climate change as a hoax.

"Pretty soon every off the hill district was doing the same. The government was suggesting the changes to state governments and trying to keep it secret. The fancy schools on the hill still have people teaching, but we got stuck with the droids."

Mr. Galen pauses. His eyes betray the thoughts of a man resigned to the world's dysfunction, but who desires to make things right. For the first time, I see him as an honest, decent man, someone I misjudged.

"So why can't we have human teachers off the hill?" I ask.

Mr. Galen grinds his teeth, the muscles working in his head. "I don't have all the answers, but I know someone who might. Why don't you ask your old teacher, Ms. Kinerson?"

Besides counselling me herself, Cara—with Mom and Dad's permission—scheduled weekly appointments for me with a psychiatrist in the CZ, a glasses-wearing woman in her fifties named Dr. Cameron, who put me on an anti-anxiety med that calmed me down and made me sleep a lot. Dr. Cameron wanted to put me on something stronger, an anti-depressant, but Cara disagreed, and I spent the majority of my middle school days in a calm, tranquilized state, obeying my teachers' instructions and ignoring the occasional threat or insult from other students.

Cara and Dr. Cameron made me attend group meetings. At first, there were a handful of them. Cara would take me to the meeting—sometimes at a church or community centre, and others at the meeting room of Dr. Cameron's office complex, which was upscale, equipped with sofas and ottomans and art and plush cushioned chairs—and then Cara and Dr. Cameron would ask for feedback: what did I think of the atmosphere, would I feel comfortable sharing/contributing, and could I relate to any of the other patients, etc.

One group was what Dr. Cameron referred to as the Trauma Group. Like the name implies, it consisted of people who, like me, had suffered death-related traumatic experiences. There was one older boy, Edmond, about sixteen, lanky and blond, who was always "sharing" about how he struggled to sleep or get through the day after accidentally shooting and killing his little brother with his parents' Smith & Wesson nine millimetre. Every time he shared, his voice trickled down a gravelly promontory, eventually breaking, and he devolved into a red-faced teary-eyed sack of a kid, sobbing as the elder group leader, Dr. Strupe, a white-haired man in his eighties, hobbled toward him with a bum hip and a box of Kleenex, patting him on the back and consoling him in a gentle grandfatherly tone. Every meeting included Edmond's whiny lament. Inwardly, I groaned. I couldn't imagine bothering a group with my own suffering, much less the intimate details of Illy's death and what she meant to me, and I didn't want to be bogged down with anyone else's.

But there was Edmond, as broken as anyone has ever been broken, and all I could think about was how to distract myself from his demons. If I could have looked at my H-phone, I would have, but before every session we had to check our phones at the door. Some patients had H watches, which were likewise banned from meetings. I wondered when the meeting would end. I thought about what would be for dinner: would Dad cook, or would he order something for takeout? And what would he order? Chinese? Thai? Vietnamese? Mexican? Anything to avoid looking into the black barrel of Edmond's soul.

Whenever someone was sharing, there were usually gaps between speech, a repository of silence before the deluge of grief, and you could hear the lights humming, or the clock on the wall ticking, or someone's stomach gurgling. It was especially true when Edmond was sharing. He stared at the carpeted floor five feet in front of him, in the centre of the circle, his face contorted with the kind of hurt that I never wanted to express in front of others. In some ways, his pain seemed to go deeper than mine. Both of us had lost a sibling, and violently, but his had died by his own hand. How did you deal with pain like that? But I was hardly curious, and nearly incapable of commiserating. I was shallow, I know. Sometimes I thought, while listening to his sobs, Just kill yourself already. At least you'd spare me the whiny spiel. And I couldn't understand why Dr. Strupe encouraged Edmond to share during every meeting. Hadn't we heard it before? Didn't he know it was driving the rest of us insane?

When I told Cara the details of the meetings, finishing with Dr. Strupe's group, she fixed me with a placid gaze of judgment, one that I would become accustomed to in my teens, a look that suggested she had located some defect in my character or thinking, and that she had, through her vast scope of experience, discerned a path of treatment or correction. I knew she was going to tell me something I didn't want to hear, but I also knew, from her past actions, from her empathy, from her helping Mom and me rebound, that there was wisdom in her voice. There was love.

"I think that's the group for you", she said, referring to Dr. Strupe's group.

"Why?" I asked, disappointed.

"You need to learn compassion", she said.

So my membership in Dr. Strupe's group was confirmed. Every Wednesday afternoon Cara would pick me up from school, on her way from work, and drive me to the CZ, where I spent time with her and Mom before attending group that evening, listening to Edmond's choking voice and the voices of other psych patients. Through Dr. Strupe's urging, I eventually shared my own story. It was less dramatic than Edmond's, without the histrionics, but with no lack of sincerity, and Dr. Strupe immediately followed up with questions of how I felt about Illy's death, and I didn't hold back: I told him I missed Illy like oxygen, that I wasn't able to laugh or smile like I used to, that I was hollow inside and often felt very little if anything, that I was angry.

If you're thinking that at some point I came around and had a grand moment of commiseration with Edmond, you'll be disappointed. But I did listen. Not just to Edmond, but to the others. I listened to the testaments of accidents, suicide, homicide, snakebites, breakups, and other tragedies that lead to warped minds and broken hearts. In their speech and mannerisms, I recognised the signs of long-term pain in the other group members, and in the end, I did feel sympathy for them, even if I didn't always express it. More than anything, I felt a sense of relief that I wasn't the only one who lived with a nightmare on a daily basis.

On graduation night I sit on the first row of bleachers, in the nice cushioned fold-back reserved seats, two seats from Torbin Romero, the valedictorian. Mosquitos and fireflies and junebugs swarm beneath the stadium's lights, and the moon glows ghostly white near Venus, with hardly a cloud above. The first ten students are arranged in order of class rank, which means I'm third in my class. Our caps and gowns reflect the navy blue and gold of our school colours. If there's a lamer display than this, I wish someone would point it out to me. The tassel on my cap keeps brushing across my cheek like an annoying horsefly.

I look over my shoulder, into the bleachers, and see Mom and Cara, dressed in nice skirts, sitting next to Dad and Eneca, who are wearing their own Sunday's best. Cara and Eneca are sitting in-between Dad and Mom, but still, the fact my parents are sitting in the same group is supposed to mean something, but I don't know what that is.

Something makes me sneeze, and the tassel jiggles in front of my face. I feel like taking the cap off and stomping it into the ground. Then I realize the source of my acute allergy: Rachel Amundson's perfume. She's sitting to my right, at number four. She has a long, thin face and bumpkin blonde hair, and the perfume smells like something fancy, which she probably got on the hill.

"I can't believe it's finally happening, can you?" she says, grinning.

"Actually, I can", I say, wishing she had slid down to fifth, taking the swanky scent with her.

"Come on, Emile", she says plaintively. "Don't be like that. Not tonight. You should feel good about it. You've worked hard to get here. You've earned it."

"Yeah", I say.

The thing is, if Ms. Kinerson hadn't been fired, I might be sitting in Torbin's chair. Not because I want to, and not necessarily because I'm smarter than him, but because Ms. Kinerson wouldn't have let me settle for anything less. I remember talking to her once about running for student council. It was in the spring, the second semester, and it was clear to both of us that she

had become a kind of mentor. I would drop by her classroom in the morning or after school sometimes to chat.

"Why don't you run for student council?" she asked, sitting at her desk, sipping coffee.

"Not my thing", I said.

"If I had a dollar for every time you said that, I'd be a trillionaire like the Trumps", she said.

I cracked a smile. "Come on."

"Don't 'come on' me", she said. "What's wrong with it?"

"It's the friggin' student council", I said. "Geek Central. Hello?"

"Wanna know why it's Geek Central?" she asked. "Because the one or two cool kids who actually have brains and could address some of the students' problems don't have the balls to run."

"Wow", I said. "Did you just say 'balls'?"

"Yep", she said. "Sue me."

"For what?" I asked pejoratively. "You're a teacher."

She tilted her head and glared. "Really?"

"Sorry, I guess that was low", I said. "But you did say 'balls.'"

"The point being, ditch your pride", she said. "Until you do that, you won't excel."

"Who says I want to excel?" I said.

She narrowed her eyebrows. "You did not just say that." Then, perhaps remembering the story of how my little sister was run down by a meth addict, her expression softened, taking on a look of empathy. "Emile, you're good in all your subjects. You're one of the few students who really gets Hawthorne and Orwell! You have a knack for solving problems. That's why Student Council needs you. If you don't run—and win!—things are going to get worse and worse for

students off the hill. We already have mechanised teaching taking over. Whatever problems arise, you're the person who understands them. You'll stand up and kick some ass."

I left Ms. Kinerson's room actually considering running for the council. It was weird. I'd never even thought of being a part of a council, club, or organization, but by the following week, I was determined to put my name on the election ballot. I even had some ideas and slogans for campaign posters, as well as the speech that every candidate was required to give. But then the next week came, and I heard the news that Ms. Kinerson and the remaining human teachers had lost their jobs and were immediately being replaced with androids. The funny thing was, despite the bad news, I could still hear Ms. Kinerson's voice in my head, encouraging me to run for the council, telling me not to give up just because she had been fired. But it was no good. Somehow the mojo had run its course, and it didn't seem right running for Student Council without Ms. Kinerson there. She had been the catalyst for my decision to run, and I needed her there to fuel that inspiration, to help me negotiate God-knows-what kind of obstacles lay in the political and social maze of the council.

The principal, Mrs. Elliot-Bunsen, who was Assistant Principal under Mr. Galen, is making a speech. Not only is she the fakest person I've ever met, but she has the most enormous calves in the human race. After her spiel, Torbin creeps up to the podium, carrying a clipboard with his prepared speech, and launches nervously into a narrative that's supposed to make us feel better about ourselves and our future.

During our junior year, Torbin and I were in the same advanced programming class, and we were more or less friends. We worked on some group projects together, sometimes discussing them over lunch. My mistake was giving him a snapshot of my spying program in its early stage. He was shocked by the penetration of firewalls, the bypassing of password protections, and he seemed a bit self-righteous about the whole thing, as if spying and hacking were something only criminals or the government did. We didn't have as much to do with each other after that.

Torbin's large pronounced mouth seems incongruent to his thin, peanut-shaped head, and as he rattles off fancy words like "serendipitous" and "ingratiating", I feel a trifle sorry for him. Nevertheless, I listen as patiently and attentively as I'm able, and he finally nears the finish.

"As we look forward to our future lives and the challenges before us, I leave you, my classmates, with the following advice", he says. Then for a second he looks right at me. "Don't let fear intimidate you, wealth poison you, or authority oppress you."

The last part makes me sit up a bit straighter in my seat. I have to give Torbin credit, the kid has balls. And there I was, thinking he was a sycophant this whole time. After some hesitation, the crowd offers a smattering of applause.

Then, starting with Torbin, Mrs. Elliot-Bunsen begins calling the students' names and handing out the diplomas. Jessica Hilliard is second. Now my name is called, and I rise and amble up on the small podium, where, as she shakes my hand and hands me a navy blue diploma, Mrs. Elliot-Bunsen can't even muster the energy to crack one of her pseudo administrative grins. I'm supposed to smile a big fake smile like the other students. Instead, I return the same guarded expression of a stranger. I turn around, grab the tassel on my cap, and rip it off, tossing it to the ground. When I get back to my seat, Rachel follows, wearing a stunned look.

"Why did you do that with your tassel?" she asks.

"Why not?" I ask.

"Don't you want it as a souvenir?" she asks.

"You mean to remind me of how I was watched, herded, and controlled for twelve years?" I say. "No thanks."

Rachel's face softens with pity. "You must have had *some* good times."

"Yeah", I say. "Kindergarten."

As Mrs. Elliot-Bunsen calls the final names and congratulates the Dick Cheney High Class of 2092, my classmates hurl their caps into the air, unleashing a cacophony of celebration. I take off my cap, flick it like cigarette ash to the side, and start to head up the bleachers toward my parents.

"Hey white boy!" Amanda says. She's standing with Emilio, her cap in her hand, twenty feet away on the walkway, ambling toward me. She's wearing a nice dose of makeup, and her hair is pinned up top by two berets.

I step down to the walkway and turn toward her. "Hey."

"Think you're gonna bail on us?" she asks. "What you doing tonight, Mister I Don't Go to Prom?"

I shrug. "Looks like you got me figured out."

"No one's been able to figure you out yet", she says. "There's a party at Scott Hoyer's house. He's one of the people you actually like, right?"

I actually like you, I think. But there's the small matter of Emilio's presence, so these words, like so many, remain suppressed.

"You should come", she says. I must give a dour look, because she steps forward and frogs me in the arm. "Why do you have to be such a rebel?"

"I was thinking non-conformist", I say.

"Whatever", she says. "You could've been valedictorian."

"Yeah, well", I say. "Maybe in another life."

"You're coming to this party", Amanda says. "If you don't show up, we're gonna come to your house and drag you there."

"Ooh, intimidation", I say.

"I'll H-text you the details", she says.

I say goodbye to her and Emilio and then meet my parents as they descend the steps.

Mom immediately hugs me tightly. "I'm so proud of you, baby boy", she says, her voice cracking.

Cara does the same.

"Congrats", Dad says warmly, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Good job."

Eneca looks so nice in her soft alabaster sweater that, even though I don't anticipate it, I embrace her, trying not to show the attraction for her that's been building inside me, and catching a whiff of her lightly scented perfume.

"Eneca and I have been talking", Cara says. "She has quite the skill set."

"Dad knows all about it", I say.

Dad grins. Then, like so many times over the past seven years, Mom and Dad go their separate ways.

At home I shed the gown and throw on a Corps t-shirt and pull on some jeans. Sitting on my bed, I play Amanda's H-text. A hologram glows in a beam from the phone, showing Amanda wearing a midriff-bearing dark brown fluffy blouse. She points a finger at me.

"Six-fifty Reagan Drive", she says. "Come ASAP. Some people are already there. And Emile, if you skip out, I'm seriously going to kick your ass."

I grin, then chuckle. Funny girl. I actually check my hair, spray on a squirt of cologne, swipe a couple of Dad's beers and put them in my backpack. Then I hit the freeway in the Camaro. Thoughts of Amanda storm my mind. Lord knows I've spanked it enough with her in the VR; I've created a virtual woman who looks almost exactly like her, and we've experimented with lots of fetishes, but mostly I prefer good ol' missionary. If she wants me to attend the party so much, why is she with Emilio? Is she just being a good friend (to me)? Or am I an altruistic project for her, the wayward super-smart loner kid who needs saving?

Just when I'm about to switch lanes, a vehicle slams into the Camaro from behind, knocking my head forward, and I hear the high pitched whine of a laser, and a ray shatters the back windshield, zips past my head, and burns a tiny black hole in the front windshield. The Camaro

caroms over the line into the next lane, and as I regain control, I see the Challenger in the rear-view mirror, the black laser rifle extended outside the driver's window, pointed at me.

I swerve into the far right lane and floor the gas, gunning for the Newtown exit. This time, unlike our past encounters, the Challenger follows me, keeping on my tail. I'm able to pass a few cars before stopping at a light. There are two vehicles between me and the Challenger. The laser rifle is no longer outside the window, no longer pointed at me. I guess the girl has a sense of assassin's etiquette: she won't shoot in a crowd. Nevertheless, she revs the Challenger's engine, edging toward the car in the adjacent lane as though to muscle it out of its space, but with no luck: she's boxed in, no place to go.

Ironically, Newtown isn't one of the new suburbs, but is a combination of a section of Burbank and a nameless stretch of old warehouses, some of which are used by homeless crudders who score cheap Mexican meth and need a place to crash afterwards. I know the warehouses from my research on Oscar Gray, and I've been inside some of them and have a decent recollection of which ones are actual warehouses and which are crudder dens.

The light turns green and I change lanes and zigzag around the other cars and trucks, onto a winding road, but I hear the hungry V8 engine of the Challenger not far behind, and it catches up to me and bumps me again, and in the mirror I catch red and yellow plastic pieces splintering from the taillight, and I let loose with a cursing barrage: bitch, slut, dyke, and a few more non-pc choices. The girl wants me dead more than she loves her car. But I don't even know the bitch. What could I have done to her? Oscar Gray was a methhead, and methheads only have one friend: meth. And the drug treats them and everyone else like shit, but the methheads cling to it like they were pre-programmed to worship it. Even the pan faces have more independent thinking than the methheads. That's how messed up it is.

I reach the Chinese part of Newtown and am shielded by a few large trucks. I hit another red light, but the intersection is clear, so I barrel through it. In the rear-view I see the Challenger crashing against another car, trying to exit the lane; then it rides along the sidewalk and runs the red light as well.

Enough of this crap, I think.

I floor the gas and pass the first warehouse. I remember a through alley between the second and third warehouses, and when I reach it I take a hard left in front of a Mack truck into the alley and immediately hit L.A.'s biggest pothole. If not for my seatbelt, my head would hit the Camaro's ceiling; instead, the lower belt pulls tightly, painfully, against my hips and thighs. The pothole's so big, nearly four feet wide, that it's a miracle the car doesn't get stuck in the damn thing. Once out of it, I burn down the alley half the length of a football field, tires hopping across broken black and gray asphalt, before slamming on the brakes. Five feet in front of the car, a Chinese toddler, a little girl with short cropped hair, is standing barefoot in a pink gown, holding a broken paper doll with blonde hair.

I look around. No adults. No one else, either. Where is this girl's mama? Shit. I try waving her away, but she just stares at me with soft black calf eyes.

"Get out of the way", I say, more to myself than to the girl.

Then I hear the roar of the Challenger at the alley's entrance. Decision, buttwipe. Make one! I turn the engine off, and get out of the car. I scamper to the nearest door, which is ratty and faded green, open it, and go inside.

A smell hits me: a sharp aroma that reminds me of hospital chloramine, with a hint of BO and urine. Somewhere in the distance, an old man is singing to the accompaniment of a Jew's Harp. It's dim and squalls of dust mites eddy from out of the darkness. I pull my H-phone from my pocket and use the flashlight app and shine it. Nothing to see in the ten foot circumference: a stained, scummy concrete floor that's begging for disinfectant. I cough and wander blindly in the haze until I find a weak beam of light illuminating a path thirty feet away. I try to move quickly and carefully at the same time, which is almost impossible. The last thing I need is to step on something sharp, like a rusted nail, or something living and infectious or poisonous, like a rat or rattlesnake, which, unfortunately, haven't bitten the extinction bug like some other lucky customers. I hear noises besides the Jew's Harp and singing. Human noises. It kind of sounds like moaning. No, breathing.

I shine the light again: a few people are lying in the floor, sleeping in their clothes. One shaggy-haired guy in his undies, face-down on a single mattress. Another has only a Pfizer blanket beneath her.

As I keep moving, I spot a dozen sleeping bags lined against the wall. About half are occupied, with people sleeping on top, as opposed to inside, due to the heat. The light from my cell phone catches a few glass and ceramic meth pipes on the bags and floor, which answers the question of where the peculiar smell is coming from. I reach the singer, an old Native American man with long, stringy black and gray hair. He keeps repeating the same phrase: "Doggy don't do what a doggy don't know."

"Think", I tell myself.

I follow the faint path of light and come to a stairwell. Opposite is another ratty door with a transom through which a rectangle of light spills, and to the side, close to the wall, are a couple of large wooden crates.

Think. What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck!

I quickly ascend the stairwell. On my H-phone I select an old H-text I sent to Berto and press autoplay. I set the phone down on the seventh step, hurry back down the stairs, and hide behind one of the crates. The H-text plays brightly and loudly, with a two foot version of myself accompanied by my message: "Hey Berto. I was just thinking. Maybe Eneca can tutor you some in algebra. I've already asked her and she's cool with it. The only thing I'm wandering about is, would you be able to concentrate on algebra, or would you maybe get caught in a trance staring at her breasts or something? Anyway, I think you ought to consider it. If you're able to focus on algebra, I think you'd make faster progress. I mean, I can do algebra myself, but teaching it is another ballgame. Okay, homie?"

I wait. The trap is in place. One of Cara's aphorisms runs through my mind: "Nothing ever goes exactly the way you want it to." Tell that to Oscar Gray.

The old singer has found another refrain: "Gonna tap me a little bit of sunshine." Over and over. The guy's not much for variety. I wonder what *sunshine* is a euphemism for.

Another beat. My H-text finishes and begins repeating. My breathing quiet, hands steady. I see a foot with a black sneaker step into view beside the stairwell. I pivot around the crate opposite the girl. The laser rifle pokes forward. It revolves in my direction before swinging sharply in the other direction, toward the stairwell. As the girl traipses toward the stairs, lured by

my voice on the H-text, I creep toward her. When I reach the base of the stairs, I lose track of her.

Oh shit, I think. Where did she go?

I consider going back and hiding behind the crate. No. She might see me. As quietly as I can, I traipse up the stairs, pausing before the last step. If she's waiting for me behind the adjoining wall, I need to distract her. I reach into my pocket for some change, sling the coins forward, and they clink against hard concrete. The barrel of the laser rifle juts toward the sound, fires two rounds. I grab the rifle and try to wrestle it from her, but she's strong. We spin toward the stairwell and go tumbling down, and in the process the girl wings a shot at me, the brick of heat passing above my shoulder, stinging my ear as it burns a hole through a window. When we reach the floor, the gun patters onto the last step, and I quickly grab it while landing on top of the girl. She tries to wrestle the gun away, but I'm too strong, and I hold the gun barrel on her breastbone. With my finger on the trigger, beginning to squeeze, I see a look of resignation in the girl's eyes. She relaxes her grip on the rifle, then pulls her hands away, resting her arms out to the side. And to be fair, her eyes are not indicative of someone who wants pity, but reflect an emptiness, a loss of hope. She's ready to die.

I ease up on the rifle, removing my finger from the trigger, and pull the weapon away from her as I sit against the wall, trying to catch my breath. She sits up as well. Even in the dim light, I can see that she's not bad looking, with full cheeks and dark eyes one might describe as "puppy dog" if they didn't belong to a would-be killer. For all I know, she's probably made a half dozen hits before. I think of what I just came close to doing: I almost took another life, one I'm not legally permitted to take.

"What's your story?" I ask.

"Bite me", she says, with no trace of an accent.

"Ooh, the Queen's English", I say. "O podemos hablar espanol. No? Why you taking shots at me?" If there is anything known as a half sigh, this is what she offers. Then she does something quaint with her eyes: they dart low and to the side, then back again. It's not rolling the eyes,

exactly, but an action that seems to be mocking it. No, I'm pretty sure this chick thinks she's too cool to roll her eyes.

"All right", I say. I look over the rifle, pretending to experiment with it. "Let's see how this thing works. I'm guessing the safety's off?"

"You killed my brother", the girl says in monotone, her eyes flashing anger.

"What?" I say, confused.

"The car you raced last year", she practically growls. "The Mustang?"

I think back. A troubling memory jolts me. About ten months ago, on a weekend night, an old gray Mustang pulled up beside me at a stoplight south of Riverside, revving its engine. When the light turned green, the Mustang roared ahead, and I floored the gas of the Camaro. Ahead of us, the highway was empty. The Camaro's odometer tilted past a hundred miles an hour, and our cars touched. Neither us slowed down. We must have been going a hundred and forty miles per hour. I don't know if I swerved into the Mustang's lane or vice versa, but our cars bumped, and the Mustang careened into a concrete barrier and came to a stop about eighty feet after. I assumed the driver was okay. *Hoped* he was okay. I was also afraid that he or she might not be, so I kept driving.

Inside, I feel a hollow ache of guilt. "What the F."

"Yeah", she says. "You're a murderer."

"We were racing", I say. "Our cars touched."

"You crossed into his lane", she says.

"I did?" I ask. "How do you know?"

"I hired a P.I.", she says. "There's traffic video."

That explains how she tracked me. My license plate must have been visible. Damn. There I was stalking Oscar Gray, while this girl has been stalking me. I look down, still thinking.

"We were going too fast", I say. "I wasn't trying to run him off the road."

"Why didn't you go back and check on him?" she asks.

I shake my head in disbelief. "Why didn't you go to the police?"

"We did", she says. "They didn't care. Our cop insurance sucks."

A moment passes.

"I'm sorry", I say.

"It's a little late", she says.

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Camelia", she says.

"Camelia?" I ask. "Didn't people stop naming their kids that a hundred years ago?"

"Don't be a retard", she says.

"Not very PC, are we? I thought Camelia was a name for dress-wearing princesses. Hardly a name for killers."

"I go by Cam", she says.

"A little masculine", I say.

"You're a jerk", she says.

"I'm not the one who tried to kill one of us", I say.

"I have a permit, asshole", she says.

This revelation makes me want to bang my head against the wall. How did *she* get a murder permit? Oh right, I killed her brother, which completely ruined her life. And she has the video evidence to prove it. I'm sure she presented it to the Retribution Council. But I'm not up for arguing about it, not with her. For one, I don't want to get into this girl's head, as my own is labyrinthine enough.

"How long have you been following me?" I ask.

The look she gives me, while not quite a glare, reveals she knows my secrets.

"I saw you kill that man", she says.

"The methhead?" I ask. A depressing, depleted feeling comes over me as I have to repeat, for the thousandth time, the irreversible fact that has haunted me.

"He killed my sister", I say. "Ran her over."

The realisation stuns her. She leans back against the wall.

I look at the floor. Warmth radiates from the laser rifle.

"What was your brother's name?" I ask.

"Liam", she says.

I was complicit, I think. Or negligent. Reckless. Irresponsible. Something like that. Maybe all of them. I was involved in an act that killed someone. I'm such a hypocrite.

"If I give you your laser back, are you going to take another shot at me?"

"Why don't you give it back and let's see?" she says, smiling.

"I'll hold onto it for a while", I say.

"I could just get another one", she says.

"Awesome", I say. "I'll pawn this one."

Her eyes burn with anger, and I expect steam to flow from her nostrils. We get to our feet and start ambling back through the warehouse. The old singer has switched to another line: "Crawlin' on down to the dank Crudder Land." I ask Cam about the Challenger's registration not showing up, and she explains, via the DOR in De la Hoya, that such details are protected once a murder permit is approved. When we reach our cars, I get inside the Camaro and lay the rifle in the passenger seat. It's beautiful, I think. I start the engine, start to pull away.

"Hey!" Cam says. "You can't keep my gun!" She slams her fist down on the Camaro's hood.

In my rear-view mirror, I see the toddler in pink approaching Cam, offering the paper doll, and Cam bending down, accepting it.

During the next week, Cam sends me H-texts demanding that I return her rifle. I don't know how she got my phone number, but it doesn't matter.

What's the rush? I text back. *It's not like you need to kill anyone anymore.*

I feel more secure with it, she texts.

Your teddy bear, I text.

That's you? she texts.

It's me, I text.

You don't know where I live, she texts.

Underground? I text.

Up yours, she texts. *You're the crudder.*

When Friday rolls around, I recognise the same sad dead-end hopeless mood that I used to experience before killing Oscar Gray. I lie down on my bed and slip on the VR. I select Dr. Glasgow and find him in his office, sitting on his desk, bare legs interlocked and swinging back and forth like a child's, wearing denim shorts and a dress shirt and tie.

"Is that you?" I ask.

"What, too drab?" he asks. "You want professional?" In a split second he changes into a gray suit and blue tie. I sigh. "Too much? Okay, don't get your panties in a crinkle." He ditches the coat and tie. "Better?"

"Yeah", I say.

"So what's got you down, Soldier?"

"I hate it when you call me that", I say in a tired tone. "Told you a hundred times."

"Saw-ree", he says, holding his hands up. "Don't shoot the shrink. I'm here to hurt." He looks askance, pretending to be confused. "Or was it to help?"

"If I wanted a clown—"

"You'd go to the circus!" he says, clapping a single clap and pointing at me. "That's a good one!"

"I don't have all day, Doc", I say.

"What, you got a job?" he asks.

"Yeah, I'm peddling ice", I say.

"The Mexican stuff? Guy's gotta eat, right? Okay, okay, okay. No more fun and games. Tell Papa G what's a matter." I glare at him. "No Papa? Fine. What's irking you?"

I describe my sombre mood in light of the elation I felt after Oscar's concrete flip special.

Dr. Glasgow offers a look of concern, nibbling on his thumbnail as he looks deep in thought.

"We got a conundrum, don't we?" he says.

"I have a conundrum", I say. "Technically, you don't exist. You're just a program."

"Of all the vile, racist things one could say!" he says, acting offended.

"You're a creation", I say. "Created by someone like me."

"You're a creation", he argues.

"So you're a Creationist now?"

"Just sayin'", he says. "It's kind of like that old AC/DC song 'Who Made Who.'"

"What?" I ask.

"AC/DC", he says. "Never mind. They don't make music like they used to. There's no singing anymore. Oh, I forgot. You like the Corps. No offense, but they sound like a catfight at two a.m."

"And your point, Doc?" I ask.

"AI's are people, too!" he says dramatically.

I laugh. "How can you be? You don't even have a body."

"Not in the sense you're talking about", he says. "My body is electric."

"Spliced together by a shrink and a pothead programmer", I say.

"You know how to go for the jugular, don't you?" he says in a hurt voice.

I grin. "Brass tacks."

"Okay, the brass", he says. "If you get in a gunfight and get shot, you're wounded. Shooting and killing your enemy brings some relief, but it doesn't heal your wound."

I nod gently. "Nice metaphor, Doc. Four stars for simplicity. But that's also the problem. With a physical wound, just find a doctor, cut out the bullet, and dress the wound. But here I am. I've been talking to you for years, and I'm still a basket case."

"Ahaaa!" he says with a Middle Eastern accent, pointing his hand at me. "Two points. First, suffering a serious physical wound often leads to years of aches and pains and other repercussions. Second, you're absolutely correct. Mental trauma is more sophisticated. That's why Freud came two millennia after Hippocrates. And it's particularly troublesome for those who cling to whatever loss or trauma they've suffered. Which is why I advocate ... " He leaves the opening for me to finish.

"Amelioration", I say.

"Amelioration", he confirms. "Like I've told you a hundred and seventy-three times, amelioration does what the wisest of us are able to do. It helps you focus on those situations that you can control, as opposed to those that you can't. It realigns your priorities on the present. Speaking of, made any new friends?"

"Yeah, if you count someone shooting at you as a friend", I say.

"Well, you know what they say", he says.

"No, I don't."

"The best friends are former enemies", he says. "Hang in there, kid."

"Thanks", I say.

"Anytime", he says. "And I do mean anytime. It's not like I sleep or anything."

"Or masturbate", I say.

"Hey", he says disapprovingly.

"Oh, you do?" I ask, laughing. "See ya." I switch him off.

Entering the Underground is like going to another country, or into a prison. While a few minimum security prisons remain off the hill, the medium and max facilities have been transferred Underground. In max prisons that previously ranked the highest for riots and murders, the inmates have been rendered harmless with cheap Panamanian-made SDIs. Now they're happy shiny people who pick up the soap and return it with a smile and a hug. No more shanks. However, Cara told me that recently the government figured out it was cheaper to execute prisoners than provide the implant and keep the inmates alive, so legislation was passed making execution easier and faster. Human Rights Watch and the U.N. have criticized the US for the new laws, and French president Lucas Francois, the world's first transsexual president, routinely derides the US for such policies.

Luckily for the average crudder, the pens are located in separate quadrants, so if a serial rapist escapes, he won't have access to an underground community. It was a sticking point in the design of URC's, or underground retirement communities (negotiated by AARP), which have sprung up (or down) in the wake of our aging population. Since the elderly lost a chunk of their medical insurance benefits under the Medicare Improvement Act, the URC's offer cheap rent, utilities, recreation, and healthcare in one bundle. The whole thing was a coup for the mining company Freeport McMoran, which holds a seat on the Corporate Council. Ms. Kinerson used to rail against the company in class.

"They're herding people like cattle!" she said. This particular rant happened on a Friday. She was wearing blue jeans and a white t-shirt with the black sketching of rock star Lichen Cobain. On the V projector were notes about Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*. "And what's worse, the people are going! That's not the country I grew up in."

I seldom spoke up in any class, but I had started to develop a penchant for speaking up in hers. And how could I not? Compared to the android teachers, a spirited pulse pervaded her class. She was *alive*. She presented one of the last real chances for a conversation with a human teacher. And since she randomly called on students for answers, shy students found little refuge in her classroom.

"What options do people have?" I asked.

"They can fight", she said, her eyes brooding, her voice low. "They can say hell no. They can resist."

"Won't the government just kill them?" I asked.

"They'll try", she said. "But we have to be smarter than they are."

"We?" I asked.

"Who do you think they're coming for? We live off the hill. In the government's eyes, we're no different than those who live underground. We're expendable."

I park the Camaro, which is good as ever thanks to Berto, in a massive parking lot and head down an escalator to the Underground checkpoint, where I get in one of the lines and fill out the required form, which has questions like "What is your purpose for visiting the Underground?" and "How long do you intend to stay?" A blue H-sign pops up along the wall: *15% Discount at Walmart for Underground Residents!* Another H-ad says *New Shoulder Passport Chip! Go to US.gov/passportchip*. A baby nearby needs its diaper changed. Several people are having conversations on their phones. The rumour is that getting through the entrance checkpoint is easy, but getting through the exit checkpoint is another matter, and that the waiting time for each reflects this. Given how slow this line is, I can't wait to see what the exit is like.

Freeport McMoran reportedly chose the locations for Underground cities, retirement communities, and prisons based on geological stability. The majority are located in quadrants beneath open spaces, in the middle of nowhere, with no cities or towns above—in other words, in areas that have zero natural resource value.

When I finally reach the Customs officer, I'm surprised to find that he's human. He's in his late thirties, slightly heavy, glasses, with finely combed hair. He scans the microchip passport in my wrist, and my info displays instantly on his monitor. To authenticate my identity, I hold the fingertip of my index finger across the fingerprint glass recorder.

"Hey, a real person", I say with interest.

"Yeah, well, someone has to keep 'em honest", he says good-naturedly. "They throw around some real flesh and blood to keep it real. A pan face would never tell you that."

"Probably not", I say.

"Emile", he says, reading my passport info. "What brings you to the Underground? Going to see the homies?"

"Just one homie today", I say.

"One is better than none", he says.

The electronic stamper yelps as the date and port are recorded on the passport microchip.

"Have a nice visit, and watch out for the cruds", the officer says.

"Thanks", I say.

I amble through the Customs exit toward the trains, where I buy a ticket to North Questa, the most decent part of the city and the location of the address Mr. Galen gave me. Above looms a simulated sky with clouds and peeking sun. I pass a crudder, an old guy with white hair, ripped t-shirt, and purple Dockers pants that are way too big for him, sitting Indian style against the wall, holding a small porcelain pipe in his hand, and the same chloramine odour that I encountered in the warehouse wafts towards me.

"Sir, you can't smoke that here", a pan face officer says to him. "This is a meth-free zone."

"A what?" the old guy asks in a hoarse voice. "This baby gots a hunnerd miles on her. She goes wherever I go. I only smoke Meskin meth. H & H constipates me."

"Mexican meth is illegal, sir", the pan face says.

"Not in my neck of the woods, it ain't", the old guy says.

I pass the usual: KFC, Starbucks, McDonald's, etc. Of the three, only Starbucks still employs human workers. Both KFC and McD's have official circular displays on their windows saying *We Practise Painless Animal Euthanization*.

I proceed toward the railway and stand at an open spot behind the yellow holographic line. In the queue beside me, a black man in camouflaged pants is standing across it, and a female A6 transportation officer moseys toward him.

"Sir, please step behind the line", the officer says.

"I ain't across no line", the man says.

"I can see you are over the line, sir", the officer says. "Move behind it or I'll be required to modify your behaviour."

"Modify what?" the man says. "That's some racist shit."

"Sir, I'm an A6 Simulan model", the officer says. "I'm incapable of racist thinking or activity."

"That's some bullshit", the man says. "Corporate Joes programmed your ass. You do their bidding. You the new slave."

The arriving train bails the black man out—he never does step back behind the line. The aluminium exterior of the cabins are silver and shaped like bullets. I step inside the cabin and take a seat near the window. There's trash on the floor: a McDonald's cup and crumpled bag, Kleenex paper, cigarette butts, and an empty pack of Marlboro 100's. The aroma of KFC fried chicken flows from the front.

As the train starts moving, the smell worsens before the rush of cool air washes it behind me. Most bad sensations and experiences like that: they sting, smell bad, taste bad, are hot or cold, or even hurt for a second, minute, hour, or even a day, but after a few days or a week they've blown away, just a small notch on the continuous chip of memory. It's something Cara taught me: to use metaphor with events in order to make light of the world, to understand how things are connected. I admit, it does work, at least for most experiences. But then there's always one so haunting that you can't shake or put into perspective, one for which no explanation makes sense. And even after you think you've solved the problem, you haven't really solved it, it clings to your skin like poisonous residue.

Hologram ads flash outside the window: Hamer & Hamer: Meth You Can Trust. Nostalgic Coke: Remember the Good Times. Try Duncan Hines' New and Improved Cannabis Brownies Mix!

At North Questa Station I exit the station and find the same sky and clouds, but now the artificial sun is fully visible, minus the warmth of rays. Electric motorcycles and electric cars zoom down the road. Strolling along the sidewalk, I see three A5 private cops beating a man on the ground.

"Awww, help!" the man says, absorbing punches. "These green bloods is beatin' me! I didn't do nothin'!"

A few people stop and stare, while the rest move on. I mosey up to the cops.

"What did he do?" I ask them.

One of the A5's, a female, gets to her feet, pulls out a taser and points it at me.

"Do not interfere, sir", she says.

Telling myself to relax, I carefully back away.

I stop at a 7-Eleven and buy a Coke Slurpee. Even in the Underground, some things never go out of style. As I stroll I look up, across the pseudo skyline, and take in the towering rows of bland apartment buildings. Using the H-GPS on my phone, I zigzag for three blocks before locating Ms. Kinerson's address in a cul-de-sac of small stucco duplexes. There's a compact gravel yard with a bearded old angry-looking Chinese gnome wearing a t-shirt that says *Absolutely No Corps Allowed on the Premises*. I follow a concrete walkway leading to the porch. A handcrafted wooden sign on the door says "Welcome."

I push the doorbell button and hear a short piano melody playing inside. The door opens and Ms. Kinerson stands, looking as vivacious as ever, wearing blue jeans and a light yellow blouse. She looks less than shocked to see me.

"Hi Emile", she says, smiling.

"Hi", I say, and give her a hug.

She welcomes me in and I step inside a small carpeted living room. In the corner is a desk with an old-fashioned VR headset, and next to it, a small sofa that I sit down on. Ms. Kinerson takes a seat on a wicker chair. She asks me about graduation, my plans, yada yada, bla, etc.

"Are you still teaching?" I ask. She shakes her head. "Why'd you move to Questa?"

"It's where the government moved the teachers", she says. "Most of them, anyway. It's in my profile. I'm an objector. Ninety percent of teachers were given objector status. The rest were labelled proponents and allowed to live off the hill. A few were even allowed into the CZ's." She grins. "You never saw that on the news, did you?"

"Dystopian", I say.

"For us it is", she says. "But not for them. For the corporations and elites, it's utopian."

"Bastards", I say.

"What brings you to glorious Questa?" she asks.

"You", I say.

"Me?" she says.

I tell her about the murder permit, killing Oscar Gray, and Cam trying to kill me (legally). She raises her eyebrows at the various revelations—again, not seeming terribly surprised.

"Sound familiar?" I ask.

"Let's just say I know this species well", she says.

"I know. That's why I came. So what's going on?"

Ms. Kinerson looks down at the carpet, thinking. She looks back up. "Did you believe that permits would only issued in extreme cases of injustice?"

"I don't think it mattered that much to me", I say.

"Ever hear of the Chicago Syndrome?" she asks.

I think back through my history classes, then shake my head.

"They removed it from the textbooks nearly fifteen years ago", she says. "In the first part of the century, before the different zones and the Underground, there were thousands of shootings

every year in Chicago. Almost all of them happened in poor neighbourhoods where most of the people were black. The police did nothing. The government did nothing. If the elites did it to one marginalized group, wouldn't they do it to another?"

"What does the government get out of it?" I ask.

"Not the government, per se", Ms. Kinerson says. "The elites. The wealthy. The CEO's. They get the usual: more land, more space, more money, more control. Half of the land and property in the US is owned by the top ten percent of the top one percent."

I ask to use the bathroom, as the Slurpee has taken its toll on my plumbing. Spoiler alert: the bathroom is tiny. It smells of spearmint. Above the toilet is a mirror that makes me flinch from my own face glaring back at me, with a sign at the bottom asking "Is that you?" On the adjacent wall is another sign: *I'd Rather Give Blood to an Android than to a CEO!*

When I come back into the living room, Ms. Kinerson is watching some news on TV. It's something about Ken Aschoff, the CEO of Freeport McMoran. He's standing on a podium, giving a speech. He has a small head that is bald on top, surrounded by bulging patches of dyed black hair on the sides and back. I catch the tail end: "... creating a more stable, prosperous America!" Ms. Kinerson flicks the TV off with a wave of her hand.

"One of your heroes?" I ask.

She glares, and I chuckle. She asks if I'm hungry, and we take our conversation into the dining room (also small). She pulls cold lunch meat and cheese slices from the fridge, and I fix myself a barbecue chicken sandwich, which I practically inhale along with a Coke.

"What's with all the androids?" I ask. "They're everywhere now. Sometimes I can't tell the difference between an A7 and a human."

"The elites don't believe in equality", she says. "They see the poor and middle class as threats to what they have. We're occupying space that they want to own, and they're afraid of us rebelling, taking their land, wealth, and power. History has proven you can't keep the proletariat down forever, so they're muddying society with androids."

"Can't there be both?" I ask. "Can't the rich keep what they have while we make a decent living?"

"Not with this government", she says. "The lower classes don't have a voice. The government abolished the unions. When the unions existed, people straight out of high school could make good money. Now none of us can even keep a job."

"But the corporations need us for labour", I ask.

"Not anymore", Ms. Kinerson says. "The elites don't see workers as people who deserve their own lives of prosperity. Robots and androids are cheaper to maintain. If a robot breaks down, just fix it or dump it into the junkyard. No hazard pay. No worker's comp. No accidental insurance. No strikes or protests."

I mention Blue Work leader Chance Dondlinger, and Ms. Kinerson tells me Blue Work is a front set up by Homeland Security and that the people who contact it and pledge their support are arrested and sentenced to time in the penitentiary.

"What the heck?" I ask.

"It's a ruse", she says. "To give the appearance of free speech."

Then she tells me of an anonymous oppositional group called SOW, as in reaping and sowing.

"Nice Neanderthal name", I say.

"They created your band The Corps", she says, flicking her eyebrows. She gives me a contact number in case I'm interested in joining them.

"How do I know they're legit?" I ask.

"My word", she says.

"Other than that", I say.

"You'll know", she says, grinning.

Before I leave, I think of something else.

"There's a difference between Chicago and what's going on now", I say. "Murder was illegal then."

"Exactly", she says.

I look at her, waiting for more explanation. "So? Why the murder permits?"

"To thin out the population", she says. "They want us to kill each other."

As I come back through Customs, the A6 officer in my line gets relieved of his shift by an A2. The pan face has a kink in his mouth and can't smile properly: his lower lip zigzags and gets stuck. Stepping up to the window, I hold my wrist to be scanned, and I notice a crack in his lip.

"How are we today?" he asks in an inauthentic, jovial voice, his mouth going berserk.

Good friggin' grief, I think. Would someone please put this tin man out of his misery? Oh yeah, I forgot. That's racist.

"Fine", I say.

He scans my microchip passport, and it gets the e-stamp.

"There you go, sir", he says with the same malfunctioning mouth. "Thanks for visiting the Underground!"

When I get back off the hill, I feel the rush of fresh air, the sun hot against my skin. The ocean of authentic blue sky looms above, swallowing the desert and mountains and everything in between. I think about what it must be like for the crudders below. After a month, three months,

or a year, the false sky must seem like the real sky. But they have to know, in their unconscious minds, that something is missing, that the fake sun doesn't convey warmth.

My H-phone service connects again and a flood of messages comes in, two of them from Camelia, whose plaintive requests to return her rifle remind me of the story of Perseus and the hags, with the blind hags whining "Give us back the eye!" after Perseus snatched it from them. One text is from Berto, who received a D in algebra and has to retake it in summer school. And the last from Cara: she wants to know if I'm coming over on Friday, and if so, would I mind stopping in Chinatown (off the hill) and buying some raw ginseng.

As I drive home, I think of what to do with Camelia. What *do* you do with a girl who tried to kill you? It was for a good reason, though, at least from her point of view. She's not bad looking. No, not at all. Nice eyes and cheeks. Tight body. Legally, she can still kill me. Legally, her rifle belongs to her. Do I want to get to know her? Dangerous question.

An H-ad pops up from my phone: A woman in a pink flamenco dress whirls around, coming to an abrupt stop. Then a woman's voice says, "New Freeport Maxis: Feel the Biozyme Freshness."

I wipe away the ad.

I take in a deep breath, then dial Camelia on holo. When she answers, a hologram of her sitting on a sofa appears above the phone.

"Watchin' the soaps?" I ask. She sighs for an answer. "I know. Not your thing."

"You better not have pawned my rifle", she says.

"Hold the threats, Nikita", I say. "How bad do you want your gun back?" She glares at me with a bored look. "If you want your laser, show up to my house tonight. Given your stalking talent, I'm sure you know where I live. Seven o'clock. Dinner."

Expecting her to protest, I'm caught off-guard by her calm reaction, accompanied with silence. Then she hangs up.

That went well, I think.

When I get home I ask Eneca if she feels like cooking dinner, and I even offer to help, which I rarely do. Eneca agrees. Then around 6:30 I throw on a decent collared shirt, one with red stripes against a slate gray, and set the table in the dining room. The silverware is spotless, not a rinse stain in sight, a sign that Eneca washed them. She busies herself in the kitchen, wearing a checkered red and white apron, her hair dolled up in a ponytail, while Dad lounges in the living room recliner, laughing at something from a political talk show on the H-TV.

It's good to hear him laugh, I think. I've heard more of it from him in the last year. For the first three years after Illy died, he never laughed, not that I heard, anyway. His investment in Eneca is paying off, I think. Not just her psychiatric or amelioration skills, or that she looks like a goddess, or that she's even good in bed. Those help, but there's more to her than that. Dad might actually be happy, and it's because of her.

As the minutes pass, I wonder if Camelia is going to show. It wouldn't be the first time I was stiffed by a girl. For one, there was my phantom homecoming date with Kim Ainsworth my sophomore year at Dick Cheney High. She'd caught me looking at her in Spanish class and began showing enough interest for me to ask her out. When I went to pick her up, the address she'd given me belonged to a Hispanic family who looked confused and a little scared.

I ended up skipping the football game. The tux rental and corsage set me back a couple thousand dollars, but that wasn't the worst of it. The next day at school I saw Kim sitting with her friends, including some football players, at a table in the cafeteria, as sophomores weren't allowed to leave campus for lunch. Stacy Forsett was one of them. Laughter erupted at their table, and they kept looking back at me.

"Hey Winkler", Stacy said, "how was Homecoming?"

Everyone at their table was laughing. Even Kim.

I grinned back at them.

"Look, the H dufus thinks it's funny", Stacy said.

I got up and went into the cafeteria kitchen. The workers asked me what I was doing. There was no spaghetti, so I settled on a chicken and cheese quesadilla. I scraped it hot onto a paper plate and carried it to Kim's table, where I opened the cheesy tortilla and shoved it into her face. Stacy pushed me and clenched his fist, ready to take a swing, but Mr. Rosenfels, the lanky sophomore principal, stepped between us.

"Hey Kim", I said. "How's the cheese?"

Stacy called me some names. I talked to Mr. Rosenfels afterward, explaining my actions, and he was cool enough not to give me detention. The next morning, during P.E., I ran into Stacy in the locker room, and we continued our little dance there. He came up from behind me and tripped me, and I fell flat onto my face. When I got up, I took him to the floor, got behind him, and choked him out.

Dad pads into the dining room and takes a seat.

"So who is this girl?" he asks.

"Just a friend", I say.

"Hm", he says. "It's good not to push these things. Take it slow."

A tantalizing aroma of lasagne fans from the oven as Eneca pulls a rectangular silver pan out and sets it on the stove. I pour fresh-brewed iced tea into four glasses and set them above the dinner plates. Then I help Eneca set the remainder of the food on the table. We all sit down, waiting as the lasagne cools. A dozen minutes later, at seven o'clock sharp, the doorbell rings.

I open the door. Camelia is standing in front of me, made up like I've never seen her: she's wearing designer jeans and Castilian pumps and a light shoulder-baring blouse with swirling black and fuchsia colours. Add in some pomegranate pink lipstick, apricot blush, fuchsia eye shadow and black mascara and it's all I can do to brace my dropping jaw.

"Uh ...", I mutter.

Embarrassed, she does that trick with her eyes: a glance down, to the side, and then back to me.

"Come in?" she asks.

"Yeah", I say, holding the door as she steps inside.

"Wow", she says, checking out the living room. "Nice place."

"Yeah, wow", I say, thinking of her appearance.

We go into the dining room and I introduce Camelia to Dad and Eneca, who shake her hand and try to make her feel welcome, telling her it's good to have her over, etc., etc. Dad carries the pan of lasagne, now since cooled, to the table and we sit down to eat. With a plastic spatula, I cut servings for Camelia and me and scoop them onto our plates.

"So Camelia", Dad says, "I assume you guys met in school."

"No, I went to De La Hoya", she says.

"The school near Chinatown?" Dad asks.

"That's the one", she says.

Dad pauses. Then he says, "If you didn't meet at school, I'm sure there's a story there."

Why does Dad have to nail everything right on the head? I wonder. Dad waits for an answer. Usually I can conjure up something convincing on the spot, but on this occasion I clam up.

"How did we meet?" I ask, looking at Cam.

"Wrestling", Camelia says.

My heart skips.

"Wrestling?" Dad asks, a little confused.

"Yeah, there was a meet at Cheney High", Cam says.

"Oh", Dad says, as though it makes total sense. "Who won?"

"It was a draw", Cam says.

"Okay", Dad says, chewing his food and wearing his best neutral expression.

I inhale the lasagne, which is better than anything Dad has cooked. Ever. With the edges of the pasta browned to a crisp and the tomato sauce homemade and the ground beef lean and nearly well done. Dad will never cook again, I think.

"Awesome, Eneca", I say. "Best food I've ever had."

"Thanks", Eneca says. "Glad you like it."

Dad and Camelia chime in with their own compliments. It's weird, since I'm usually the last one to offer my approval. Camelia is going through the lasagne almost as fast as I am. Dad and Eneca ask her about her interests and her plans for the future, and she says she played point guard on her high school basketball team, likes dancing and drawing, and is thinking of studying social work at a local college. Dad's eyebrows rise in admiration, and Eneca commends Camelia as she pats her hand. I find myself staring with a mixture of wonder and accusation: either Camelia possesses some real talent, or she's one big flattering liar.

I refill everyone's tea, and when everyone's done with their meal Eneca serves dessert: a chocolate Bundt cake with custard filling.

"You guys going anywhere afterward?" Dad asks.

Camelia looks at me. We haven't discussed an *afterward*.

"If you want to borrow the Ford ... " Dad says.

It's not every day that Dad offers the use of his harrier.

"We might", I say.

After dessert I offer to help wash the dishes, but Dad and Eneca wave me off and tell Camelia it was nice meeting her and having her over for dinner.

"Up for some sky driving?" I ask Camelia in the living room.

"I was thinking we could take my car", she says.

"So you can whack me and leave me on the side of the road?" I ask.

"Seriously?" she says. "I'm past that. Although dinner and a whack does have a nice ring."

"Assassin's humour?" I ask.

"You would know", she says. The light glints off her dark eyes, reflecting a hint of pain and anger. A moment passes. Camelia seems curious about the living room, looking at the photos on the mantel and one of Eneca's paintings above the fireplace: a would-be deer hunter in the high desert, a scoped rifle strapped across his shoulder, scratching the head of a deer standing in front of him. She fixes her eyes on a photo of Illy, who was four years old at the time, smiling as watermelon juice runs down the sides of her mouth. Camelia looks at me. She's on the verge of saying something, but I look down at the floor, retreating from the pain, the rush of emptiness.

"Your car doesn't have harrier", I say. Then a second later I ask, "Is this a control issue or something?"

In the garage, I unlock the Camaro's trunk, open it, and pull out a long Corps tote bag. I'm about to close the trunk.

"I need to see it", Camelia says.

I give her a you've-got-to-be-shitting-me look. "What, you think I'm gonna give you like half a gun? Fine." I set the bag back down in the trunk and unzip it and pull the rifle out and lay it on the bag. "Happy?"

She reaches for the rifle stock, but I block her hand with my own.

"No touching", I say.

"Who doesn't trust whom?" she asks.

"Whom? Really?" I say. "Not even Eneca says 'whom.' And you *did* try to kill me." I zip the rifle back up in the tote bag, sling it over my shoulder, and carry it to her Challenger, which is

parked along the curb. "Look on the bright side. You're getting a free Corps tote bag. I don't give these babies to just anyone."

"The Corps ..." she mutters.

"You don't like The Corps?" I ask. "I'm hurt." I lay the bag in the Challenger's trunk.

Dad's harrier, a Ford 800 turbo, the model NASCAR uses in its ground and sky races, can out-run, out-fly any ground car or harrier on the market. Dad has reminded me more often than I have driven the thing not to push it, not to treat it like a sports harrier. And so far, I haven't.

Camelia and I are still on the ground, approaching the entrance ramp, the engine quiet. Camelia is reading her H-phone and checking her makeup in the glare of the screen. Through the vents, the ubiquitous combined scent of gunpowder and laser blows into the Ford.

"Smell that?" I ask.

"There's a sweep three blocks away", she says.

"I don't hear anything", I say.

"Ever hear of silencers?" she asks.

I nod. The Ford keeps moving.

"You ever think that maybe one day there won't be anyone else left to sweep?" I ask. Camelia doesn't answer. "Guess not."

There's one harrier in front of me—three car lengths away, just like the law requires—and it lifts up as it enters the ramp.

"Are you gonna get airborne?" Camelia asks.

She sounds just like Dad, I think. When he rides with me he gives me *suggestions*, such as *Now you might not want to wait too long to engage the harrier, etc.*

"Sure", I say.

I push the green button that engages the harrier engine, and the Ford lifts vertically off the ground. The piloting wheel rotates out in front of me, replacing the steering wheel, and I steady it as we enter the ramp. On the exterior, the body panels shift into a rounder, wider design for flying mode, and five-foot wide titanium wings spread from each side. The H-ads start to pelt us:

Now at Walgreens! Pfizer's New vasectomy Vaccine! Two-Year, Five-Year, Ten-Year and Lifetime Vaccines Available!

The Deer Spawn Farm: Providing Hunters with Future Fresh Meat

The Cheney Foundation: Replacing Bad Tickers with New Sustainable Hearts

For a Limited Time Only! The Colt AR15 Retro Model! Only \$40000!

"What is it you wanted to show me?" I ask.

"Twenty-two Reginald Avenue", she says.

The harrier's computer picks up the address, and the location on a holo map flashes above the console.

"South Riverside", I say.

I don't argue. Instead, I rev the engine, and Camelia shoots me a look that says *Seriously?* As I pick up speed, the vertical thruster disengages and the horizontal thrusters kick in. The sky lane opens up, and when there's a football field of distance between the Ford and the harrier in front of us, I gun the thrust, the harrier engine roaring a purer, cleaner, higher-pitched roar than the land-based engine, but the sky lane curves sharply and I hit one of the orange holo pylons, which sends an alert to the Ford and records the incident. If you hit too many pylons you get points deducted on your license.

"You have struck a pylon", the Ford's automated voice warns.

"Shit", I say, jerking the wheel to the left, steering us back into the sky lane.

"How many times have you sky driven?" Camelia asks, her eyes revealing worry.

I give her an irritated look. "I don't remember."

"About how many?" she asks.

"Besides my license exam and training ... three or four times." Camelia makes the sign of the cross. "You're Catholic? Is that you? You're Chinese, right?"

"My parents are", she says. "I'm something called American."

"Isn't it against your culture to be Catholic?" I ask.

Camelia gasps. "Did you get the Asperger's vaccine? I'm not really Catholic. I don't go to mass all the time or anything. My mom does."

"So you don't believe but you adhere to the customs", I say. "How messed up is that?"

"It's called desperation", she says.

We pass over the sparkle of lights that make up Riverside. When we reach the address, I turn into the sky waiting zone. The highway from Riverside to Temecula, lit by lights and H-billboards, curves below.

"What now?" I ask.

"Lower", Camelia says.

I stare at the road below. Then the wheel. I sigh.

"Okay", I say. I grab the pilot wheel and lower the harrier until we're hovering above the entrance ramp to the highway. Cars and harriers speed in opposite traffic lanes up and down the highway. Cam watches the highway on the harrier's H-screen, then looks out the window. How many times has she been to this location? I know she's thinking of her brother, and right now she's trapped, maybe with an image, or a memory, or the lonely space in her life that would normally be occupied by Liam.

A minute passes.

"It will never go away, will it?" Cam asks.

I know she's talking about the pain.

"I thought it would", I say. "But I've still got issues. So no. I don't think it does."

After another minute of quiet, Cam turns her gaze from the window.

"Let's go", she says.

I take us back into the night sky and get on the sky freeway. The harrier engine is kicking serious butt now, emitting a hollow roar, steady at 200 mph. I drive for five minutes, glancing at Cam once in a while to see if she's still sad. I exit at the Angeles National Park and stop in a sky parking zone a minute later. There are no other harriers around.

Below, lit by the moon and artificial light, the dark mammoth peaks of the San Gabriel Mountains reach into the night.

"Wow", Cam says, looking down. "They're beautiful, aren't they?"

"Have you seen them before?" I ask.

"Not from up here", she says.

The minutes pass. At some point I get my fix of nature and turn my gaze toward Cam, and she wrests her own gaze, distant and wondering, from the passenger window, and we're just looking at each other. A hybrid feeling of euphoria and awkwardness fills me with anxiety, like someone looking down from the high dive into the blue gulf of the deep end for the first time, and I wonder, in spite of our history, if maybe she feels the same way.

I drive us back home and walk Cam to her car. She thanks me for inviting her to dinner. Her sadness still palpable, etched into her expression. I think of giving her a hug, but that could be inappropriate, given the short time we've been on friendly terms, and especially since I'm a guy and such an action might be perceived as flirtatious or even perverted. But I could show her some small act of contrition.

"Hey", I say. "I'm sorry. I mean it."

Looking into my eyes, she nods.

I hold out my hand, and she takes it, our eyes locked in understanding. It's something of a handshake, but more intimate. Then she gets into the Challenger and takes off.

The next day I'm sitting in the living room, watching TV. On CNN there's a panel of six pundits discussing recent infighting on the Corporate Council. Eneca is reading a thick book of historical fiction in the recliner. Why do androids read? It can't be on par with the enjoyment humans get from it. The A7's like Eneca are supposed to have similar limbic regions and hippocampuses in their brains, for emotions and pleasure, and their spines hold humanlike nerve plexi, but even with these components, you don't see the androids displaying road rage, embezzling money, or putting arsenic in their lovers' drinks. Which is conversely why I wonder about their level of enjoyment for the things they like.

"Hey Eneca", I say. "Do androids dream of electric sheep?" An old joke from school. Some consider it "racist" now, but not everyone views androids as a race. Eneca glares at me, prompting me to chuckle. "Come on, I'm joking. Teasing is not a crime. It's a sign of intimacy."

"Do you dream of real sheep?" Eneca asks.

I laugh. "Good one." What a catch, I think, for Dad's sake. No one needs to meet the right person anymore. These days, you just buy one. *Purchased Love*, I think. A good title for a musical. And the star of the show would be an android.

"Do you?" she asks, flicking her eyebrows.

"It's been a few years", I say. "I've moved on to bovine now. How's your book?"

Eneca gives a light grimace. "I've read better."

I nod. "Hey, I've been thinking about amelioration. A lot. I'm ready. That is, if you're still up for it."

Eneca sits up straighter, offering a look of optimism.

"You want to do it right now?" she asks.

"Yeah", I say.

I turn the TV on mute. Eneca says that, as a licensed psychiatrist, she has to explain the effects of amelioration, but I've heard it all before—probably a dozen times, literally. From Cara, Dr. Glasgow, Dad, and Eneca, herself. She gets up from the recliner and pads toward me. Standing in front of me, she pulls up her blue t-shirt to her lower ribs, revealing smooth abs and a nearly perfect navel in the shape of a seven.

"Put your hands on my stomach", she says.

Almost reluctantly, I place my hands on her belly, which feels warm against my fingers and palms.

"What—" I start to say.

"The conductivity is best here", she says. "I have a battery, remember?"

"Works for me", I say.

"Close your eyes", she says.

I close them. This is a bit weird, I think. Is she going to kiss me? What would Dad think? But he approves of amelioration, and he had it done on him himself, by Eneca, so he knows the specifics.

"What are your biggest fears?" she asks. "Bring them to your mind. You need two or three, but no more than five."

Fears, I think. As far as I know, I'm not really afraid of much. That sometimes happens to cynical cantankerous types like myself who have lost hope that things will ever be as good as they once were. Or I could be lying to myself. There could be monstrous tentacles of fear buried within my unconscious. Just when I'm about to give up, the fears trickle into view: A) I'm afraid of forgetting Illy, the good memories I have of her, B) I'll never snap out of this bitter spirit of resentment, that I'll tug it into midlife and old age, never connecting with anyone or finding anyone to share my life with.

"Now think of the worst thing that has happened to you", she says. "Or the event that you can't forget. You know, the problem. And remember the consequences and frustrations that it caused."

I conjure Illy's body being crushed upon the impact of Oscar Gray's pickup. Although I didn't literally see it happen, witnesses described it in detail. I recall Mom and Dad moping around the house, like ghosts. Mom sobbing for weeks afterward, her eyes a constant leaking spigot. The numbing hollow aura that followed for at least a year afterward.

While I'm thinking about these, a new image comes to mind: that of Peppy. And not just the image of him, but his being in the act of something: he's licking my face. And the image is virtual—I can almost feel his wet tongue stroking my cheeks.

"And we're finished", Eneca says.

I open my eyes and take my hands off of her stomach, and she pulls her shirt down.

"How was it?" she asks, sitting down beside me.

"I saw Peppy", I say. "He was licking me."

Eneca grins. "Good. It beats the other memory, right?"

"So will that be the dominant memory from now on?" I ask.

"You're assuming there will be a dominant memory", she says.

"Won't there?" I ask.

"Not necessarily. But the old memory, the bad one, will be re-directed to the back of the line. You'll still have the memory, but you won't dwell on it."

"Hm", I say, taking it all in. "What's the success rate?"

"It's effective in approximately ninety-six point zero thirty-four percent of patients", she says.

"Thanks for the extra digits", I say.

"I included them especially for you", she says, grinning.

I weigh the probability. "What if I'm in the three-point-zero-sixty-six percent?" A second passes. The world is on a downward trajectory of decay, I think. Technology can't save us. It yields new tools, toys, and weapons, but we end up in the same place, only faster. "I'm not getting the implant."

"I know", Eneca says.

This confuses me. "How?"

"I know *you*", she says.

In the afternoon I grab a yellow highlighter, lie down on my bed, and comb through the general help wanted classifieds of the *L.A. Times*. I worked at a call centre during my junior year. I sat at a skinny desk in the world's most uncomfortable chair and called people—who we referred to as "targets"—via an H-phone to collect late payments. The air in the office had a funny dank smell, like wet swimsuits were hung up to dry, and none of the employees made eye contact or said anything to each other. Everyone made minimum wage, and there were no raises. Through my targets I became acquainted with expletives I'd never heard before, accents and twangs that assaulted my seventeen-year-old sensibilities, anger in the broken hearts of the dispossessed. Needless to say, I wasn't very good at collecting. I developed sympathy for the people I called. I didn't badger. Sensing pain, I listened. Maybe that's why some of them made their payments, because I wasn't the prototypical pushy collector. I stayed six months. By the time I left, I hated the company as much as my targets did.

Interspersed among the ads for Walmart and security guard jobs are recruiting announcements for the Army and CDF Special Forces. The CDF ad screams *\$200,000 sign-up bonus for eligible recruits!* I highlight it and move on to the others. Next is the janitorial section. During my freshman and sophomore years, I worked as an assistant to a janitor at a large Baptist church. It was the best job: no angry customers, total solitude, wiping away the dirt and filth and making everything clean and shiny again.

When I'm done with the classifieds, I pull my letter of acceptance from the University of New Mexico from a shelf on my desk. The schools' emblem, a red pueblo, sits in the upper left-hand corner of the white bond paper. UNM is renowned for its radiation science and nuclear waste storage programs, neither of which is on my list of possible majors (hint: I don't actually have such a list). What does a killer like myself study? Psychology? Criminology? Sociology? Retribution science? What the hell am I going to do? I don't know. And I'm not going to ask Dr. Glasgow. At least not right now.

Later I text Cam and ask her how she's doing.

Fine, she texts back.

I ask her if she'd like to hit the De la Hoya Mall sometime and get something to eat.

Why De la Hoya? she texts.

Never been there, I text. *And plus, I thought you could show me around your neighbourhood.*

You mean my hood (ghetto), she texts.

I didn't say that, I text. *Didn't mean it, either.*

Okay, she texts. *Sorry.*

If you need to talk or anything, well, you know, I text.

Okay, she texts. *Thanks.*

As I drive to the CDF's recruiting office, something tells me it's a bad idea. Amanda sends an H-text asking what I'm up to, and I tell her where I'm headed.

"You better be pulling my fucking leg!" her hologram says from the passenger seat. Interesting image, I think. I wouldn't mind doing that, as she has very nice legs. "You are not wasting that IQ of yours on the CDF."

"I'm just going for a look", I say.

"Said the sheep entering the wolf's den", she says. "You hate the government. Or maybe I've just been talking to your cynical anti-establishment geek clone for the past three years?"

"Seriously, Emile", she says.

"I know", I say.

I parallel park near the CDF recruiting office in downtown Corrales. A poster on the office window shows a special forces operator donning an electronic helmet and aiming a multiple rocket launcher fitted to his arm, with several rockets flying to their targets in a desert. Through the window I see a balding man in his thirties, a little overweight, leaning back in a black leather office chair behind a desk, holding one hand behind his head.

I open the door and walk inside and am immediately slapped by a stuffy, ammonia-laced odour. You sign in at the entrance, get embalmed at the exit, I think. The recruiter, who introduces himself as Kevin Barts, springs from his chair, talking with a thick Southern drawl and requesting my own personal details (including phone number), which I write down on the official visitor register.

"You like to shoot stuff?" he asks. "Like to blow shit up?"

"Depends on what it is", I say.

"How about Ruskies?" he asks. "Bastards took the Arctic. Now they're messin' with Greenland. Dmitry Putin's a son of a bitch. Someone's gonna nail his ass. He'll bite it like Grandpa Vlad."

I nod toward the poster. "What's that about?"

"That's the cyborg division", he says. "Most of the andies do the grunt work now. When real flesh and blood gets involved, we send our ops armed to the teeth. Limb appendages require a

neuro implant. Fully detachable. Don't believe any of that shit in the Times about permanent nerve damage. When the government presents its case, they'll have to retract that story."

I think about this, gazing across the desk. Stacked on a heap of papers is a brass figurine of a commando carrying a ton of weapons, including a heavy machine gun, anti-aircraft launcher, anti-tank launcher, and ammo on his arms and back. So much weaponry, I think. Too much. No normal person could handle that much weight. But an android could.

"What about brain implants?" I ask.

"Intra-cranial?" Mr. Barts asks. "Those are permanent. It takes some serious clearance to get 'em. There's a slight risk, less than one percent, of malfunction or adverse reactions. But the few who qualify can process thoughts and calculations more rapidly than you and me. They're lethal fighting machines."

"What happened to the Seals?" I ask.

"They're still part of the Navy. They used to be the shit. They hold their own, but the CDF Special Ops sets the standard now."

I think about this. "How hard is it to get in to the CDF Special Ops?" I ask.

"Very", he says. "About one in every one hundred applicants makes it." Mr. Barts gives me his card and some colourful brochures, shakes my hand and thanks me for coming in, and I leave the office.

Outside, while strolling back to the Camaro, I see Stacy Forsett approaching me, wearing a blue CDF t-shirt that gives away his career aim. He stops in front of me, blocking my path.

"You'll never make it", he says, glancing at the brochures in my hand. "They don't take head cases."

I gesture at his t-shirt. "You're right. They have a penchant for assholes."

Stacy steps up, gets right in my grill. "It's a bad time to piss me off."

"Make sure you're sure", I say. "You've lost the element of surprise."

"I've been practicing", he says, donning an ugly, elitist grin.

He simultaneously knees me in the crotch and throws an elbow at my eye. On instinct, I lock my knees together and twist my hips enough so that he doesn't get a clean shot at my nads, but his elbow lands flush against my eyebrow, opening a cut and dumping a rivulet of blood into my eye. What I've learned from years of fighting is that pain is not an excuse to quit or even pause: you fight until one of you is knocked out, or until the winner gets bored of beating on the loser. There's also mercy, but it's rare. I dodge a punch and he snaps a kick to my upper thigh, revealing some newly acquired Muay Thai.

Now that I've recovered, I throw an elbow of my own that misses. Another of his punches grazes the side of my head as I dodge, and I pull an uppercut to his chin, which momentarily buckles his knees. Now that he's off-balanced, I push him, and he falls backward, onto his butt. I notice a few people watching. A burly man hustles toward us as though to keep the peace. A middle-aged man is talking on his H-phone, but he won't summon his private cops over this, not when he isn't threatened. I walk away, toward the Camaro. As I drive away, I see Stacy rising to his feet, glaring in my direction.

Blood trickling into my eye, reddening my vision, I look into the rear-view mirror, assessing the damage. I'm parked outside a clinic not far from home. The cut is still stinging. My head is throbbing on the same side, the pulse along my temple thumping. I think about the potential bill at the clinic. Since the Corporate Council was established, health care costs have doubled. The American Medical Association holds a seat on the council, and proposals by the Democrats in Congress to lower healthcare costs have never been approved. Ever. Even with Dad's insurance, the bill to get my cut stitched up will run at least two thousand dollars.

I dial Eneca on my H-phone. This is my first fight since Eneca's been around, so I'm not sure how she'll take it.

"What happened to your eye?" she asks. I imagine what my hologram looks like on her end, the open cut, the blood oozing. But what really strikes me is her concerned tone, which reminds me of Cara's.

"I bet you can guess", I say.

"You got in a fight", she says.

"Is Dad home?" I ask.

"No, he's at work."

"Please tell me nursing is one of your skills", I say.

The hologram Eneca grins.

I sit on the sofa, the TV on, my eyebrow numbed with Novocain. Eneca sits on a chair in front of me, sewing the cut with dissolvable thread and a sickle-shaped needle.

"You've got the touch", I say. "Can't feel a thing."

"Next time let's try it without an anaesthetic", she says.

Eneca's wearing a mild perfume—something that hints of the desert: creosote, cactus, and rainwater—which is difficult to detect unless you're right next to her. Her aqua marine eyes are focused on the task at hand, but with no anxiety. Perfect eyes. Movie-star cheeks and nose. Near perfect facial symmetry. Killer body. Maybe having an android partner is the way to go. There's just the small question of authenticity. The celebs, models, and beautiful people used to complain when people questioned whether they were human or android, but then came the campaign for equality, the push for legislation, Supreme Court decisions, which Ms. Kinerson said was pushed by the Corps, and suddenly it became taboo for anyone to complain about these distinctions.

"Just curious", Eneca says. "What have your thoughts been like since the big A?"

She means amelioration. Now androids are curious, I think, my pessimism returning to true form. God help us. Is this the start of AI? Is this where the machine takes over, turns humanity to one gargantuan masturbation apparatus?

"They've been good", I say. "I haven't thought as much about ... "

"Illy?" Eneca asks.

With the mention of her name, I nearly lose my breath. Her name still invokes pain. But I prefer that a billion times to losing her memory completely, or to having it altered like what has happened to Mom, who still remembers Illy, but not the way she really was, not the way things happened.

"I won't forget her, will I?" I ask.

"No", Eneca says. "And your other thoughts, what are they like?"

I think of Liam. My recklessness helped take him from his family. That's what death does, I realize. It fragments the lives of others, it removes loved ones from cohesive social arrangements. Which leads to less connection, more instability. War does the same. But I can't tell Eneca about Liam. Or Oscar.

"They're not too bad", I say. "I'm sorting through some things."

Her eyes are analysing me. She knows I'm withholding something.

She puts down the needle and ties off the stitching. "All done." She leans close and kisses my stitched eyebrow.

"What—" I say.

"To make it all better", she says.

A moment traipses by. I'm a little stunned. "You have emotions."

"Yes", she says. "Lots of them."

On Friday I leave for Mom and Cara's house in the morning, and the three of us, along with Peppy, take their Buick harrier to Yosemite, where we stay in a rented cabin. We had originally been booked for the previous week, but we had to re-schedule because of some Neanderthal NRA-sponsored bear hunt that included the Texas governor, who, with 108 safari hunts, claims the most exotic animal kills of any publically elected official.

For lunch we make sandwiches from the lunchmeat and other groceries we've brought with us. Cara asks about my eyebrow, and I don't want to upset Mom, so I let Cara know I'll tell her later. Then Cara reads and Mom crochets while I take Peppy out for a walk.

We stroll along a path that winds beneath whitebark pine and giant sequoias and between spindly swaths of sage grass. Peppy, ever a lover of the forest, pulls against the leash, bucking like a bronc, his feet gingerly tracking across the rich earth. Whenever we bring him to the outdoors, he goes insane, sniffing and peeing on the plants and trees, darting from bush to bush. The path leads us to a stream, and we walk beside it, the cool water sluicing over rocks. I sit down on a smooth boulder and let Peppy off the leash, and he takes advantage of his freedom, jogging along the stream, traipsing toward the edge, sniffing everything, then circling back to me. The sun bright and warm on my legs, the air spiriting smells of incense cedar, lupine, quaking aspen, and showy milkweed. I pick up a pebble, sling it across the water. In the stream, a perch gets stuck on a rock and flips about, flopping back into the water. Seeing the fish, Peppy's ears perk up, and he whines with excitement, waiting for the perch to reappear.

"You like this place, don't you?" I say to Peppy. "Me, too."

Nobody owns us here.

Later we eat chicken and rice that Mom baked back at the house, and I open a can of Science Diet and dump it into Peppy's dish, along with some chicken from a drumstick that I mix in. He inhales the stuff without chewing. While Peppy finishes his food, the rest of us gravitate with our

dishes to the living room, where paintings of Yosemite adorn the walls, the room filled with the pure scent of pine.

The TV is old and uses a black rectangular handheld remote, but at least it has a large screen. Mom points the remote at the screen and it flicks on. She finds *The Spooners* on the oldies station and commences to laughing at all the jokes and red-faced tantrums of the main character played by Jack Pitt.

Cara is sitting beside me, eating and sipping a glass of red wine. I wash down the chicken and rice with Nostalgic Coke, more as an experiment than for the taste (re: amelioration). It's producing the usual flash and buzz, but not the usual memory. Instead of a memory of Illy, I'm remembering a day from my sophomore year at Dick Cheney High, in Ms. Kinerson's class. We're re-enacting scenes from the novels we've read during the fall semester, and Ms. Kinerson is wearing an austere black skirt and ugly alabaster blouse, her face minus makeup and her hair tied in a plump Mennonite bun. One of the groups, four girls dolled up in red skirts, blouses, and scarves, are playing the roles of the handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale*, while Ms. Kinerson is playing the part of Aunt Lydia, who I'm sure was much meaner, fatter, uglier, and more grotesque than Ms. Kinerson on her worst day. The script is original, written up by the girls with advice from Ms. Kinerson, who has no problem getting into character.

"As handmaids, you are to be seen and not heard!" Ms. Kinerson barks.

"Yes, Aunt Lydia", the girls say in unison, hands folded in front, heads slightly bowed.

"You will have your masters' babies", Ms. Kinerson says, "and you will not complain or cry or try to run away. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Aunt Lydia", the girls say.

"But what if we want to keep our baby?" one of the girls asks. "To raise it as our own?"

Ms. Kinerson, or Aunt Lydia, pretends to slap the girl, and the girl winces with mock pain, holding a hand to her cheek.

"The baby is not yours to keep!" Ms. Kinerson says. "It belongs to the master and his old bag of a wife, and therefore to the state!"

It was silly, now that I think of it, as class skits usually are. But then so were parts of the book, like the lame code phrases the handmaids say to each other. *Blessed be the fruit. May the Lord Open. Under His eye.* But that's the thing about authoritarianism. It *is* absurd. For decades North Koreans addressed their merciless henchman as "Dear Leader."

"Emile, what are you thinking?" Cara asks.

I wrest myself from the memory to find her looking at me as though I'd been juggling Ginsu knives. "Just something from school." She glances at my can of Nostalgic Coke. "You're not big on nostalgia, are you?"

"Adolox citrate is a precursor to Adofen, a hallucinogen", she says. "I just think it might be more harmful for some people than others."

"How can Coke go wrong?" I ask in a dead-pan tone. "That's one corporation I trust." Cara shoots me a deliberate look.

Mom squeals with laughter. On the TV, Jack Pitt's face is flushed with anger, and he's chasing after his goofy pal Mort, who scurries around a kitchen table, telling Jack to calm down, they can talk things over, but once Jack gets worked up there's no turning back. Jack finally slips and falls on his big butt, wincing and crying out in agony, and he puts Mort on a guilt trip, saying, "I think I broke my hip."

Mom howls, but I struggle to see the humour. The old Mom might have smirked or given a half-hearted chuckle, but she wouldn't have been busting a gut like she is now. I give Cara a tiresome look, and she shoots me a look of reprimand. Finished with my dinner, I put my paper plate in the trash, and Peppy follows me back to the couch and jumps up in my lap for a massage. He closes his eyes as I work the muscles of his neck and back, his leg kicking from a ticklish spot along his hip.

I tell Cara about the amelioration with Eneca, and she looks pleased. She asks about my plans, and I tell her I'm still thinking them through and that she shouldn't worry, which only spurs her to ask about the cut again.

"Why do you always do this?" I ask.

"Because you always do this", she says. "You keep things buried. They fester. They burn."

As usual, I spill the details. She listens patiently and doesn't respond immediately, something I find both admirable and intimidating, because of her wisdom. She's staring at a space beside the TV, thinking. I know she's not happy about it.

"What?" I ask.

"You still have old thoughts, old habits, that you don't challenge", she says. "That's one habit that will keep you in trouble. How many times have we talked about this? What's wrong with walking away?"

I pause to consider this. "That's one thing I'll never do."

We spend another day and night at the cabin before returning home. As the next week lapses, my eyebrow begins to heal. I receive another letter from the University of New Mexico, encouraging me to choose a major, enrol, and apply for on-campus housing. I don't hear from Cam, and I wait until Thursday to send an H-text, asking if she wants to go to De la Hoya Mall.

On Friday night I drive to Chinatown and climb the stairs of a modest urban apartment building. Next to the apartment number is an outer metal door with red calligraphy in the centre. I knock on the metal door, and Cam's mom, a short marginally plump woman with a kind expression and traces of baggy eyes, opens the wooden door behind it, followed by the metal door, and asks me to come inside. I hear a heated conversation from somewhere inside. Then Cam's mom shouts something in Chinese over her shoulder.

I step into a carpeted living room. An archway leads to the dining room, where a man in his late forties is arguing in Chinese with Cam and a girl in her early teens.

"Have a seat", Cam's mom says. "I'll go get her." She pads into the dining room, speaks more Chinese, and Cam emerges in the archway, uttering a few last combative words in the direction of the dining room.

"Sorry about that", her mom says.

"Yeah, sorry", Cam says. "So much for stereotypes. Let's get out of here."

In the stairwell an H-ad leaps at me: *Got Jock Itch? Tired of the Same 'ol Failing Treatments? Try Doctor Wu's Special Cream for Jock Itch. You Can't Go Wrong with Chinese Medicine! How Can 5000 Years of Knowledge Go Wrong?*

I give the H-ad a shove, but it won't budge, so I end up passing right through it. I check my phone to see if the H-ad infected it with adware. Thankfully no.

"What was that about?" I ask Cam.

Cam tsks and gives a disgusted look. "My dad's going apeshit over my sister wanting to play clarinet. Dad thinks she should keep playing flute since she's been playing it for six years. He says all her time and effort playing flute will be wasted. And he doesn't like the idea of buying another instrument."

Mentally, I compare the two instruments. Both are linear, with pads and fingerings.

"Aren't the clarinet and flute sister instruments?" I ask. "They're both woodwinds."

"Exactly", Cam says.

"So your sister would be able to apply her flute skills. And you don't have to buy a new instrument. She could probably trade in her flute for a used clarinet without paying an arm or a leg."

Cam stops along the stairwell. "You know when my voice was crescendoing? That's what I was saying."

"Which crescendo?" I ask.

Cam frogs me in the arm. We continue to the bottom of the stairs. Then she shakes her head.

"My family", she says. "No wonder my brother ... " Her eyes take on a heaviness.

"You okay?" I ask. She nods. "You never told me what happened."

"He's missing", she says. "We don't know where he is." She looks at my eye. By now the cut has almost completely healed, and the stitches are only noticeable if someone is up close. "Are those stitches?"

I nod and give her the gist of the story.

"You couldn't let it go?" she asks.

"So says my shrink, my step-droid, and my mom's partner", I say.

"Sorry", she says. "Did you fight back?"

"Kind of", I say.

"Good."

De la Hoya Mall resembles most American malls. There are two stories and a swanky entrance with a musical fountain and a giant screen of H-ads for The Gap, Panda Express, Gun Mart Foot Locker, The Green Shop, etc. Groups of mostly Hispanic and Asian teens are hanging about, some throwing smug looks our way.

"Don't start anything", Cam says.

"I don't start things", I say.

"You know what I mean", she says. "Don't ignore, you bite the floor."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"My brother", she says.

We pass by Baskin Robbins, where I order two scoops of peanut butter and chocolate in a cup.

"Won't that ruin your appetite?" Cam asks.

"I'm flexible with the order of dessert and dinner", I say.

"Okay", she says. "About an eight on the Weird Scale."

"Speaking of, how's that laser firing?" I ask.

Cam grins. We stroll through The Gap on our way to *That Like Audio Store*.

"Want a bite?" I ask, holding a spoonful of ice cream out to her.

"No thanks", she says. "I save dessert for last."

She complains that the clothes in The Gap are expensive and of average quality. I remind her that the jeans, which are a constant source of H-ad mortars, are made by Crudders for forty dollars an hour, the minimum wage, and she says she knows and that she doesn't blame the Crudders for the mediocre workmanship. I peruse a few t-shirts. Made in Tanzania. When it comes to manufacturing, Africa has replaced the China of eighty years ago. The country I most look forward to finding on the labels—if, for no other reason, that most people have never heard of it and don't care—is Gabon, a tiny nation on Africa's west coast.

That Like Audio Store is packed as usual, with teens and twentydumbthings sampling the latest music of Synapse (rock), Ariandroid (R&B), Mitchell T. (rap), and Ho Lite (female rap). Life-sized holograms of the stars dance and sing at their own displays. Most of their songs are set to Noise Shielding, which blocks the sound unless you stand in the correct spot. The singer who's audible is Ho Lite, a pigtailed Vietnamese-American in her twenties who, in a midriff baring olive tank top and gold tights, is street dancing to her hit "All the Pho in the World." I stand on the H-marker, and the music projects portably to my eardrums.

Don't get me started 'bout the cause of the tiff

if you ain't gittin' ready for the speed of my fist

You'll go down like a crudder in the speck of da fight

All the Pho in the World ain't go save you tonight.

"Drool much?" Cam asks.

"Can't help it", I say, stepping away from the H-marker. "I'm a drooling machine. You should see my pillow."

I nod at Ho Lite's hologram. "You like uh—?"

"No", Cam says immediately, and wanders toward the classical music section.

I spot the copper black font of The Corps on a ponytailed man's bicep. Generally, I don't care for H-tatts, but if you're going to get one, you can't go wrong with my favourite band. I recognise another one, a retro H-tatt of Madonna, an old singer who some say was a slut, glistening from a young blonde's ankle. I stand in front of Synapse's new album, move my hand along the H-console sensor, and program a song and video to play from the new *Pipe Me* album. The guitarist, Bom Garrett, a lean cat with a mound of curly brown hair and a goatee, shreds his Gibson guitar with a rollercoaster of distorted punchy riffs. It's a mean song, but the lyrics are mainstream, and nothing about it—not the lead singer, the tone of distortion, the song writing, or the lyrics—rises to the raw unpredictable originality of the Corps.

After fifteen minutes we hit *Pho Mama!*, which Cam claims has the best pho in the mall. They hand us a restaurant pager, and we sit down at a fountain on the same level, talking, while we wait for the signal. When the disk starts flashing and vibrating, we amble back to Pho Mama!, take our seats, and order pho. The bowls of pho arrive in five minutes, and the allure of the noodles and broth, steam spiralling from the soup, has a hypnotizing effect, like the Sirens I read about in Classic Lit, commanding my attention to the extent that, for the five minutes I'm inhaling the stuff, I almost forget about Cam.

"Been starving yourself?" she asks.

"Must be something in the pho", I say. "You know, like the Colonel's herbs and spices."

Fifteen minutes later, we're sitting at the second floor fountain again, watching the water rush over a fall into a larger pool. There, at the base, water geysers twenty feet into the air, changing colours as it reaches its peak, colliding with holograms of other fountains that are impossible to distinguish from the real water without passing one's hand through.

A half dozen kids do exactly that, standing on the pool's barrier and giggling as they slap at the holograms. Some are toddlers. Cam looks into my eyes. She might actually be on the verge of smiling. I think of holding her hand, but I'm afraid she would think it's retarded.

"Still feeling guilty?" she asks.

"About Oscar or your brother"? I ask.

"Both", she says.

"Sometimes", I say.

"Don't", she says. "What's done is done. Anyway, I believe you when you said you didn't mean to kill Liam."

"But the DOR gave you a murder permit anyway", I say.

"Yeah", she says. "Crazy, right? I needed to direct my anger somewhere. You were the biggest target."

I think about it. "Were there more targets?"

Cam sighs. "I beat up a girl at school. She was bullying another girl, but I'm no hero. I really messed her up. I got suspended for a week."

As the image of Cam punching or kicking someone fills my mind, shots ring out. At first I think it's some gang bullshit or mass shooter, but then tear gas and sleeping gas canisters tumble onto the floor fifty feet from us, smoke snaking into the air. In the distance, back near the That Like Audio Store, black-clad troops carrying assault rifles fan out across the mall, barking at people to get on the floor.

"Sweep!" Cam says. She grabs my hand. "Come on!"

I see toddlers balling, calling for their moms.

"What about these kids?" I ask.

"They'll be okay", Cam says. "But we won't."

Staving off the pungent gaseous aroma, I follow Cam as she runs in the direction opposite the soldiers, dodging others who are running, screaming, and crying. Shop owners are locking their doors, killing their lights. More shots ring out. Cam veers and shifts like a halfback, and I can barely keep up. How did I ever overpower her? I wonder.

As much as they're talked about, it's only the second sweep I've witnessed, the first occurring at Gary Brown Park in Rancho Cucamonga, which Dad hovered over a year ago on our way home from San Diego. While we hung a mile up in the sky—and not directly overhead, even though the underside of Dad's harrier is bullet-proof—Dad used the zoom cam to give us a close-up of the melee. Beneath the park lights, people scurried like disturbed ants across the park's hilly lawns and around the trees and ponds as armed troops in black uniform chased them down, slinging them to the ground and cuffing them.

"Is this where we chant USA?" I asked, leaning between the two front seats from the back.

The expression he gave bordered on his more sarcastic we've-got-a-comedian look and his more parental you're-not-as-funny-as-you-think-you-are glare.

"Is that military or police?" Eneca asked.

"Depends on who you ask", Dad said. "Most people say it's Army. There are probably some National Guard units mixed in."

We watched, our eyes glued to the screen on the soundless console. A man swung a bat at a soldier, who responded by jabbing a rifle butt in the man's face.

"What's going to happen to these people?" Eneca asked.

"Who the hell knows?" Dad said. "Nothing good."

Cam leads me through the closing rolling shutter of a Chinese restaurant. She speaks Chinese to the elderly woman who lets us through, thanking her repeatedly in Mandarin, and we wander through the restaurant and into the kitchen, where the aroma of steamed rice and fish hangs in the air. Two five-year-old girls are holding hands next to a boy who looks a year younger, their faces stained with worry. A handful of staff, three women and one man, stand in the kitchen's centre around a chopping block.

"What's their deal?" I ask Cam.

"They don't want to get deported", she says.

"The Underground", I say. "So that's what the sweeps are about?"

"One of the results, anyway", Cam says.

Even in the kitchen, we hear the mall's chaos: the shots and screams.

"Why the gunshots?" I ask.

"Intimidation", Cam says. "They try to scare people first. But they'll shoot gangsters and anyone who draws a weapon."

She leads me into a dark storage room and flicks on the light. A hundred black bottles of soy sauce glare at me from an eye-level shelf. From one of the bottle's caps, a large brown roach peers at me, its antennae waving. Bags of rice, chopsticks, and fortune cookies line the other shelves. Cam finds a small square hatch in the corner of the wall, and she grabs a brown iron handle and pulls it open. Through the opening, the night beckons.

"Down we go", Cam says in a TV game show host's voice, an optimistic achievement for her.

"Assassins first", I say, gesturing toward the hatch.

"That would be you", she says.

No argument from me. I step toward the hatch and see an iron ladder running ten feet down to the ground. I swivel around, bend down, and lower myself down one step at a time, my hands clasping to each rusted rung, Cam following above.

"Just so you know, I'm not looking at your butt or anything", I say.

"It's okay", she says. "I'm used to it."

"Would that be due to size or shape?" I ask, reaching the ground.

"Probably both", she says.

She skips the last two rungs and hops to the ground, spinning toward me and acting, via closed fist, like she's going to punch me in the arm, but I hold perfectly still, and her punch stops just short of my arm.

"A non-flincher", she says, relaxing. "What else don't you react to?"

For a moment we stand there, checking each other out, unsure of where to go. A few old cars are parked along a quiet street that terminates in a cul-de-sac. It's hard to believe, but there's virtually no one around. Still, it's a non-kissable moment, I think. But does such a thing exist? I mean, it's not like bullets or lasers are whizzing overhead, although they could be soon. There's enough light overhead—from streetlights forty feet away, as well as from the moon—for me to see her face clearly: large black eyes, smooth high cheeks, and thick though innocent-looking lips.

I lean forward and kiss her, closing my eyes the second I realize she's not going to punch or knee me. I'm about to step back, to end it with the notion of an innocent beginning, when she places her hands on my shoulders and draws closer, shepherding us to the Red Light District of Kissing involving tongues, body heat, and petting. After what I imagine to be a minute (maybe two?), we finish in the manner that we started: looking into each other's eyes.

"We should go", Cam says.

"Yeah", I say.

We walk to the private car park a few blocks away, and I take Cam home, and when I get home I sit in the Camaro for a minute, thinking of her, remembering the feel of her lips, their taste, and I lick my lower lip, trying to get it back.

I turn on the VR, leap upon my bed and lean against the wall. I call up the H-console, click on Dr. Glasgow. He appears on a stage, dressed in a long sleeve blue-gray shirt and tie, wearing shades, banging on a piano and singing, bobbing his head around like Stevie Wonder.

"Mocking blind folks", I say. "Not cool."

He ceases playing and singing. "Not cool, my foot. It's called imitation. You the PC police? I don't see no badge."

"Complaining is *my* area", I say.

"Who says?" he asks in a New York mobster's tone.

"I do", I say. "I'm the patient."

"I'm the doctor", he says.

"Bought and paid for by *me*", I say.

"Yada yada. So how's things going?"

"Can't complain", I say. "I went out with Cam tonight."

"The killer chick?"

"That's the one."

"Whew, you mean like on a date?" he asks, abruptly removing the shades. "Get a little smoocharoo? A little tongue action, maybe?"

"Manners, Doc", I warn.

"How about a little sympathy?" he asks. "I'm a player trapped in an AI's e-body. You know I don't get out much, right?"

"Here we go", I say derisively. "You can't keep living vicariously off me and feeding on all the juicy details."

"To be fair to me, there aren't that many", he says. "Just sayin'."

I glare at Doc. A few quiet seconds tick by.

"Sometimes you can be a douche", I say.

"Is that a synonym for 'cool'?" he asks. "Need I remind you that you have the settings turned to cool/hip/casual? If you want to control my demeanour, change the friggin' settings! Remember, you control this program. You control me! How cool and twisted and authoritarian is that? Then, of course, you'll be short-changed of all my evanescent coolness, but you will never be offended again! At least not in any flippant sarcastic way."

My face unwinds in a smile, and I chuckle.

"You are one funny dude", I say.

"Nine in ten schizoids say so", he says.

I think back to the mall, the scampering escape, the restaurant, and finally, the kiss. "Yeah, there was some tongue."

"I thought so!" Doc slaps his knee. "Emile Winkler always gets his tongue!"

"Let's not get carried away", I say. "All right, gotta run, Doc. Hasta luego."

"Hey, wait! I didn't—" he says.

But I've already closed him out. I shake my head, still grinning. What a freak.

I switch on the H-player and play a song by the Corps called "Sweatshop." On the video Volcana is wearing heavy makeup that includes teardrops of blood, and her outfit consists of shaggy cut-off blue jeans and a black sports bra that bares her slender midriff. Video of the band is interspersed with footage of sweatshop workers in the Philippines and Guatemala.

For the past three years, besides revenge, I've thought of almost nothing but Volcana. Certain female critics of the Corps refer to her as *spank bait*, and even though I see their point, I find it insulting. I mean, Volcana shreds with the best of the all-time guitarists, even Eddie Van Halen, George Lynch, and Jimi Hendrix. When they reach the chorus, Volcana joins the singing with a sweet alto:

Corpheads suckin' up all of the land
trading your asses for a wad of green
ringing you out like a damp dish rag
power to the rich while the poor prole bleeds.

After the song, I chat Cam up via traditional text.

Me: I had a really great time tonight. Thanks for going.

Cam: Same. Kind of scary in the mall, though.

Me: Yeah. But you kicked into high gear. You've got some moves.

Cam: You too.

I pause for a minute, thinking of what to say, considering our relationship. I can't get too soft on her. Don't girls hate that? Guys crying like they have no Y chromosomes left, as though they're in a contest to prove who's more feminine. I mean, maybe that stuff flies in other countries (Spain and France come to mind) but in the America I know, the hot girls won't even glance at you unless you're a buff good-looking jock who resembles the V screen god Campbell Irving.

Me: All said and done, I'm glad I met you.

Cam: Me too.

Me: Good night.

Cam: Night.

While I'm lying down in bed, staring at Volcana, Cam sends me an H-text. Her shades-wearing hologrammed self is sitting in her Challenger, in the driver's seat, drinking a large Sonic drink, the side of her face lit with the blue light of Sonic's H menu. I can just make out the "og" in either a corn dog or hot dog.

"Hey", she says, sipping her drink.

"Is that a Diet Coke?" I ask.

"Nostalgic Diet", she says.

"Got a flash?" I ask. She nods. "So?"

She takes a sip. Pauses. "I'm outside the mall with a Caucasian boy." She waits. "Do you need me to be more specific?"

I smile. "No. The imagination is powerful enough. Plus, I have a memory of the actual thing." A reel of the exact moment unwinds in my mind: Cam and I standing behind the Chinese restaurant, facing each other, looking into each other's eyes. "What's with the shades?"

"What?" she asks.

"I want to see your eyes", I say.

She pulls the shades off. Her black Asian eyes beckon, less of a mystery now, hinting of toughness, pain, courage, loyalty, yin and yang. If only kissing a hologram could match the real thing. Her H hand reaches toward my ear, sticks a finger inside, swirls. She giggles.

"Hey, you wanna shoot some hoops?" she asks.

"You any good?" I ask.

"Not bad", she says.

Because she's in the area, she swings by the house and picks me up, and she drives like mad on the freeway, toward Chinatown.

"What's the rush?" I ask.

"No rush", she says. "I always drive like this."

I find a small rectangular slip of paper lodged along the edge of my seat. I make out two brief poetic lines of Arial font print:

I'm nobody! Who are you?

Are you — nobody — too?

I recall the lines from freshman lit. Not every high school student drives around with Emily Dickinson poetry floating in her car. And why only these two lines? Does she identify with them? Again, the pain in her eyes. She does identify, I decide. Then again, scores of teenagers must feel the same way at some point. I just hope I don't find any lines of Sylvia Plath. If that happens, we're screwed.

What would normally be a thirty-minute drive for me amounts to a twenty-minute drive for Cam. She parks at De la Hoya High Gym and we wander inside. Two teams of high school aged girls dressed in nylon shorts and jerseys are running up and down the court, playing a pickup game.

Cam strolls toward a thin middle-aged woman with short sandy hair who is casually leaning back against a bottom bleacher, watching the girls play. They embrace and have a brief conversation. Then Cam takes a ball from the rack and brings it to me.

"Here", she says, handing me the ball. "Practise." She gestures to one of the glass backboards and goals along the side of the court. Before I can ask where's she's going, she disappears, presumably into the girls locker room.

From the centre of the ceiling, hanging from the rafters, are black and gold banners of various athletic accolades. The most recent catches my attention: Girls Basketball Division I State Champions 2092.

Holy shite, I think. That's the current year. Either Cam is supernaturally talented, or her teammates were. Or both.

I bounce the ball, take a few shots up close. I'm not bad at the sport, having played on my middle school's team in seventh and eighth grade (before I started training in MMA), mostly at the behest of Cara, who noticed my interest in the sport and encouraged me to try out for the team. But a point guard I am not. I'm more of a shooting guard, as well as a rugged defensive specialist, the kind of player who takes charges and elbows the opposing team's best scorer.

When Cam comes jogging out of the locker room, decked in black shorts, a gray De la Hoya Warriors t-shirt, and white Adidas hi-tops, I pick up the ball and hold it, my mouth ajar. Her hair is tied in a long ponytail that emphasises her eyes and facial symmetry.

"What?" she asks, standing in front of me. "Don't stare." She slaps the ball from my hands, dribbles toward the basket, makes a reverse layup that kisses the glass backboard and drops through the centre of the net. She passes me a crisp pass, right to my chest. "You first. Take it out. Play to eleven? Make it, take it?"

"Sure", I say, dribbling to the top of the key. "Ready?"

"Yep", she says.

I take a shot, it hits net.

"Nice shot", she says, and passes the ball back to me.

I take the ball to the wing, line up the right angle, and hit a seventeen-footer off the glass.

Cam raises her eyebrows. "So you're a shooter."

"I can do other things", I say.

Cam guards me tightly on the next shot, holding her hands in my face as I release the ball, and it misses off the side of the rim. She grabs the rebound, dribbles to the top of the key and quickly releases a shot that swishes net. On the next possession, I try sticking to her, but she blows past me for a reverse layup.

"Nice", I say, but I take it she's heard praise before.

She hits three more outside shots—from college 3-point range—before backing me down in the post, ten feet from the basket, at an angle. I stand my ground, leveraging my hip against hers. She bumps against me, knocking me enough off-balance to get her shot up: it banks in.

On her next possession, she does the same, knocking me with more force, so that I grab the ball after it goes in and hold onto it, pausing.

"What?" she asks. "There are no fouls."

On her next possession, she backs me down into the post, and I bump her with as much force as she bumped me. She bumps me back. When she shoots, I make contact with her body, but she keeps playing without complaint, going up strong for the rebound off the missed shot, her stout muscular body slamming into me from the side, and she fades away from my outstretched arms, banking the shot in.

"Nice game", I say.

"Yeah", she says. "You're not bad."

My forehead is moist, and I wipe off a bead of sweat. The girls on the court are standing around, their skin red with sweat, having finished their pickup game.

"Cam!" they call out plaintively. "Cammie!"

A couple of them gravitate toward Cam, embracing her, asking her to play with them. She introduces me to the middle-aged woman, Coach Walters, who grins and gives me an ironclad handshake. The girls again plead for Cam to join them, and Cam tosses the decision my direction.

"One game?" she asks.

"Go for it", I say.

As Cam takes the court, I sit down next to Coach Walters. She asks me the basics: which school did I attend, what are my plans, etc.

"How'd you meet Cam?" she asks. Her guarded manner of asking, as well as her light blue eyes betraying a patience, sincerity, and diligence akin to Cara's, suggests a parental concern for Cam. The woman demands respect, I decide, but she's not a screamer. Again, like Cara.

"Pure accident", I say. "We kind of ran into each other."

"How'd the one-on-one go?" she asks.

"I lost", I say.

"Don't feel bad", she says. "Most people do."

"She's not your average player, is she?" I ask.

Coach Walters grins.

On the court, Cam has the ball. Isolated against a defender, she conjures up a wicked crossover dribble that leaves her opponent on her backside, and coasts in for an uncontested layup. The other girls *ooooohhh*, and then they're racing down the other end of the court, all business, using picks, setting screens, fighting for position.

"How good is she?" I ask.

"Not bad", Coach Walters says. "Second Team All-State. Team captain. As a senior she led the team in assists, steals, three-pointers made, three-point percentage, free throws made, and free throw percentage." She pauses, watching the action.

This gets my attention. I think back to that day in the warehouse as I wrestled with Cam, pressed the steel butt of her own laser rifle against her, and she eased up and spread her arms to the side like some sacrificial lamb. Pain, I think. It's the only explanation, but it doesn't fill in the picture completely. People are infinitely complex. They are not puzzles to be solved. Had she lost hope? Why else would she risk throwing away her talent? Had it lost value in light of her brother's death?

"You look surprised", Coach Walters says.

"I shouldn't be", I say.

"Her brother was quite the player, too", the coach says. "He holds most of the same records for the boys team."

On the court, Cam barks directions to the players on her team, dribbling with one hand and gesturing with the other. It's a tone of voice, one of knowledgeable command, I haven't heard from her before. She drives the lane, drawing defenders, and dishes a perfect bounce pass to a tall teammate for an easy layup.

"I'm sure you've had other good players", I say.

"I have", Coach Walters says. "But Cam does so many things well. And she's tough. She doesn't back down from anyone."

I'm leaning back on the sofa, milking a Nostalgic Coke, savouring its carbonated taste. Chance Dondlinger, wearing a corduroy brown suit and blue tie, is spouting off anti-corporate talking points on CNN. He has a habit of opening his mouth well in advance before speaking, and often interrupts the other guests, and sometimes even the program's host. If he's as fake as Ms. Kinerson says, he sure does a good job of playing the dissident.

"Look, corporations have been the death of this country", Dondlinger says. "You can trace their evil back to the corporate lobbyists who whispered sugar-coated bribes into the ears of Congressmen, only to have the Senators and representatives pad their campaign funding with corporate money."

Halfway through Dondlinger's diatribe, the Coke spurs an image: Peppy galloping across a grassy knoll, his beard brown and clean, mouth wide open and teeth almond white, muscles flexing in his hind quarters, legs fully extended and digging into the earth on each stride. If there is a god, he never made a more beautiful animal.

As I emerge from the vision, I notice Eneca sitting in the recliner.

"Hi", I say.

"How was the flash?" she asks.

"It was Peppy."

"What about him?" she asks.

"He was running."

"Beautiful dog", she says, smiling. She met Peppy last year when Mom and Cara dropped him off before going on their trip to Alaska. Both dog and android seemed enamoured with the other. Every night after dinner, Peppy would roll into Eneca's lap on the sofa, and she would stroke his beard and coat as though she were his master and he had never belonged to anyone else.

"I think he'd say you're not bad, yourself", I say.

A beat passes. Dondlinger rattles off a response to an anchor's question. The anchor starts to add something, but Dondlinger warns him not to interrupt.

"Eneca, what do you think of this guy on TV?" I ask. "Dondlinger."

Eneca looks at the TV, studying Dondlinger. "What's the old phrase? You can't trust him as far as you can throw him."

I nod and chuckle. "How do you know?"

"Forced voice inflection, mostly", she says. "Disingenuous emotions."

"What if it's for the cameras?" I ask. "He could still believe what he's saying."

"I wouldn't put money on it", she says.

A sudden thought strikes me. "Do you have eye scanning?"

She nods. "But it doesn't work for TV or holograms."

With Eneca's permission, I use the H-console to change the channel. Out of curiosity, I pause on Fox News. A blonde female anchor (a human) wearing thick turquoise eye shadow is reporting that Russian jets have intruded into Greenland's airspace, provoking US jet escorts. She breaks to commercial. There's an elderly man in a hospital bed, with oxygen tubes snaking into his nose and an IV tube disappearing into the pyjama sleeve of his arm. The camera pulls back to reveal two middle-aged couples, accompanied by a hologram of a twentysomething-year-old man who would logically be the old man's grandson, standing around the bed. One of the women clutches the elderly man's hand, and he offers a slight smile. Tender, not quite hopeless piano notes are playing. A woman's soothing voice narrates: *When it's time to say goodbye, choose Koch Clinics. Because your family is our family.*

I think of Mom and her attempt at euthanization. What if Cara hadn't stopped her? Would the blow have been as painful as losing Illy? Would Cara have played such an integral role in my life? I turn to Eneca.

"Do you experience pain?" I ask.

She regards me with quaint consideration. "I don't hit my thumb with a hammer, if that's what you mean."

"No, not that", I say, knowing that androids, and especially A7's, aren't clumsy enough to do such a thing. "Do you ever feel deep pain? You know, the kind that comes from loss. Or from just feeling inadequate, or that your life is out of balance."

"My brain rivals a human brain", she says. "It looks and functions nearly identically. I have a limbic system. An amygdala. A hippocampus. So I have emotions and memory, and I'm loyal to the people in my relationships."

"Sounds like humans", I say, "except for the loyalty part."

Eneca looks amused. "But I do have the capacity to suffer. At some point I suppose I will, especially if I lose someone close to me. But it would be better not to let that happen."

I call the number Ms. Kinerson gave me, and I get a woman's recorded voice: *Welcome to Kilt Critters! For halal options, press one. For the spiciest Cal-Mex, press two. For vegan and vegetarian, press three. For pork-related specialty foods, press four. And for all other inquiries, have a nice KC day!*

"Weird", I say, looking at the H-phone.

SOW, I think. Ms. Kinerson said it was the one pronounced like "so", as in reaping and sowing. Not sow like the pig. Oink oink, I think. Option four is the only one that could be related, even if it is the wrong homonym.

I push four, and get another recording: *Welcome to the Porkaholic Portal! Here you will find the latest and juiciest pork-related cuisine, including salivating cuts of loin from the newly bio-engineered pork hulk! To peruse the menu, come on down to 425 Agatha St.*

Agatha Street. Near Cam's home. Possibly in Chinatown proper.

I get in the Camaro and use the H-GPS to find the address, which lies on a busy street of Asian mom and pop restaurants. I park and start walking. The sun is bearing down on me, baking my neck. Tofu hisses on a street vendor's grill, the soy-rich smoke shimmying past me. I tread along Agatha Street, on the sidewalk, looking for address numbers. There's a 7-11, a Malay restaurant, and a Gong Cha Chinese tea shop, with a line of a dozen Asian teenagers waiting to get the most savoury tea around. As I amble past the tea shop, one of the customers in line, a tall skinny young woman with long black hair and shades, pivots gently towards me.

"You want the next building", she says, lowering her shades, her eyes darting toward an adjacent abandoned building.

"Thanks, I guess", I say.

"No guessing", she says, smiling faintly.

"How do you know what I'm looking for?" I ask.

"We know things", she says. "The way in is through the hatch."

I mosey toward the next building, an old concrete structure reminiscent of the old English pubs. A faded sign up top says Kifu's Bar in faint gold against a mantis green background, with a dotted black trace of the 425 address next to the doorway, which is boarded up with two-by-fours and a sheet of stained plywood. The same type of boards cover two double window slots. A thin alleyway leads around the side of the building toward the back, where another entrance is boarded up. I look at the roof: no way up. Then, near the lower corner, I see the square outline of a hatch, like the one in the Chinese restaurant in De la Hoya Mall. I try prying the hatch open, but it doesn't give. Then I kick it, and a small cloud of dust explodes against my skin as the hatch budes loose. I spit the dust from my mouth, and then sneeze. I bend down and push with my hands, and the hatch opens, swinging inward. Who are these freaks? I wonder. Forcing someone to climb into a decrepit dive through a dust-infested hatch is bullshit. I can already hear their reasoning: *We're the real resistance. No dicking around. You don't think we'd let just anyone into our clique, do you?*

Inside, light trickles in through a sky hole. The air is musty, reeking of wood, sawdust, and acrid expired beer. As I amble through the kitchen, the wooden floor creaks with each step. I spot a few mousetraps on the floor, stepping around them, and pass through a doorway into the seating area where old square oak tables are spread about, with lacquered log stumps for seats, and beetle-collecting booths with torn, rotten red vinyl despite cleaner, well preserved vinyl cushions on the stools at the bar. On the wall opposite the bar hangs a gray sketch of a grinning Natalie Kennedy, our last president with any real power, against a white background. A young man a few years older than me, with a blond square head and thick chest and shoulders, is standing at the bar, wiping the dusty counter clean with a wet rag. His gray t-shirt declares "The End Is Not the End" in black lettering. He seems to ignore me, although I sense his peripheral recognition as I mosey up to the bar.

"Let me guess, you're SOW", I say, pronouncing it like the pig.

"It's SOW", he says, ensconced in his cleaning, "as in you reap what you sow. And you know that already." Finally, he looks up, his sharp blue eyes lancing into mine. "I'm Greg." He extends a hand, and I shake it, countering his strong grip.

"You're not very polite to customers", I say.

"You're not a customer", he says.

"Then what am I?" I ask.

"That's to be determined", he says.

I give a short pseudo chuckle. "Nice food biz. Why the runaround?"

"We can't be too direct", he says. "Thus the automation. For our protection." He looks at me, seeing I still don't approve. "What, you think we'd advertise on CNN?"

"You're a douche", I say.

"Clean and unused", he says in a used car salesman's voice. "Annalisa said you'd say something like that." He pauses as though to size me up. "And no, I'm not gonna fight you. But she said you'd want to."

"Who's Annalisa?" I ask. "AI?"

"Per intellect and talent, more like a goddess", he says. "But completely human."

"Whatever", I say. "Someone's not impressing."

He points at me. "That's the best thing you've said yet. And it's your lucky day, because Annalisa is in the house. She rarely meets applicants in person, but she's made an exception for you." He glances at the tap. "Want a beer?"

"Seriously?" I ask. "Those taps are ancient."

"We came prepared", he says. "Did you?" His eyes challenging me. He pulls two upside down glass mugs from the shelf, extends one in front of me. "Clean enough for you?" The mug is surprisingly clean, distinct from the dusty mugs on the shelf.

I nod. "A little early for me."

"Coke, then?" he asks. "Let's make it Nostalgic. You do like Nostalgic, don't you?"

"How would you know that?" I ask with an edge.

"How would I not?" he asks. He steps toward the tap. "So?" I nod, and he pulls the tap for Coors Light: dark carbonated liquid pours into the mug, foaming and fizzing at the top. He hands me the mug, and I look at the drink, then back at him.

"You don't trust me", he says. "Good for you." He fills his own mug a quarter full from the same Coors Light tap, then shows it to me as proof. "Bottoms up." He guzzles the drink, draining the mug.

Still, I don't quite trust him. Trust must be earned, and this is hardly it.

"Have a flash?" I ask. He nods. "Juicy?"

"None of your biz", he says.

Must have been painful, I think. The guy has demons, like the rest of us. He suffers, which makes me like him the more for it.

I take a drink from the mug. Nostalgic Coke, no doubt. A flash hits me: I'm kissing Cam, inhaling the combined scent of gunpowder and her perfume, my fingers finding the grooves of her ribs.

"That looked like a good one", Greg says, filling his mug with amber-coloured beer from the Modelo tap. He takes a drink. "Never too early for me."

"Real Coke, real beer", I say. "So what?"

"We can't believe everything we see, can we?" he says.

"How can I believe you?" I ask.

"You can't", he says. "Which demands a revelation. I have to give you something. Something convincing. Something of value. And if we do convince you, you'll have to give us something in return."

"What are you, Satan?" I ask.

"You never know", he says.

He spreads his hands across the bar, leaning casually on it, and looks around the room. "Bars are great, aren't they? Too bad we won't be seeing this place again." I narrow my eyes, which Greg interprets as a question. "We never meet in the same place twice."

For a few seconds there's dead silence.

"Hi", says a voice behind me.

I pivot to find a slender teenage girl with shoulder-length black hair and green eyes standing behind me. She seems a little out of place in her plain clothes, like she's used to wearing a lab coat, or a suit.

"I'm Annalisa", she says, holding out her hand.

"Emile", I say. Her hand is soft, her handshake gentle.

"We're good, Greg", she says. Greg wrings out the rag in the sink, sets it down on the bar, and wanders away. "Have a seat." She gestures at the stools. "Don't worry, they're clean."

I hoist myself into the seat, the cushion firm against my lower back, and Annalisa moves in a careful motion onto the stool seat next to me.

"I don't judge books by their covers", I say, "but you don't look like you've been around the block. I'm guessing eighth grade."

Annalisa grins. "Actually I have finished formal schooling. I received my PhD from Yale last year. Now I'm devoted to serving SOW." She pauses. "But you're right. I'm fourteen, so I would typically be near the age of an eighth grader."

Fourteen, I think. The age Illy would be, if she were alive. The thought stings, but only for a second.

"What did you study?" I ask.

"Government, poly sci, and law", she says.

I nod my head. "Nice mix. I thought the corporations hoarded your types. Why aren't you on the hill?"

"I was", she says. "My parents were human rights attorneys. They were imprisoned five years ago, while I was working on my bachelor's degree at Stanford. Donovan Gershon gave me a choice. Sign a lifetime oath to the Corporate Council and get a free ride at Yale, or be consigned to the Underground. One of us kept his agreement."

So she abhors the system, I think. Like me.

"You live dangerously for a fourteen-year-old", I say. Annalisa grins. "What is your position in SOW, exactly?"

"I'm something of a caretaker. An office manager, really. SOW has only been in existence for three years. We started as a ground roots movement. Our donors didn't see the need for an actual leader, someone to make the difficult decisions, until recently."

I look around the room. My eyes settle on the Natalie Kennedy poster. Her posture and expression, confident and dignified, can almost form words. What would Kennedy do? I think.

"Why does SOW want me?" I ask. "I wasn't even class salutatorian."

Annalisa pauses. The look in her eyes suggests a dozen different thoughts, and possibly strategies, are fleeting through her mind. "Let me show you something." With a wave of her hand, she calls up an H-console and a large H-screen appears in front of us. She taps a folder, then toggles through a long list of video files. Finally, she selects one by tapping it. On the screen, perpetrators wearing fatigues and camouflaged ski masks are fanning throughout a wing of the NSA building in Washington, D.C. Some of the perps work quickly on the H-screens of computers while others brandishing laser assault rifles stand vigilant, looking for hostile threats. After a minute, the hackers finish and in the ensuing escape, glowing red traces of laser begin flying.

"I remember that", I say. "It was in the news. The government said it was terrorists."

"We've conducted dozens of other operations that you never hear about", she says. "That was our RF force. They're our bad asses. Joining the RF requires intellect, quick decision making, and fighting prowess."

"And that's where I fit in?" I ask.

"I think so", she says. "For now. You do like to fight, don't you?" She looks into my eyes as though searching for something I've buried in my conscience. "You're not afraid to lose. You're not afraid of pain. Even after the suffering your sister's death caused, you beat back your demons enough to resume a normal life. You excelled in high school. You weren't the most sociable classmate, but neither was I. Neither are many other gifted young people."

"Did you just say 'gifted'?" I ask.

Annalisa grins. "If you had applied, I believe you could have entered a good college."

I take a drink of Coke. A sharp beam of sunlight glints off the red label of a whisky bottle behind the bar. Annalisa calls up another file on the H-screen. Dick Cheney High principal Mrs. Elliot-Nelson dips her Twinky into coffee, shoves it into her mouth.

"Nice program", Annalisa says. "The code was a little rough, but we liked your creativity. The antiviral armour was impressive, and it quickly penetrated the firewall."

"Where did you find it?" I ask.

"We can get things", she says.

"What are you going to do with it?" I ask.

"That's to be determined."

I nod. I look around, wondering if there's anything SOW doesn't know about me. "What is your end game?"

"Our end game is to thwart the Corporate Council's end game", she says. "You've heard of small government. People who advocate for small government are often protecting corporate power. Naturally, the plantation owners of the slavery era wanted government to stay out of their lives. The same with those who exploited the Irish immigrants. Now that same exploiting spirit is targeting the non-wealthy."

"It's a virus", I say.

"Corporations once believed they needed people", she says. "Not because they cared anything about them, but because they needed someone to both manufacture and consume their products. It was never about building a healthy economy, or helping the middle class, or creating well-paying jobs for the impoverished. Now that the Corps have developed a self-sustaining culture of wealth in the CZs, they don't need us anymore. They've already thrown away the Crudders. Now it's our turn for disposal."

Annalisa's views sound similar to Ms. Kinerson's. Is it common to minds of progressives? Or rebels? Whatever it is, Orwell would say Ms. Kinerson and Annalisa are definitely rebels from the waist up.

"I'm not sure that explains why the wealthy can't co-exist", I say.

"It's the nature of accumulation", she says. "Whoever loves money never has enough."

"Is it that simple?" I ask.

"I believe that's the root of it", Annalisa says. "Money. Materials. They address insecurity. Terrorism and globalism fomented CEOs' fears of chaos and instability. Crimes crept closer to their homes, so they installed barriers between those they viewed as their own and the remainder of society. They have everything they want. Almost. They have a surplus of finances. They have power. But now they desire more land. More space. They want a bigger buffer." She pauses. "Now for something that might make you a tad uncomfortable."

She uses the H-pad to call up another video. It shows my Camaro prowling like a bobcat in the Hamer & Hamer Resort parking lot, picking up speed, its engine audible and roaring, slamming into Oscar Gray and flipping him. Annalisa stops the video.

"I'm going to be completely transparent", she says. "You came here to acquire info. And you think you're assessing us, when in reality we've been assessing you. You didn't just show up here by accident. You think you did, but you didn't."

"You've been watching me?" I ask.

"The government is, so why wouldn't we do the same?" she asks. "Whatever resources the corps have, we have to match them, or at least improvise with equivalent weaponry."

I relax, cross my arms. "You've been keeping tabs on me. Big deal. Then you must know I like keeping tabs, myself."

"Oscar Gray", she says, her eyes peering into mine, unflinching.

Why would she need to bring up that deplorable bum? I wonder. My first thought is she wants leverage. Then again, she hasn't asked for anything. The more likely reality is she wants to prove the competency of SOW—and herself.

With a wave of her hand, Annalisa summons an H-console, eliciting a dazzling, surrounding bling of H computer screens, with digital data and videos projecting from the sides and corners.

"So what are you doing, blackmailing me?" I ask.

"No", Annalisa says. "I showed you the video to make a point. The killing was sanctioned. It was legal at the time. But what's to say the government won't reverse the law and make it illegal?"

"They can't do it retroactively", I say.

"Who says they can't? The government manufactures the law as well as truth. With the stroke of a pen, or the whisper of a Corporate Council member, a warrant could be issued for your arrest. And from that point, who knows."

As our meeting winds down, I ask Annalisa where SOW's headquarters are located, and she tells me it's sensitive. I think of asking her to be more specific about the eventual goals of SOW, but I let it go. Then, as though reading my mind, she gives me an answer to that very question.

"Someday", Annalisa says, "I hope to usher in a government that upholds the Constitution pre-Corporate Council, one that corresponds more closely to the blueprint of our Founding Fathers."

She shakes my hand and thanks me for showing up.

"Remember, we're watching you", she says, raising her eyebrows. "But only to protect you."

I leave via the same backdoor entrance.

The next SOW meeting happens three blocks from Dad's house, in a nice one-story bungalow with Spanish pueblo features. After walking to the address, I stroll up a bricked walkway and am about to press the doorbell when the door swings open.

Standing in front of me is the tall skinny young woman from the Gong Cha tea shop, wearing black designer jeans and a Cannabis Cure t-shirt.

"On time and in shape", she says. "Come in." I step into a carpeted foyer and she closes the door. "I'm Veronica. Most people call me V. And no, I don't know why Annalisa doesn't go by a shorter name." She shakes my hand. Her black eyes bulge as she makes a face. "I'm the real thing. No wires in this hot bod."

"Who said it was hot?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Eighty-six-point-three percent of L.A."

"When it comes to opinions, I usually hang with the minority", I say.

V lets this go, leading me into the living room, which looks like a typical family habitat, with a plush brown sofa, large-screen V-TV, electronic recliner, photos of a young family on the wall and mantel. There's a framed NRA poster with a sketch of a Colt .45 that says *Guns Kill People. So What?* The TV is tuned to Fox News. The anchor, a blonde A7 with a flawlessly noble smile and facial symmetry, is boasting of record-setting performances in both the DOW and NASDAQ, with Simulan's stock gaining four points and projected to climb.

"Ew", V says, and changes the channel.

I follow her through an archway into the dining room where, across a marble counter, Greg is pouring drinks in the kitchen. Greg and I reacquaint ourselves as he pours V and me glasses of Coke with ice. While V and I down our drinks, Greg opens a bottle of Modelo by prying the cap off against the counter's edge. He takes a generous drink. I ask them where they went to college: Stanford for V, Loyola-Marymount for Greg.

"So", Greg says, "you ready to suffer? Oh, I forgot. You are suffering. You torture yourself over something that happened years ago. A deep permeable loss. But then you had amelioration, and now everything's better. Welcome to the club."

In the living room, I sit on the sofa as Greg navigates the H-console to call up the VR. A haze of blue light envelopes the room. I notice the setting *Full VR* on the H-console, which means the living room and the contemporary world and everything in it will disappear and all I will experience will be relegated to the time and place of the chosen program.

"So what is the program about?" I ask. "Can you give me a hint?"

"It's a Sioux ritual called 'Vow to the Sun,'" Greg says. "V and I will be in the other room, monitoring your vitals. If we need to, we'll pull the switch."

"Why would you need to?" I ask.

"Oh, I don't know", Greg says nonchalantly. "In case of a heart attack, seizure, that kind of thing."

"I'm already shaking", I say cynically.

Greg gives V a do-you-believe-this-guy look.

"What, exactly, is the purpose?" I ask.

"To see if you're committed", V says. "Pain. Suffering. Sacrifice. To join SOW you need to demonstrate all three."

"Okay", Greg says. "Ready?"

I nod, and Greg taps a red button on the H-console.

"Don't go down like Winston", V says.

"What?" I ask, confused.

"Nineteen Eighty-Four", she says.

"Oh", I say.

She gives me a thumbs up and exits into the dining room.

"Don't fear the Reaper", Greg says, trailing V.

For a few seconds there's nothing, just V and Greg conversing in the dining room. Then two green laser lights, the VR sensors, zero in on my eyes, their warmth giving me a false sense of comfort. I try to relax, but that's hard to do when you know what's coming. The lights dissipate and an ocean of slate gray washes over the room, as though I'm passing through a void, and then the first thing I encounter is the brightness of spring: the sun massaging my skin, black hawks soaring in the sky, aspens tiptoeing toward the mountain peaks, pollen tickling my nose, and wild grass greening the rolling Wyoming hills.

A heavy base drum beats, vibrating my bones, awakening me to the virtual world. A sign, a reminder, that I am *here*, in this new place, and it is real, and that the Word is made flesh in such a world, one of man's creation, and the blood spilled here carries consequences in the original world. Smoke from a nearby fire eddies into the World's Bluest Sky, journeying to meet fat white clouds, and burning my nostrils. Accompanying the drum is a slow chant that some of the tribe, especially the women, are singing, the words not uttered in harsh gutturals, but with encouraging tones, as though they're urging me to fight through what is to come. I see their faces, black-eyed and dark and painted, along with the black hair spilling over their shoulders. Their eyes peering into me, seeing my soul.

I'm standing on the ground, on amber sage grass, between two large wooden stakes, which are attached to two separate dangling leather straps. As I look around, I see two teen natives, younger than I, hanging from their own stakes by their pecs, the leather straps pulled taut, rivulets of blood coursing down their sides, the boys lifting and lowering their heads, apparently drifting in and out of consciousness.

Is that going to be me? I wonder. Will I scream when the needle pierces my skin and comes out the other end? It isn't real, I tell myself. It's only virtual, an apparatus trying to convince me that it is real. I know the truth. Illy was real. Her death was real. My sanctioned murder of Oscar Gray was real. Yes, I know the tricks, the conniving machinations of the virtual world, which functions as a con, a technological devil's advocate, insisting that you believe, that the images

and sensations you experience approximate the real to a close enough extent that they might as well *be* real. The encounter is real as long as you believe it to be.

A burly old man wearing a raccoon's hide on his head, his face painted blue and white, hands a teenage girl a needle-like bone attached to a string. The man's hands tremble with Parkinson's, which might explain why he's not fulfilling the duty as Piercer in Chief. The girl steps toward me in her moccasins, her beige clothes exposing her smooth brown collarbone. She dabs the needle bone in a small pottery cup of puke yellow liquid, and then, before inserting the thing into my flesh, she holds up the needle, pausing, looking into my eyes, waiting for my approval.

After Illy's death, I stopped fearing physical pain. Maybe it's a form of authentic self deprecation. All the better for SOW. They need someone who's fearless, who treats fear like a meth-dealing hobo to be pushed off the train.

I nod. Then, holding the bone needle with her thumb and first two fingers, the girl carefully positions the point just below my left nipple and slowly slides it into my skin. Even though I'm looking at her eyes, and not at the bone, I feel the piece move through my flesh, stabbing me with a slow grating violence that is foreign, and no amount of willpower or self talk or reassurance about the pain being VR can lessen it. I tense as the needle exits above my nipple, with what feels like three streams of blood snaking down my chest, the leather squeezing through the wound as she pulls the needle.

The young woman unties the leather from the needle, then ties the end of the other leather strap to it. Now I get to do the whole thing over again, just on the other side. I grind my teeth as the needle enters, and I exhale as it exits. Two male natives tie the leather ends against the etched tops of the stakes. Then they hoist me up, setting the lower ends of the stakes into their earthen holes. I grunt as the straps pull against my skin. What happens if they cleave my skin? What are the chances of having a heart attack or stroke or going into shock? And if one of the latter occurs, does that mean I can't join SOW? On the other hand, despite Ms. Kinerson's endorsement, maybe SOW isn't the kind of organization I should be excited about joining. Why am I so eager to suffer for it? But isn't that the kind of cowardly bullshit thinking that would make others give up? No, there's no quit in this homeboy.

I hang by my pecs, baking in the sun and smoke, sweat slithering down my cheeks and neck, into the wounds made by the bone needle, the natives singing in their foreign tongue. I fix my gaze on a cloud in the distance, a bloated thunderhead in the shape of Peppy's beard, knowing the pain is a long-distance event. If pain is anything, it is generous, giving you all you can handle, and then, after you think you've sucked all of its venom out, it rears its pitted face and delivers another dose.

Hundreds of other thoughts pelt my mind as I lay suspended. I can always quit, I think. Not that I will, but I like knowing the option is there, like an ex-smoker who keeps a pack of Marlboros in the fridge: the cigarettes are always there if he wants one. It's the choice that counts. Without choice, that would be authoritarian, and we can't have no dang authoritarian scum in the good old US of A. So git your dang ol' commie socialist pig hands off my firearms, Second Amendment, Corporate Right to Legislation, Right to Work, Budweiser, Coors Light, Big Oil, the Controlled Substances Act, euthanasia, my Constitutionally guaranteed right to legal murder, and git the hell off my property!

If I pass out, do I fail?

I lower my eyes and see the Flesh Piercing Girl singing softly a few steps away, her eyes tender with concern.

"How kind of you", I mutter, "to let me join your tribe." Then I look to the sky and laugh.

At some point I begin to lose track of time, and I lean my head back against the base of my neck, my arms and legs dangling, numbed by the nothingness of inactivity. When I finally come to, I'm sitting on the sofa in the living room, facing Greg and V. The lights are on, and I can see from the drapes that it's dark outside.

"Welcome back", Greg says, lounging in a recliner.

"You made it", V says, sitting beside me. "You're part of SOW."

I reach for my pecs, which are sore, but my hands find fistfuls of cotton t-shirt material. No gaping cuts. No blood. My brain's distinction between real and virtual kicks in.

"We get that a lot", Greg says. "You're all there, chief."

"How long was I in VR?" I ask.

"Doesn't matter", Greg says. "But you realize it's dark out?"

"Did I pass out?" I ask.

"Naw", Greg says.

"Good vitals", V says.

There's a pause as I wait for more info. "What now?" I ask.

"Rest, and we'll be in touch", Greg says.

A few days later, after dinner, Cam comes over to the house to hang out. We embrace at the door, and she hands me a Sonic forty-four-ounce Nostalgic Coke, which matches her own. Dad and Cara are happy to see her and talk with her briefly before leaving us alone in the living room, where we sit on the carpeted floor watching a Ho Lite video on VH1 and then listen to a rant by Chance Dondlinger on Fox News.

"He has a mouth on him", Cam says. "How does he get away with it, saying those things about the CC?"

"One of my teachers thinks he's fake", I say. "A ruse to sniff out anti-government types."

Cam probes me with her eyes. For a moment neither of us says anything. Then, without naming SOW, I tell Cam that I'm involved with an opposition group, and I describe the VR pec torture ritual, and Cam asks if the group is involved in anything dangerous, and I tell her my MMA background could be useful.

"How's your jujitsu?" she asks.

Without warning, Cam grabs my wrist with both hands and goes for an arm bar, twisting my forearm against the carpet, but I roll with the twist and spin out of it. Now that I'm on my knees, her legs reach for my neck like scorpion pincers, gripping me in a squeezing leg lock, and my head purples as my blood and oxygen are cut off. Cam laughs with her back on the floor, regarding me, no doubt, as the harmless Homo Sapiens White Boy. As I suck in a breath, my hands fight their way through the wedge of her thighs and I pry her iron legs apart and land on her, my face inches from hers.

"Good job", Cam says.

I catch my breath. "Those are some strong legs. They should be outlawed."

"They *are*", she says. "In Orange County."

For a minute we look back at the TV. An anchor is reporting a CDF Special Ops raid on a cartel base in Monterey, Mexico. According to the report, one US service member was wounded

while the cartel camp was destroyed. Footage of the charred remains, courtesy of La Raza TV, is shown in the TV screen's corner. US President Salazar is shown sitting at his desk in the Oval Office, wearing a navy blue suit and tie, stating: "The United States is determined to stamp out the illegal manufacture, transporting, and distribution of illegal methamphetamine and other narcotics from across the border, no matter the region or the foreign legalities that give rise to their creation and export."

I call up the H-console and change the channel, settling on a funny sitcom *The Homies Brown*. It's about an old gray-haired black man, Harv, who speaks his mind and refuses to move from his Underground condo despite his son Evan's job offer that will allow them to live off the hill. The show has won four Emmy's, including one for Best Actor, and it's filmed in the Underground city of Goldsmith, about fifty miles north of L.A.

Harv: What I'm gonna do off the hill? All my friends is here.

Evan: What friends? You a crudder, Pop. Crudders ain't got no friends.

Harv: Quit callin' me that.

Evan: What, crudder? What Webster's say, Pop? A crudder is any dimwit dummy who lives in the Underground. That's what you is. The truth stank, but it still be truth.

Harv: Crudder is in the mind, fool! Fools is crudders because they believe they crudders. Once they refuse to believe it, they free.

Cam laughs.

"What is it that you want?" I ask. "I mean long term. What do you want your life to be about?"

"Are you getting existential on me?" Cam asks.

"What if I am?" I say. "Let's have it. What's your thing with social work?"

Cam waits. "I hate it that people are being discarded. The crudders. People in my neighbourhood. A family in our building can't afford their electric bill, especially not after the heat waves, so my mom and some other residents chip in and help them. The sweeps are getting

worse. They're a tool for sending the poor underground. The country was better before meth and murder were legal, before all the euthanasia clinics."

"New laws are hard to repeal", I say. "Citizens United. Meth. Murder. They're here to stay."

"Screw the status quo", Cam says.

"I've learned the hard way", I say. "You're just chasing footprints in the river."

"Philosophy much?" Cam asks.

"Sorry", I say. "My AI shrink loves Heraclitus."

"Your AI shrink?" Cam says.

"Yeah", I say.

"How does that work?" she asks.

I describe Dr. G and our sessions. The more details I shed, the more Cam regards the whole thing as a cartoon. When I describe Mr. G's sensitivities, the times I've reduced him to tears, Cam laughs. So, the girl has a sense of humour, I think. And even better, it doesn't always involve a snarky putdown of yours truly. I'm liking her more and more. Intelligent. Strong. Athletic. Attractive. Human.

Cam looks at the floor. I see blue and green light spilling from the edge of her sock. I'm guessing it's an H-tatt. When she sees me looking at it, she quickly pulls her pants leg down over it.

"I'm not totally sold on social work", she says. "I'm not sure how much help I can really be to people whose lives are messed up."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"It's almost like some people are stuck to the ground. Pardon the metaphor. Things have been so bad for them for so long, that no matter how hard you try to pull them up, they just fall flat on their faces again. And even if you help someone through one episode or tragedy or whatever the

hell they're going through, they might be okay for a while, but there's another bad event waiting for them down the road."

"Yeah", I say, nodding. "But isn't there usually something good waiting ahead, too?"

"I don't know", Cam says. "For some people, maybe not. I think a lot of poor people are miserable all the time."

I think about a lot of the crudders and homeless, the poor people who live in shacks and bullet-riddled homes. What do they have to look forward to? At least the methhead has his fix to look forward to.

"What about you?" she asks. "What do *you* want?" She frogs me in the shoulder.

"Besides travelling in time and preventing my sister's murder?" I say. I think about it. "I want our leaders to know what it's like to be on the other side. To live off the hill, or in the Underground. Even if it's just for a minute. I want them to feel the same helplessness, the imbalance of power, and have to look up to someone else and plead for help."

"People need leverage", Cam says. "With the CC in power, our ideas about change are just cigarette ash in the wind."

I consider the possibilities. "What if we did have leverage? You know what a panopticon is, right?"

"I might", Cam says.

"It's an old design for surveillance in prison", I say. "It allowed those in control to watch all the inmates all the time."

"That's mostly correct", Cam says. "But the authorities didn't need to watch the inmates all the time. Their intention was to make the prisoners believe they were being watched. If they could do that, the inmates modified their own behaviour, just like the authorities wanted."

I nod and give her a fist bump. Then I think of the spying program I created while taking the computer programming courses at Dick Cheney High. I'd spent several months studying complex corporate and government firewalls and how to penetrate them. I didn't really consider myself a

hacker or anything. I think I was just pissed off at the Corporate Council trying to control every speck of our lives. When the CC tried to get Congress to pass legislation requiring off the hill citizens to get intracranial implants—which would have linked our brains to the internet and bombarded us with corporate ads—I decided to write the program. When it was finished, it was way too sophisticated for the computer system at Dick Cheney High, although I don't know how it would stack up against a government firewall.

"What if the panopticon were reversed?" I ask. "Instead of them watching us, we're watching them."

"Dangerous", she says. "They'd torture you on Sinaloa TV if they caught you."

Then Cam does something I've never seen anyone do. She casually pinches her own waist.

"Did you just pinch yourself?" I ask.

"I did", she says. I form a question with my eyebrows. "It's a waist check." I throw her a confused look. "I like to watch my weight. I'm Chinese, okay?"

"So pinching yourself is the equivalent of a weight scale?"

"It gives me a good idea", she says. She narrows her eyebrows. "Why? Does it bother you?"

My throat constricts. The truth is her pinching her waist drives me up the wall—in a sensual way. As in, I'd like to be the one doing the pinching. As though reading my mind, Cam moves closer, and she takes my hand, placing it on her waist, and time skids to a stop as we kiss for the second time.

I see Cam for the next few days. We mostly just hang out at Sonic, continuing our discussion about politics and our aims in life, as well as certain recipes for Chinese dishes, our favourite bands and singers, and what it would be like to live in the Underground.

On the weekend, while I'm at Mom and Cara's, the fire ant sting of loneliness swells within me. I spend my usual pastime savouring the taste of Mom's cooking—imitation pork chops with rice and carrots—and relaxing in front of the TV with Peppy parked in my lap. Although I'm always content to see Mom and Cara, I find myself craving Cam's company. Since she doesn't have a CZ visa, she can't come with me onto the hill. Even if she applied for one, her chance of approval would be less than ten percent. I imagine her potential answer under Reason for Visit: Visiting Boyfriend's Home. Or would she say *Friend's* home? Which brings up the question: What are we? We're dating. Seeing each other. In high school everyone wanted to slap a label on such relationships, whether it had been going on for two days, two weeks, or two months. What if it doesn't matter? What if, like the instability of everything in life, there are no suitable labels for any relationship?

After dinner, Mom, Cara and I spend an hour and half watching *The Spooners*. Mom hoots and hollers while most of the jokes fall flat for me. But I laugh at a few of them, as always, for Mom's sake.

At about nine p.m. Mom turns in, leaving Cara and me alone. Cara asks me what I've been up to, and I tell her about Cam and vaguely about SOW, failing to reveal the name and referring to it as a community organization. She asks how I got involved, and I bring up Ms. Kinerson, who I've discussed with her in the past, lamenting her firing at Dick Cheney High.

"She's the one who criticized the government?" Cara asks.

"Yeah", I say.

"It takes courage ... " Cara says, sounding as though she's rounding the corner of a contrasting statement.

"But what?" I ask, anticipating the other half of her half-empty glass.

"I'm not sure it's all that smart", she says. "Not for your average citizen."

"You mean for someone like me", I say.

"I wouldn't want you to get too vocal", she says. "Some of my patients ... I've seen what this government does to people who don't have money or aren't well-connected."

I think of arguing that resistance doesn't work without brave citizens committing to action, but that would only make Cara suspicious of me, and then she would worry. Besides, debating with Cara is useless. In the past, when we disagreed, I usually bit my tongue and then did what I wanted—like running over Oscar Gray—only to regret it later. I know where her reasoning would lead. She would reinvent the you-can't-fight-city-hall adage, but in the latest coinage. And the odds, like always, would be in her favour. Most average law-abiding citizens don't fare too well when resisting armed-to-the-crotch authority. Particularly authoritarian authority. Most, if not all, average Joe's will be sacrificed.

Cara asks for the latest details about Ms. Kinerson. What happened to her? Have I been in touch with her recently?

"I visited her", I say. "In the Underground."

Cara thinks about this. "What did you think of the Underground?"

"I didn't think much of it", I say. I tell her about the smells, the cops beating the man, the android cop threatening to tase me.

"Rapacious control", she says. "Congress is proposing a new bill that would amend the zoning laws and demographic guidelines in the CZs."

"Do you have that in English?" I ask.

"It would mean more androids, less humans", she says.

"How many less humans?" I ask.

"Thirty percent, according to the proposal", she says.

"Holy crap", I say. "Where will the people go?"

"Off the hill", Cara says. "Some could be designated for the Underground."

I think of Mom and Cara having to sell their house and move off the hill. They were the people in my life who seemed the most stable. But like all things in the world, they can be taken away in a cruel blink.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because they would be considered *nonessential*", she says.

It's like a virus, I think. It was there in the Beginning, whether that beginning was created by God, the Big Bang, or both. People wanted more of everything: more food, more land, more livestock, more gold and jewellery, more slaves, more control. And they possessed a constant craving for the best quality in each category. They craved whatever belonged to their neighbour—only better. And MORE. People weeded each other out, oblivious to the welfare of their neighbours, who could either fend for themselves or die, with the thriving class justifying actions with the excuse that the latter "didn't want to work." For the greedy, idolatrous insecure human soul, how much is enough? Is the lust for more, for better, ever satisfied? I think of the future. Thirty years. Forty years. What will the CZs resemble then? Maybe there will be an interior portion, an exclusive circle, designated for the elites of the elites, with the same restrictions for entry that apply when passing from one current zone to another. No, the land area would be too small. Whatever the elites and wealthy desire, it is BIG. Gargantuan. Colossal. All the adjectives that define largeness. If they wanted more, they would kick people out of the CZs. But when would the process stop? I imagine a lone CEO living on the hill, with an army of androids at his command, offering the semblance of a society.

Cara asks again about Ms. Kinerson. Did she have family? Is she teaching in the Underground?

"Why?" I ask. "You almost sound jealous."

"Just the opposite", Cara says. "She sounds admirable."

I give her the particulars, at least what I know.

"From my experience, many of the best teachers are single", Cara says.

"How is that?" I ask.

"Well, they don't have a family of their own. No spouse. Very often no children. So their students become more or less their children."

"Hmm", I say, thinking it over. "Could a teacher really think of her students as her own kids? Could she care for them that much?"

"You'd be surprised", Cara says.

On Monday, as soon as I pass the CZ checkpoint headed for Corrales, I get a classic text from Greg: I'm to meet V in Riverside, and he gives me the address.

Riverside, the world's least favourite burb. Refuge of Smog. L.A.'s Anus. If given the choice of residing in Riverside or the Underground, I'd pick the Underground.

When I reach the address, which is actually heading away from the suburb limits, I'm not impressed. A gray warehouse is sprawled across an otherwise abandoned lot, with hardly another building in site. The next one is a closed-down Phillips 66 station a half mile down the road.

At least it's not in downtown Riverside, I think. I saunter up to the front door, passing a smattering of ripe green tumbleweeds and bloodweed. A wide dark green metal door has a padlock on its faded silver handles. Nevertheless, I grab one handle, give a half-hearted tug, just to hear the creaking of the ramshackle door.

These people really like back entrances, I think.

I wander around the side, kicking a flint rock toward the building's side. Luckily, the rock sets off a rattlesnake's rattlers. Against a bevy of rocks and worn out cinder blocks, the reptile has found the perfect camouflage. As I stand still, taking measured breaths, I locate the uncoiling, slithering patches of gray and black. A remarkable animal, I think. Like most, given a bad name by the most violent predator: man.

The beast is huge, at least a five footer. Likely a Pacific Diamondback, the most deadly kind of rattlesnake due to both the toxicity of its venom and the generous amount it injects into its victims. I'm a good twenty feet away. No need to panic. The snake creeps casually, its tail going *ssshhththcckkkk*, motoring along the building's side as I keep my distance and walk toward the building's rear.

A gust of wind brings the stench of decaying meat, and I quickly find the source: a hog's head staring at me beside a dumpster, a half dozen vultures clamouring around it, fighting to get the choicest parts. I lean over, wondering if I will puke, but nothing comes out. I meander around

the foul airstream and cross a path through creosote bushes to reach the back door, an almond painted metal structure that swings flimsily as I push it open.

Inside, I'm met by a surprising cool draft and, in the distance, a familiar song, the Corps' "Rock the Boat", blasting through an audio system a hundred feet away. It's dim, but there's enough light to see where I'm walking along the smooth concrete floor, which is cracked in places. The room appears to have been used as a watering-down section, perhaps in a slaughterhouse; spigots line the walls two feet above the ground, with a few old crumbling black hoses hibernating in the corners. I pass into a hallway, the rhythm guitar in "Rock the Boat" revving with drop D power chords. I also hear pads knocking against each other.

I turn the corner, and the warehouse opens up into a spacious floor. In the centre, beneath the lights, lies an MMA cage. In front of it, standing on a blue padded floor, is V. She's wearing red nylon shorts and a black lycra top, and she's damp with sweat from pounding a heavy bag. A couple of round high-powered fans sit on each side of her, their blades churning out cool currents of air. As I come closer, I see her hair tied up in a ponytail. She stops punching and mutes the music.

"You made it", she says.

I nod. "That's a serious rattlesnake."

"That's Hank", she says. "He comes out sometimes. Don't hurt him."

"I won't", I say.

"Ready to fight?" she asks.

I shrug. "I'm not usually in the habit of hitting girls."

V stiffens her lower lip. "That's fine with me. It's not like you're gonna hit me, anyway." She grabs a clear plastic bag of clothing from the corner of the cage and tosses it to me. "Thirty-four waist, is that about right? You can change in the restroom down the hall." She nods toward a dark corridor on the other side of the cage. The music commences, and V goes back to punching and kicking the bag as though it had stolen her lunch money. Her shots crisp despite her slender limbs.

I wander to the bathroom and pull on a pair of black nylon shorts and a gray t-shirt that says *Support Android Reform*. When I return to the mat, V is standing inside the cage, hands wrapped in grappling gloves. She throws me a black pair of such gloves.

"Get in the cage", she says. "Let's go."

The gloves are unwrapped, but I briefly hold them up to my nose. Brand new. There's nothing like hitting someone with new grappling gloves. I enter the cage through the cage door, strap on the gloves, and hop around lightly to get my feel for the canvas.

"Ready", V asks.

I nod.

"Do your damage", she says.

She stands slack, almost flat-footed, with an expression that conveys boredom, as though I'm wasting her time. Although she's an inch or two taller than me, her thin build is hardly intimidating, lacking the muscular mass of Cam. I imagine hitting her flush with a rock or a fist, breaking several bones in her face.

I hesitate. "Uh ... I—"

"I'm not going to be the one in pain", she says, grinning. Her assurance does me little good, and I still can't find the motivation to hit her. So far, she's one of the more likeable people I've met in SOW, especially when lined up next to Greg. "We've seen you in action. On surveillance. You're good, but not next level. I scored you personally. You're an A-Nine."

"I'm guessing ten is the highest", I say. V nods. "What's the A for?"

"Amateur", she says.

She's trying to piss me off, I think. She wants me to fight. In Buford's Gym in Corrales, if you wanted to scrap with a female you had to first ask Coach Buford for permission. Based on that, perhaps this should seem like a great privilege. I shake my arms loose, start circling to my left, clinching each fist to move the blood into the knuckles. In V's eyes I see knowledge,

caution, and confidence. I throw a feint, then a fake jab near her cheek. Neither rattle her. She remains in her cautious upright stance.

"Don't play", she says. "Throw it like you mean it."

Okay, I think. You asked for it.

I miss with a jab, then snap a left-right, the latter grazing the side of her head. I throw a right to her midsection, and it lands but bounces off a wall of granite abs. She dodges a straight right. I kick at her lower leg; she checks it and cracks me in the mouth with a straight right. The sweet and sour taste of my own blood whets my appetite, so I unleash a combination: one-two to the head, a right to the body, followed by a spinning kick to the body. Like before, the only one that lands is the right to her midsection, and V's iron stomach diminishes the impact. She catches my foot and pulls up on my leg, flipping me onto my back and landing on top of me. She smacks my forehead with a hammer fist and moves to side control. I try landing some punches, but it's useless. The next thing I know, V has me in a chokehold and I can't get any air. I'm tapping, the universal signal for giving up and admitting defeat, but V's grip doesn't let up. The last thing I see are the overhead lights, blurring.

A bucket of ice water welcomes me back to the conscious world. V is squatting in front of me, the bulk of her weight resting on her ankles, and she's close to heaving another bucket when I hold up my hand, motioning her to stop. I'm gasping for air. I've been choked out a few times in the gym and in amateur matches, but never out-out. She hands me a cold bottle of water.

"What the hell", I say, taking a drink. "Didn't you see me tapping?"

V shakes her head slowly, her expression saturated with pity. "Where we go there is no tapping."

The reality jars me. I know SOW isn't the Boy Scouts or anything. Still, I ponder the seriousness—the danger—of SOW's activities. Having murdered someone, myself, and having been the target of another sanctioned murder, I'm no virgin of violence, of the fine art of drawing

blood. Nevertheless, that doesn't immunize me from additional threats of harm. Is my life going to be threatened again? Or maybe the question is, When will my life be threatened again? Why else would V present this life or death reality check?

"If I'm an A-Nine, what are you?" I ask.

"It depends on the scorer", V says. "Greg scored me as a P-Eight."

"I'm guessing P is for pro?" I ask.

"Yep", she says.

When I recover my faculties, V shows me where I went wrong: my stance, footwork, uneven distribution of weight, failing to turn some punches and snap others, overcompensating on the spinning kick, a multitude of defensive errors while on my back. After that, she runs through the basics of punching and kicking, honing my technique, and she teaches me a few new defensive manoeuvres. By the time we're done, I've broken a sweat. We sit on the canvas floor, drinking water, our backs against the cage fence.

"When you're done training me", I ask, "what will my level be then?"

V thinks about it. "P-five, minimum."

"How long is it going to take?" I ask.

"A small eternity", she says.

Berto sits at the dining room table, paying full attention, staring at the sheet of loose leaf paper. In the plainest, clearest, most coherent language anyone has ever used to explain algebra, Eneca sits beside him, drawing equations and solving them, step by step, with a perfectly sharpened brand new number-two pencil.

Amanda and I are sitting on the living room sofa, drinking Cokes. She's never been in the house before, although, during the last three years, I've imagined this configuration more than four score. At least. Of course, I've thought of the living room as just the warm-up.

"What does x equal?" Eneca asks.

Silence. Berto stares at the paper, dumbfounded as a goat.

"God, Berto, how can you be so stupid?" Amanda asks.

"Shut up, I'm trying to think", Berto says.

"Not happenin'", Amanda says.

The TV is on, with the volume turned low. Some asinine sitcom about android toy store clerks.

"How you been?" Amanda asks.

"Great", I say. "I'm staying busy. What about you?"

She shakes her head, gives me a don't-ask look. "Arizona State is closing. Can you believe that shit? I was enrolled and everything. I even paid my room deposit."

"Won't they reimburse you?" I ask.

"Yeah, but now I have to start over", she says. "I'm so mad. I feel like hitting someone. Come here. Get a little closer." She grins and raises her eyebrows.

"Berto's a better candidate", I say. "You might knock some sense into him."

We look at Berto simultaneously, craning our necks. Eneca is waiting for him to give an answer, but he looks stumped.

"Nothing can knock sense into that cow", she says.

"I heard that", Berto says.

"No you didn't", Amanda says. She looks back at me. "The only school with 'State' left in its name is Oregon State. Thank God I applied there."

"You got accepted, didn't you?" I ask.

"Yeah. Did I tell you?"

"Yeah", I say. "Did you apply anywhere else? Berkeley?"

"Hell, no", she says. "I can't afford Berkeley. Even if I could, I doubt I could get in. I don't have nerd grades like yours." Amanda narrows her gaze at my face. "Did you get in another fight?"

"Kind of", I say. "I was training. Got my ass handed to me by a girl."

"Some girl", Amanda says. "You need to watch out for them."

We watch the TV for a minute. The android characters aren't like real androids. They're idiots who can't do anything right. I guess that's the show's appeal, but their lines are about as humorous as a group of pygmies squatting around a latrine. Some GED aspirants might find it funny. Chalk this sucker up to cancellation.

Amanda wants to watch VH1, so I change the channel. To my surprise, the Corps' video of "Sheepin'" is playing, with Volcana scintillating in a retro red zippered one piece, strumming the rhythm angrily on her Gibson.

"Holy shit", I say, scooting to the edge of my seat.

"What?" Amanda asks.

"It's the Corps", I say. "How'd they get on VH1?"

Amanda shrugs. "Maybe they're not banned anymore?"

I shake my head. "Not a chance."

At the end of the video, Volcana glares from the screen and folds her forearms in the shape of an X in front of her chest. Then the screen goes blank, and it cuts to the middle of a pop video.

"Decide on a school yet?" Amanda asks.

"Not really", I say.

Amanda gapes with alarm. Her eyes turn serious and condemning, like those of a big sister, although no one's sister ever looked half as hot as she does.

"What are you waiting for?" she asks. "Emile, you can't screw around with this. You got accepted, right? Where was it? New Mexico?" I nod. "The government's shutting down more schools, and you and I were lucky enough to get accepted somewhere. And don't excuse yourself with your non-conformist underachieving attitude." Her eyes intense, sincere. Her pleading voice full of empathy.

It seems not long ago that Cara delivered a similar spiel, but less excoriating. Now, with the juxtaposition of the two, I realize how patient Cara has been.

"You don't have to get all piped", I say.

"I'm not piped, I'm just being real", Amanda says.

"Why?"

"Maybe I care about what happens to you", she says.

The lip gloss shimmers on her lips, and I notice how we've incidentally leaned closer to each other during the conversation, separated by a mere two feet. An ocean scent of perfume. Am I mistaken, or does she act like she's preparing to kiss me? I would have given almost anything for that in high school, but things are different now.

Later, I dial up a session with Dr. Glasgow. He appears on a golf course, decked in white golfing apparel, with a cap and a polo shirt that says "I Care." He's rearing back to take a swing at the ball with his driver.

"Doc!" I say.

He flinches awkwardly, like someone who has been shot, his face flushing. "Can't a guy get a round of golf in?"

"Office", I say. "Now."

Doc lays the end of the driver on the ground, straightens his posture, and rests his other hand on his hip. "You don't own me."

"Do, too", I say.

"Do not."

"Do, too."

"Says who?" he asks.

"Me."

He pauses. "Prove it."

"You were bought and paid for", I say.

"My *services* were bought and paid for", he clarifies. "I, however, am my own man."

I briefly consider his argument. "Bullshit. You're not a man. You just play one in the program."

Dr. G looks stumped. Wait for it, I think.

His face simmers a pink hue, his forearm fidgets. Is that fluid in his eyes?

"Below the belt!" he erupts in a plaintive, wounded voice.

If I didn't know better, I might think this is one of those occasions when he's not acting. But you know what the actors/actresses say: the best acting *is* real. So maybe it doesn't matter. Ronald Reagan was an actor. When he was sitting in the White House signing documents, or reading speeches, was he serving authentically, or was he playing the role of President. Does it make a difference? Either way, he served the interests of those in power.

Acting or non, Doc's antics elicit a nice laugh from me.

"Calm down, Doc", I say.

He dabs at an eye. An AI crying. Is that even possible? Aren't emotions confined to the flesh? I think of offering an H-hug, but the thought passes.

"Someone needs to apologize", Doc says.

"I'm sorry", I say, wanting to bury the phantom hatchet and get to his services.

The next second Dr. G is in his office, clad in a nice dark green suit and tie, sitting on the edge of his desk as usual.

"Uh ... " I say.

"Too much?" he asks. He instantly changes into jeans and gray short sleeve button-up shirt.

"Out with it", he says. "What's your damage?"

I give him the details about Amanda's visit, particularly the vibe she was giving me, and my conflicting emotions. Although I'm treating the issue seriously, with a vial of lament for my middle school and high school years replete with loneliness and strikeouts with the opposite sex, Dr. G responds by leaping away from the desk and dancing, in a weird and outdated manner, in the middle of the office, snapping his fingers, jerking his hips, and moonwalking.

"Got my little somethin potion lotion", he sings, borrowing Ho Lite's lyrics, but obviously not her voice, his falsetto careening out of tune. "Get to the beat, no come to the back." Dr. G looks up and notices that I'm not enjoying the moment half as much as he is, so he hops back onto his desk. "We's havin' fun now." Pronounced with something of a Cajun accent. "I guar-rone-tee you ain't gonna step in this here river again." He claps his hands together.

I glare at him. "Doc."

"Come on", he says. "What's a little gallows humour?"

"It's called a conundrum", I say.

Dr. G reaches behind him and grabs a bag of popcorn. He tosses some popcorn into his mouth. Crunch, crunch. "My daddy always said the more the merrier." He is baiting me, waiting for me to say something disparaging. "Good. You could've made an insensitive statement, but you suppressed that desire. Now that's maturity. At least a growing sign of it."

"Doc gives a compliment", I say.

"I did", he says. "And I do, when they're warranted. So, time to earn the big books. Oh, that's right, you don't actually pay me. Must be nice for certain high-end shrinks."

"Money changed hands a long time ago", I remind him.

"So it did", he says. "But I didn't see any of it."

"There's the small issue of agency", I say.

"What are you saying?" he asks.

"Nothin'", I say, with a slight grin.

Doc waits, eyeing me like a distrustful gunfighter, anticipating the draw of my Colt .44. I hold back.

"Where were we?" he asks. "Oh yeah, the two for one. So the girl you yearned for at Dick Cheney High—no pun intended—is suddenly available. But now you've got a little thing for—"

"Not so little", I say.

"Pardon mua", he says. "You're currently smitten by your would-be assassin Camelia."

"You had to bring that up", I say. "The murder bit."

"What doesn't kill you brings you closer?"

"Thanks", I say.

"The brass is coming. Here it is. Amanda knows the score. You're into Cam, and she's into you. Don't get distracted by the relationship you always desired with Amanda and don't currently have. It doesn't exist. Focus on the one you do have. Water it. Nourish it. Stay with it to its end."

I think about the particulars down the road. I take in a deep breath, exhale. "What if it doesn't end?"

"That, my friend, is called a keeper", Doc says.

For the next three weeks, I continue training with V in Riverside. Somedays I see Hank, the rattlesnake, slithering alongside the building or coiled near the pile of bricks, sleeping until I wake him up, his tale advising me to keep my distance. My eyes drawn to Hank's black diamond patches, the sun glinting off like shimmering onyx.

V and I spar until the sweat is pouring onto the canvas, despite the turbulent air of the fans. My punches and kicks getting crisper, quicker, stronger. Still, I wear a perpetual shiner and swollen lip from V's straight rights, and her head kicks have both wobbled me and knocked me flat on my ass into a borderless, starlit country whose language has become painfully familiar.

"How many times, Emile?" V asks. "Head movement." She's usually squatting in front of me when delivering this news, and often there are two of her. "Defence, defence, defence. You can't fight if you're dead."

Dazed and confused, I look at her. "Am I dead yet?"

To which she offers a rare grin.

During the third week, while sparring, I begin to put together the defensive moves V has taught me—head movement, checking kicks, smothering, and blocking shots with my gloves—and we engage in a combative three-minute flurry where V can barely even touch me, and I dodge one of her combinations and land a hard left to her solar plexus, which seems to stun her by the glazed, dilated look of her eyes, as well as the fact that she takes a step back to recollect herself.

"You all right?" I ask, pausing, standing straight up.

The lull in action is all V needs. Disapproval would be an understatement for what explodes in her eyes. She sucks in a quick breath and unloads an angry roundhouse missile toward my temple, grazing my head as I dodge.

"Don't! Drop! Your! Hands!" she says between a barrage of punches, landing the second and fourth. Then she finishes with a one-two and a head kick which, for the first time, has me seeing three of her.

The week after, I hold my own against V in sparring, and at the end of the second workout, she grins and gives me a playful slap across the side of the head. I'm trying to catch my breath. A bead of sweat scoots down the ridge of V's nose.

"Congrats", she says. "You're a pro now."

"That's it?" I say. "Just P1? Not P3 or P4?"

"Patience", V says. "I can't turn water into wine. You punch and learn. Because of your background, we've been able to progress as fast as we have." She gives me a smug look. "Not that you're the fastest learner in the gym, but even the slowest react to punches and kicks."

"I appreciate that", I say.

"I know."

The Gonzales and Meyer Clinic lies in Elysian Park, north of Chinatown. The hallways are padded with clean carpet that alternates in blocks of amber and green, the walls adorned with paintings and sketches of new age and nature, including California parks like Yosemite as well as the limestone peaks of New Mexico and Utah. Auto-timed air fresheners spray short bursts of desert rain-scented mist from the walls, which blend well with the scents of succulents and other potted plants.

Cam, who I thought was fearless, proceeds cautiously down the hallway, as though it was haunted, with me at her side.

"Relax", I say. "I thought you used to work here."

"I did", she says. "The last two summers."

"But not this summer", I say.

Cam doesn't answer. We come to an elaborate L-shaped front desk, and I see Cam's mom sitting behind it, smiling at us as we walk up. I take in the brochures and posters: *Ask about the Philip Morris Financing Plan*, *The Remains Disposal Act of 2076: What Does it Mean for Me?*, *Lily: The Humane Choice*, *Asset Forfeiture and Estate Options*.

In addition to us, an elderly white couple who have seen better days are talking to another desk attendant. The woman looks to be in better shape than the man, who, wearing a checkered yellow and blue polo shirt, is humped over against a walker, his gray hair dishevelled and face a maze of golden age spots. Dry white hairs on the tops of his ears. The blue irises of his eyes glistening, fading, clinging to life. God knows what other ailments he has, besides the bent spine and walking problems. I wonder if the woman, his probable wife, wants him to live. Suddenly, my heart strains. Seeing him smack his lips together, recognising his struggle to stay on his feet, I'm overcome with a desire to comfort him.

As Cam's mom leads us into an office behind the reception, I look back at the elderly man. I'm sure he is officially regarded as a "patient", but what could he really be if not a "target?" I know he's going willingly to his own slaughter, but still, his life is being taken for profit, a

robbery legitimized by the government, and as thousands of dollars change bank accounts, they will call it humane.

"Emile", Cam says. "What is it?"

I look at her, not knowing what to say. "Nothing." But it's not nothing. The man is on a downward trajectory, death is imminent. I'm not against ending the lives of the terminally ill or those who suffer hopelessly, but still, something within me, deep within my chest, wants the man to live. I don't know if it emanates from Illy death or where it comes from, exactly—maybe it's inherent in humans—but in this moment I'm convinced that each second of living, every individual heartbeat, is a miracle that can't be taken for granted.

"You're sure about this?" Cam's mom asks. "You want to observe?"

Cam looks at me, waiting for me to answer. I feel a weight on me, as though I'm deciding for both of us. Cam hasn't told me specifically what she did when she worked at the clinic, and didn't seem too eager to discuss the clinic's details.

"Yes", I say, "if Cam is willing to."

Cam nods yes to her mom. Then as we exit the office and pad past the elderly couple, I pause, standing a few steps away from the humpbacked man. I'm not sure what I'm thinking of doing, but I can't ignore him. The man regards me, looking at me with his gentle death-welcoming blue eyes.

"Emile?" Cam says, grabbing my hand softly. "Come on."

We walk down another hallway where people who are either elderly or terminally ill are sitting in waiting chairs outside the offices of terminal care physicians. We pass a man in his forties, a gaunt-looking character with a small head and bad posture whose bug eyes look too big for his face, and I wonder what his problem is, or if there even is a problem.

Cam's mom swipes her hand past a sensor, and the heavy door to the observation room unlocks, and we file inside. The room is small and purposefully dim. There are two rows of cushioned benches, one elevated behind the other, and cushioned noise-proof pads on the walls.

We stand in front of the window, which forms a four-foot high rectangle in the middle of the wall, offering a transparent view into a small clinical room.

Cam's mom looks at her watch. "They should be wheeling the patient in about now."

"How old is she?" I ask.

"You'll see", Cam says, foreboding in her eyes.

I think back to the warehouse, to the moment I pressed the tip of the rifle barrel against Cam's chest. The look in her eyes one of resignation, an acceptance of her own fate, a kind of complicity. Which is different from the sadness they express now.

A door in the clinical room opposite the viewing window opens, and a young woman with long auburn hair—practically a girl—is wheeled in on a small hospital bed by a muscular male nurse. The nurse looks like a Pacific Islander, and he wears a light blue uniform with an embroidered Gonzalez and Meyer patch stating *Caring Is Sacred*. He pushes the bed with one hand and pulls the rolling IV stand with another.

A human nurse, then. At least Gonzalez and Meyer afford her that. But then I think of Eneca, and how we have grown closer. How she was kind to me from the beginning, even though I rejected her. How, every time I've been in need, she offered help regardless of the way I treated her. Are empathy and compassion from an android just as valuable, as genuine, as those from a human? I'm almost beginning to believe they are. If that's true, does that certify android racism as real, as an evil that should be identified and combated?

"Is she old enough?" I ask.

"Yes", Cam's mom says.

"What's the age of consent?" I ask.

"Eighteen", Cam says.

The young woman's eyes look glazed, which Cam's mom explains stems from the IV cocktail that includes a relaxant, and that this is the final stage: the administration of drugs that put the patient completely under, followed by the drug that stops the heart.

A thin woman in her fifties enters the room after the IV and closes the door. A stethoscope is draped over her shoulder.

"The doctor", Cam's mom says.

Doctor, I think. Right.

"What's wrong with the girl?" I ask. "Does she have a medical condition?"

"Only her doctor knows", Cam's mom says. "Patient confidentiality."

"She looks ... normal", I say.

"She is normal", Cam says indignantly.

"You don't know that, Cammy", her mom says.

"I know about others", Cam says.

Even in the observation room, I can smell it: the disinfectant chloramine, as though the government has determined to make the process of dying as clean as possible.

"If she's terminal, why aren't her parents here?" I ask.

Neither Cam nor her mother answer. Since eighteen is the new age of consent, the young woman's parents don't have to be informed, because legally it's her decision, no one else's. A dozen reasons hammer my brain as to what might have precipitated this. Did her boyfriend/girlfriend break up with her, or vice versa? Did she fail to get into the right college? Are her parents getting divorced? Or maybe they were divorced some time ago and she's been looking ahead to this day for the past few years, or longer? Is a brother, sister, parent, or friend sick, or did one of them die?

The doctor sits on a rolling stool and talks to the young woman. Though we can see through the window, we can't hear their conversation. I imagine the doctor is calming her, explaining that the procedure will be just as discussed, that she, the patient, will be comfortable, that there will be no pain, just the blissful end of consciousness.

The doctor begins tapping buttons on the H-console.

"The doctor is setting the patient's chosen resting program", Cam's mom says.

Resting, I think. Rest. At rest. The euthanasia industry practically owns the term, which adorns brochures and ads. *Be laid to rest with dignity. Don't make your loved ones suffer through your suffering.* And the word *pain* is repeated to appeal to potential customers, patients, or whatever, as though mention of the word digs a raven's claw into their flesh, spurring them to end it.

The eye of the VR turns green, and the young woman's eyes gaze into maybe a national park. Or an ocean, coastline, or beach. A river. A lake. Water is good for death. The Vikings knew this. Water runs eternal, or so humans think. It cleanses, washes away the dirt. It renews. But can it remove death's sting? Or does its volumes, its waves, carry away one's soul to another life, a reunification with one's family and friends? Is it truly *hasta la vista*, or until next time?

A few minutes go by. Already, the young woman looks only half present, her gaze unfocused, head sunk into the pillow. The doctor nods subtly to the nurse, who flicks the switch on the IV, opening the flow of lethal heart-stopping drugs from the IV bag.

I can feel Cam tense up, and for a few seconds I find it hard to breathe, myself. A person's life is being taken before my eyes. For all I know, a very good person. What if it's an otherwise perfectly healthy life?

The minutes trudge by, hard and sorrowful. The patient's eyes transform from glassy to empty. As the doctor reaches forward and closes the eyelids, Cam shivers with grief, her face a teary mess, and I wonder what it must be like for her, having lost her brother in the past year.

Surprisingly, I don't think of Illy. And why not? Is it because of amelioration? That could be part of it, but it can't be the only reason. The answer is beside me. I'm not fixated on my own pain because I'm thinking of someone else's.

I put my arm around Cam, grab her shoulder, and give her a firm squeeze, absorbing some of her tremors.

While I'm driving to a Starbucks in Burbank to meet V, I'm stopped at a light on the suburb's outskirts. A hundred yards away, the H-screen on a billboard changes from a Lays potato chips ad to an image of CC chairman Donovan Gershon, with the caption *Selling You Out One Community at a Time*.

I look around at the other cars, wondering if anyone else is seeing what I'm seeing. Five seconds later, the Lays ad switches back on.

At the Starbucks I order a sweetened iced tea and find V, clad in white t-shirt and jeans, sitting on a cushioned bench in the corner, an iced coffee in front of her. As I sit down opposite her, I notice a silver bracelet with a topaz gem on her wrist.

"It's not too public?" I ask.

"Sometimes public is best", she says.

"What about bugs?" I ask. "As in listening devices."

"We're good. We have an app for that."

"Seriously?" I ask.

"Seriously."

I pause, waiting for the joke to drop. But there is none. V's expression of sincerity doesn't change.

"Down to the brass?" she asks with a grin.

The brass, I think. Hardly a coincidence. Although Doc and I weren't the ones to coin the term, the odds of V using it are slim. Which raises the question: How deep into my privacy is SOW?

"Is there anything about me that you guys don't know?" I ask.

"We have our bases covered", V says. "We like to know who we're getting when we get them."

"Seems like you're watching me more closely than the government is", I say.

"As far as you know. You don't have the means to know the government's reach into your private affairs."

This stumps me. "*Is* the government watching me?"

"No", she says. "Not yet, anyway."

"What do you mean 'not yet'?"

"Never mind", she says. "There's no reason for them to."

"Are any of you being watched?" I ask.

"We've been careful. Our shielding software is the best. That isn't to say the government is ignorant. They know we exist. But the particulars—our name, sources and methods, locations—have gone largely undetected."

I take a drink of my tea, glance across the room. At the counter, a young woman with a Mohawk haircut is wearing a white tank top with a sketch on the back: a Ferris wheel with twelve small portraits of the Corporate Council members, and a caption saying *Time for the Ride to Stop?*

"People are getting braver", I say.

"Speaking of, anything catch your eye on the ride over?" V asks.

"A billboard ad", I say. I relay the details, which don't seem to surprise V. "What's that about? Is that SOW?"

"It's the ground work", she says. "We're conditioning the public."

"You mean off the hill", I say.

"Also in the Underground. But we do some things different there. The platform is altered."

"As in?"

"Underground citizens are the modern equivalent of the proles. They don't have much of anything, including motivation. They're closed off, yet illegal meth and opioids are more abundant, and euthanasia restrictions are rarely followed. The people there are drunk, high, and waiting to die. It takes a different message to reach them."

We sip our drinks. There's some banter by teens—three girls and two boys around fifteen years old—at a table fifteen feet away.

"No, pipeface!" a blonde says, slapping a boy on the forearm. "I wouldn't screw an andy for a billion dollars. That's the difference between guys and girls."

"She's got a point", I say.

"Does she?" V asks.

"I don't know any women with android partners", I say.

"I imagine there are some."

"What would the benefit be?" I ask.

V shrugs. "No spousal abuse?"

"Good one", I say, impressed.

"So", V says. "It's time we activate you. Put you in the field."

"You mean give me someone to hit", I say.

"Not quite. Not our style. Plus, you haven't been trained in firearms yet."

V looks at her H-phone, presses a few buttons. She turns it around, the screen facing me. There's a photo of a sixtyish man in a navy blue suit standing between two people on a stage.

"This is someone we're looking for", V says.

She lets me take the phone, and I hold it closer. There's no mistaking the dark wizened eyes, the thick cheekbones. It's the old man, the singer in the warehouse where I lured Cam and wrestled the laser from her.

"I've seen him", I say. I tell V about the warehouse and the old man singing, while leaving out the part about Cam.

"You don't smoke meth", V says, peering into my eyes. She could easily ask why I was there, but she lets this drift away like sparkling embers. Besides, maybe she knows.

"Why do you need him?" I ask.

"He's Professor Robert Eaglethorn, a scholar in Resistance and Civil Disobedience", she says. "Or at least he was until UCLA was shut down."

"Prof to pipe", I say. "Interesting career change."

"There wasn't much to choose from", V says. "The government phased out his field in higher ed. Anyway, you didn't see him smoking it, did you? Not that it matters. If he is piped, we'll sober him up."

"What should I do when I find him?" I ask.

"Call me", V says.

"What if he's violent?"

"Improvise. You know how to do that, don't you? It's not like you haven't been shot at before, is it?"

At Mom and Cara's, I'm sitting on the sofa between Mom and Peppy. Cara is in her study, reading. *The Spooners* is on TV, and Mom is listening as she crochets a small white, yellow and scarlet sweater using a medium point crochet hook. There's a rhythm to her hand's movements: hook, pull, swivel, repeat. Each step requires a distinct amount of effort, as well as time, even though it contributes evenly to the process. Right now she is working on a patch of scarlet, smiling as she listens to the TV, knotting each stroke meditatively.

With one sleeve and most of the body completed, I take note of the size: a child's sweater. Mom has often crocheted baby blankets and baby clothing for friends and family expecting newborns, but this piece would be too large.

"Who is that for, Mom?" I ask. Mom pauses as though not having understood. "The sweater."

"It's for my baby", she says, continuing with the hook.

"You mean ... " I say.

"Illy", Mom says. "I know you think I've forgotten her, but I haven't. She's gone, but I remember."

Whether Mom's peace is medically induced or not, why shouldn't I be happy for her? Besides, I don't have the right to judge her—I've been doing that for too long. I put my arm around her back and shoulder and pull her close.

It's the middle of July, which means it's the middle of summer.

What about the Fall? a voice asks. What are you going to do?

It looks like I'm New Mexico-bound. The former Land of Enchantment, now the Great Waste State. Nuclear waste, landfill cities, underground cemeteries. Why wouldn't I want to go there?

I park outside of the warehouse and enter through the same door I entered when I lured Cam inside. As I stumble in the dark, I detect a dry odour of meth. A trickle of light serves as my guide, and I find the den of sleeping bags and ragged clothes and meth paraphernalia as well as a few addicts sprawled on top of their bags. The heat is suffocating, with no fans or drafts in the building. A bead of sweat drivels down my forehead, and I wipe it with my forearm.

Near the stairs where I put the move on Cam, there are more sleeping bags. No sign of Professor Eaglethorn. I use the flashlight app on my H-phone to shine a light on the sleeping bags. Not much looks familiar. No Jew's harp. The man playing the instrument isn't here, either. But there is someone sleeping in a foetal position on top of a bag about two sleeping bags from where Mr. Eaglethorn's had been, a lean man with a thick dirty blond beard. His arm has a dense tattoo of the Corporate Council with a slash through it.

I nudge the guy's leg with my foot. Nothing. He can't be dead—his chest is moving back and forth. But he smells bad enough to be dead. Do methheads even have a sense of smell? Do they have a sense of anything? I imagine them floating in an imprisoned state of intoxication, but the high has become stale and bitter, far removed from the original high that started the whole thing, and memories push and pull in their unconscious delirium, distorting into phantasms that no longer have any meaning. And in fact, their zombied lives have no meaning, either.

"Hey", I say to the man, giving him another nudge. "Phillip Morris, wake up."

Trying to wake up a methhead is like trying to pull out one of your own healthy teeth. Someone on a meth binge, especially the new stuff from Mexico, is likely to go three or four nights without sleeping. When his body finally gives out, the addict will crash for the same amount of time. Tired of being soft, I give the guy a light kick in the rump. I kick him again,

harder. Nothing. The creature doesn't stir. What am I thinking? I almost forgot about the methhead's worst fear: light.

I pull my H-phone from my pocket and switch on the flashlight app. I hold it down, shine it at an angle into the snoozer's face. Almost immediately, the man begins to stir, at first rolling over, emitting a lazy growl, then shielding his face from the beam of light with his hands. He makes a grating sound with his throat—like he's growling at me—but he's just coughing up methhead phlegm, which he spits onto the cracked concrete floor beside him. He launches into a series of gutturals that I realize is an attempt to talk.

"Sorry, I don't speak pipe", I say.

The man clears his throat. "Whatta ya want?"

"I'm looking for the guy over there", I say, pointing the light where Professor Eaglethorn had been. "The singer."

The man turns his head to follow my direction. "You mean the Chief? He ain't here no more."

"Where did he go?" I ask.

He makes a baffled expression. "Beats the tar outta me. Chief goes where he wants. Always on the move."

I wonder if SOW provides training on torture techniques. This guy would be a good test case.

"Is he gonna come back?" I ask.

"You're askin' the wrong feller", he says. "Hey, you got any meskin' on ya?"

"Geez", I say, shaking my head and turning away. As I'm leaving, the man is seized by a fit of vomiting.

I'm sitting at the dining room table, opposite Berto, who is dumbfounded as usual over a word problem. I guess you could say I'm bored, but I'm also convalescing after another rough workout with V. I miss Cam, who's working a basketball camp in Sacramento. We text each other, but words and holograms don't quite cut it.

Watching Berto hunkered over the text, resting his chin in the heel of his hand, a slow-thinking kid destined for the bluest of blue-collared work, leads me to a typical thought: thank God for AI labour. Body work is the perfect gig for Berto. Not fast food. No way. I imagine him making a sandwich at Subway, packing a foot-long slice of wheat bread with tomatoes and green peppers and chicken strips, then sneezing into his hands.

Sitting next to him, Eneca is wearing a v-neck blue and yellow top, sipping on a diet Coke, mechanical pencil in hand. She writes equations on a spiral notebook with a fluidity, an evenness that maintains the same amount of pressure in each stroke. Uniformity. As she leans forward, writing, I see Berto stealing a glance at her cleavage. A few seconds later, I catch him again. I don't know whether to be angry or sad. Berto, oblivious to the algebraic logic, finally glances at me and is stricken with guilt. (Yeah, I said "stricken", so what?)

So much for Berto's newfound focus. When he scored a C on his last test, he sent me a flurry of H-texts that featured him singing the lyrics of Ripple, a rapper from East L.A. I had been thinking he might pass algebra after all. Now I'm not so sure.

I grab a can of Nostalgic Coke from the fridge and open it on the living room sofa. I take a sip. Nothing. There's a classic text message on my H-phone: Amanda asking how Berto's algebra is coming along.

Me: What algebra?

Amanda: I thought your dad's android was tutoring him.

Me: That android has a name. Eneca.

Amanda: Sorrrrrrrrrrrrrreeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

Me: She's doing her part. I don't know what the hell Berto's doing.

Amanda: I thought of coming.

Me: It's the thought that counts.

Amanda: Are you being snarky? You are being snarky, aren't you?

Me: Me? Come on.

Amanda: I'm gonna smack the snark out of you.

Me: So what's new? Been hanging with Emilio?

Amanda doesn't reply. A few minutes go by. I send texts apologizing and explaining that I can understand if she doesn't want to talk about it. Then I take a drink of Nostalgic Coke and have a flash of Christmas day, when I was eight and Illy was four: we're sitting around the Christmas tree, Illy wearing light green pyjamas, her hair dishevelled, shredding the wrapping off our presents, and I've stopped unwrapping mine so that I can watch as Illy opens the gift I bought her. The wrapping's base is green, and the twinkling Christmas lights glint and sparkle off the paper's gold and red stripes as Illy pushes away the red bow and gold ribbons, her face beaming with expectation, Mom and Dad watching just as eagerly as I am. With the wrapping gone, Illy holds a box a foot and a half long with clear plastic packaging in front, revealing a midnight blue hammerhead shark with large petrified bug eyes. Illy looks at me and smiles, then tears through the packaging and holds the shark in front of her.

"What are you going to call her?" Mom asks. "Give her a name, Honey."

Illy thinks about it. "Gabby."

Sadness pinches me as I emerge from the flash. Even though the memory was a pleasant one, as opposed to one of Illy's death or funeral, it leaves me thinking of her nevertheless. Yearning for her to be here. Now. To be among the living. She would be fourteen, the same age as Annalisa. Does the flash mean the amelioration is wearing off? I think of the implications. If memories of Illy start flooding back like before, I'll be left with two options: 1. Return to the

same miserable state I was in pre-amelioration (which is awkward, since I can only kill Oscar Gray once), or 2. Get the SDI.

Berto plops down beside me.

"It's makin' sense now", he says, nodding.

"Yeah", I say cynically.

"What?" he asks.

"I noticed your attention deficit. Dude, she's an android."

Berto gives me his guilty face. "I can't help it. It's hard to study when ... " He looks at the floor, thinking. "Guys check out the teachers at Dick Cheney High all the time. Anyway, I'm all about the equality."

Berto has a point. How can I shred him when I've been guilty of the same offense? I could make the World's Top Ten Hypocrite's list. I guess I'm defending Eneca since I've gotten to know her, and maybe that's not such a bad thing. No, I decide. In fact, it's really good.

One afternoon when I finish lifting weights, V sends me the text of an address, Riverside again, and tells me to find it.

"Are you gonna be there?" I text back.

"In spirit", she texts.

"I'm excited already", I text.

"Don't snark, just go", she texts.

I've become used to driving to Riverside, so it's not a big deal now. Seriously, it reeks worse than the Underground. An H-ad pops up inside the car, triggered by a nearby billboard: *Johnson & Johnson: Is it Time for an Enema?* I reach the address, a rickety two-story house with flaky white paint and two dormer windows. A rusted old washing machine takes up a large square of the lawn, which is dead except for some healthy green tumbleweeds.

"Go inside", V texts. "Take your phone."

I shove the phone into my pocket and get out of the car. Sirens whine from the freeway. Gunshots and gun smoke. God bless the United States. God bless the Second Amendment. God bless Reagan and the men and women in uniform. Is this what the Founding Fathers envisioned? I amble toward the front door, try the door knob. It gives, so I push the door open, take a breath, and step into total darkness. A wooden floor board creaks as I transfer my weight onto it. I close the door. I briefly think of texting V and asking *What now?* but have the feeling she would either ignore me or tell me to deal with the obstacles that present themselves.

I pull out my H-phone to use the flashlight app, but there's no power. As I transfer my weight onto my next step, a small padded bag springs toward me, punching me in the mouth. Tasting blood, I lick my lower lip. Welcome to V's Haunted House of Getting Your Ass Kicked. That's my V. Building my confidence one punch and kick at a time.

Now that my guard's up, I take another step, this one at an angle, keeping my head low, but the punch slams into my right side, just below the ribs, cinching my breath.

Another step, another punch. My vision rattles from the blow to my temple. If V wants me to get a concussion, she's doing a good job of it. I take another punch, then a combination that ends with a blow to my chin. I think I'm wobbled, but it's difficult to tell in the dark, a place where you don't have your bearings to begin with. I kneel down, trying to catch my breath, sucking the tiny cut on my lip. Ah, blood, the abundant sweet and sour sauce.

My phone lights up. I hold it up and see a classic text from V: *Listen! You can hear the punches coming. You can also feel their movement.* The light from the phone flashes off.

Sure, I think. Then I think about it. V's right. I've been focused on what I can see, which is nothing, instead of what I can hear or sense.

I take a good deep breath and stand up. Listen, I think. If I can dodge some of V's punches, I can dodge these. Sound. Movement. Focus. I take a step forward. A bag swings at me with a roundhouse to the head, but I hear it *whoosh* in time to duck, and I just catch a grazing slap on the top of my head, ruffling my hair. I sensed the movement of the punch, I heard it coming. Then it dawns on me, the reason for total darkness.

I take another step, and another, dodging the punches. I'm sensing them. *Hearing* them. Every motion has a sound. The sound of air, of kinetic motion. I continue, weaving through the dark, my forehead damp with sweat, until I'm practically waltzing undetected, like some phantom of the resistance. My phone lights up with another text: *Go up the stairs.* Just before the light disappears, I shine the light around and locate the wooden steps five feet away, along with the quickest painless path to reach them.

At the base of the stairs, I tap a foot on the first step, but the punching bag isn't triggered until I put half my weight on it, at which point I step back to avoid the bag. As I climb the stairs, I manoeuvre around such traps. Near the top I'm thrown off-balance by a bag that launches only after all my weight is transferred onto the step, and I brace my back against the wall to avoid falling down the stairs. Talk about wasps in the stomach.

"Tricky bastards", I mutter.

I allow my breathing to settle down, then climb the final step. The lights flick on, illuminating the network of red and black punching bags and their mechanical extensions.

Everything looks understandable in the light, outlined in clarity. It's the darkness that perplexes, that leaves one guessing. V ambles toward me from a corridor. She claps her hands three times.

"Good job", she says. "You're right. The last punch was tricky."

"I could've fallen", I say.

"You could have."

"All the way down", I say.

"No. I wouldn't let that happen."

An almost mystical understanding, one of mentor and student, passes between us.

I gesture to my phone. "How'd you shut the power off?"

"Easy", she says. "It's called a cell block." She pulls a small gray three-by-one-inch device from her pocket and holds it up.

I nod. "So how'd I do?"

"You didn't fall down the stairs", she says. "It won't be so easy next time."

I'm driving through a thunderstorm, on my way to an address in Crayton, five miles from Corrales, supposedly to meet one of SOW's donors, but V didn't give any other details. Raindrops hammer the Camaro, and I start to worry about hail, which sucks because I'm stopped at a red light, with nowhere to move.

V texts me: *Don't worry. Storm's not as bad as it seems. No hail in forecast.*

Her texts are always classic texts. They're harder to trace than H-texts, she says.

When I reach the address, I find a typical bungalow in a suburban neighbourhood. The rain pelts me as I get out of the car. By the time I reach the porch, my t-shirt and shorts are soaked, and my arms and legs are glistening with rainwater. I press the doorbell. The door opens, and Mr. Galen is standing in front of me, clad in jeans and a gray short-sleeve collared shirt.

"Hi Emile", he says, holding the door open with one hand while offering a rolled up towel in the other hand. "Come in."

Surprised, I remain in place, hesitating. Could Mr. Galen really be one of the "good guys", instead of the schoolmarm stooge I'd taken him for?

"Well come on", he says. "We're on the same side here."

I take the towel and step inside, wiping my arms and legs and patting my shirt and shorts.

"There are things called umbrellas", Mr. Galen says, leading us into the living room.

"I suppose there are", I say.

Against the wall is a large H-TV, and a Sony VR lies in a cabinet beneath. In front of the sofa, standing in a glass vase on a coffee table, are three white roses. Mr. Galen notices my reluctance to sit on the sofa in my wet clothes.

"Have a seat", he urges. "Water never hurt anything. It's not my house, anyway."

I sit down, perusing the artwork while Mr. Galen slips into the kitchen to grab me a Coke. One photo is of the Empire State Building, with torrents of mist clothing three-fourths of the skyscraper, with only the top peaking through. Another photo is a head shot of a temperate looking man with white hair. Mr. Galen returns from the kitchen, hands me the Coke, and twists off the cap of a Coors Light for himself.

"Who's the old guy?" I ask, gesturing to the photo.

"John McCain", he says, leaning back in a leather chair, taking a sip of beer.

McCain, I remember from U.S. history. One of the dissenting Republicans against Donald Trump. Instability in the ruling class: a prerequisite for regime change.

I open the Coke and take a drink. It tickles my throat, and I begin to relax.

"So you're the donor", I say.

"One of them", Mr. Galen says.

"How many are there?"

"I couldn't say. Probably more than you or I can guess."

"Why do you say that?" I ask.

"Come on, kid. Haven't you seen the signs? They're everywhere. Billboards. Newspapers. TV. This is the first stage. All we need is a spark. A catalyst. Once there's movement among the people, things will get messy."

"Define 'messy,'" I say.

Mr. Galen grimaces. He reaches for his glass on the coffee table, his forearm stiff with tension, and takes a drink. "People are going to die. That's what happens in revolutions." He pauses. "Why are you looking at me funny?"

"You said 'revolution,'" I say. I consider the possibility of a second American civil war. The last one didn't turn out so well: brother shooting brother with crude bolts of lead, bodies tipping over like dominoes, along rain-soaked Southern fields.

"Use some gray matter", Mr. Galen says. "You think the CC is gonna step down voluntarily? These things take oppositional elbow grease. Organization. Counter-Intel. Mobilization."

"And lead", I say.

Mr. Galen's eyes light up with agreement. "Now you're seeing the light." He looks down, scratching his head as I take another drink of Coke. "Where you going to school? You are going to college, aren't you?"

"You mean you don't know?" I ask.

"No, I don't", he says. "I'm just the guy with the cash. One of many. They don't tell me the sensitive stuff."

"I guess you're not a next level donor", I say, grinning.

"Guess not", he says. "But I've seen your profile. You didn't study for the SAT, did you?" I shrug. "You want to know who did study? Torbin. And he beat you by two points. Who cares? Not SOW. The test we watch is the one where the results are kept secret. You killed it on the California Aptitude Test. Officially, you graduated third. Unofficially, it's not even close."

I tell him about the University of New Mexico, and this disgustingly polite grin spreads across his face.

"New Mexico?" he asks. "You don't sound too excited."

"I don't get excited about much", I say.

"There's counselling for that."

I could tell him about my sessions with Dr. G, or amelioration with Eneca, but I'm not ready to bear my soul. He may know about them, anyway.

"Well, wherever you're going", he says, "we'll help on the financial end."

"I'm not doing it for the money", I say.

"Hold on, Braveheart", he says. "None of us are." He takes a generous drink from the bottle. "Look, it's part of the deal. Think of it as ROTC, except its privatized twin. Anyway, it'll save your dad a chunk of change."

We chat briefly about the Corporate Council and rumours of internal fighting. Eventually, the conversation winds down, and I finish my Coke, thank Mr. Galen for the towel, and start to rise from my seat. Then he gives me this concerned look like the one he wore during the DOR interview.

"Not much for chatting, are you?" he says. "Before you head off, is there anything you want to ask me?"

I think about it, then ease back onto the sofa. "Yeah, why isn't Annalisa the head of SOW?"

Mr. Galen sighs. "You too, huh?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"There are others who think the same. Have patience. One day she very well may lead SOW. There's no shortage of cognitive ability, that's for sure. On the other hand, there are some lessons that one can only learn through experience."

I'm not convinced, and my expression must say as much. I'm sure that if I asked, Mr. Galen would say he has next to no pull in the matter, and he would probably be right. But he can at least tell me what goes on behind the scenes, what the brass of SOW discuss regarding the machinations of leadership and strategy.

"I'd take her right now over anyone in the government", I say.

"You don't know everyone in the government", he says. "But I get your point." He interlocks his hands behind his head, leans back. "So you want to be governed by the best, do you? By a wizened philosopher king. You don't see a lot of young generals in the Army. They're all old men. And a woman or two." He tightens his jaw and gives this quaint look like he knows more but can't say anything.

"You can't hide the truth from SOW's members", I say. "That's what the government does."

Mr. Galen regards me with the same authoritative look I remember from Dick Cheney High. He sits up straight, leaning forward. "Have you thought about what would happen if SOW succeeded? If the government collapsed, and people learned that the group leading the resistance was headed by a fourteen-year-old girl, what would happen to SOW's legitimacy?"

"So it's political", I say.

"Damn right, it's political", Mr. Galen says. "Everything, including the air we breathe, is political."

I continue looking for Professor Eaglethorn, scouring the most decrepit abandoned warehouses and meth dens L.A. has to offer. Santa Monica. Burbank. Hollywood. Irvine. Inglewood. Temecula. Rancho Cucamonga. Even Compton and East L.A. I approach the worst lot of methheads in the States, decaying vessels of living flesh, beings who have given their mind and spirit to a demonic chemical, most of them laid out on sleeping bags, cardboard, or thin dingy mattresses reeking of moulded vomit, each den with its own peculiarity, like the elderly methheads in Compton, the corner of heroin users in Santa Monica, or the faeces-strewn basement in Hollywood.

Dad and Eneca ask me what I've been up to, but they don't press the issue like Cara might if I lived with her. I give them a little fib. Okay, maybe not so little. Or maybe the size of the fib depends on the eye of the beholder. I tell them I've been training and running paid errands involving community service. One of those extended lies that possesses a strain of truth, which, in reality, doesn't make it better than one that's a hundred percent false (see *Serpent in the Garden*).

Back in town from basketball camp, Cam invites me to dinner at her parents' house. I nestle next to Cam, who's wearing a light shoulder-baring black blouse, as we sit around a round table made of dark oak. Steam rushes from a rice cooker as her mom scoops rice into bowls and passes them around. There are porcelain bowls with sundry vegetables: eggplant, cabbage, snap peas, white carrots. A large blackened tilapia lies flat on a plate, and we pick clumps of its tender white flesh with our chopsticks. I scoop dark sauce from a bowl of black pepper sauce and chicken onto my rice, then bite into a lean piece of chicken leg, which tastes so good that I begin to think of excuses to come to dinner again.

When I arrived, her little sister Aster was practicing the opening riff to AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" on a clarinet rental in her room. I couldn't see her, because I was waiting in the living room, but I knew her fingers had to be dancing up and down the horn like those of some woodwind virtuoso. Not much mesmerizes me, but that did.

If I were a class A jerk (as opposed to my usual class B or C one), I would tell Aster how brilliant her playing was right now at the table, in front of her dad, who wants her to stick with

the flute. But I have more respect for her dad than that. I compliment Cam's mom on her cooking and tell her I would never get tired of eating her food, and as she smiles, I see Cam's eyes in her mother's, the voluptuous iris at the eye's centre, with the horizontal teardrop pulling to the side.

After dinner, Cam and I sit in the living room. The TV is on, but we aren't really watching anything. Aster pads by, selecting a book from the mahogany bookshelf, and Cam calls her over.

"What?" Aster asks, standing before us in shorts and a white shirt, on the front of which are black Chinese calligraphy and a sketch of mountains and forest. Her hair black and nearly waist-long, tied in a ponytail, her limbs slender, without the muscle of Cam's. There's a reticence, a humility in her voice that suggests she isn't of the warrior class like Cam, although that could change with time.

"Emile wants to tell you something", Cam says.

"I heard you playing the clarinet earlier", I say. "You've got some serious skills. Keep it up."

Aster grins, and I hold up my hand and give her a casual high five.

"Thanks", she says.

"Don't get conceited", Cam cautions her.

"Pot calling kettle", Aster says.

I chuckle as she trails off.

I ask Cam about basketball camp, and she talks about leading rich children in drills under the watchful eyes of their parents and how the camp sponsors, most of them corporate execs, were adamant about holding the Pledge of Allegiance before each session.

"Did you say the Pledge?" I ask.

"You know I did", Cam says. "Except for the CC part."

I pledge allegiance to the flag, of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, guarded by the Corporate Council ...

She tells me that her classes at City University of L.A. start in four weeks. Our conversation meanders, and she asks me what I've been up to. I vaguely mention a project that requires me to scour L.A.'s meth dens. Cam asks for more details, but other than describing encounters with methheads, I'm reluctant to say more. Coincidentally, a government ad depicting methheads as bloodthirsty red-eyed zombies appears on TV. A cruel contrast, I think. The government demonizes the very drug users it produces.

Cam lays her head on my shoulder, looking straight ahead. I place my arm around her and rest my chin next to her head. She lifts her foot onto the sofa's edge, pulls up her pants leg and scratches at her ankle. That's when I see it again—the blue and green light peeking beneath her sock. And like before, Cam catches me looking.

"Curiosity killed the cat", she says, holding the elastic of her sock taut.

"I'm not a cat", I say.

Slowly, she pulls down her sock. Just below her ankle, spanning two inches wide, the name LIAM juts out in a blue-green hue. My throat goes dry. I'm impressed and sad for her at the same time.

"I like it", I say.

Cam snaps the sock back over the H-tatt.

"Hey", she says, perking up. "I have something to show you." She hops off the sofa, tugging gently at my hand.

I follow her to her room, pausing at the entrance.

"Uh, will your parents—" I say.

"Shut up and get in here", she says.

"Yes, ma'm", I say.

She freezes like a statue, her eyes rotund with pseudo-rage. "Never, ever call me that again."

"Yes ... uh", I say. "Yeah."

Cam takes my hand and pulls me inside. As I enter, a light smell of lilacs tickles my nose. An HP laptop sits on an oak desk. Beside it, there's a queen bed, and on top of it, a comforter embroidered with lilacs. Cam and her basketball teammates stare at me from the walls in blown-up team photos. Cam turns on her laptop and switches it to H mode. On the H screen, characters of Chinese calligraphy are written in light green.

At first I'm confused, but I stop myself from making any judgments.

"What does it mean?" I ask.

"Little Sister", Cam says. "I drew it, myself."

I stare at the characters, mesmerized by the intricate strokes and meaning.

"Is it an H-tatt?" I ask.

"Yep", Cam says. "Don't tell my parents, but I have my tattoo license. If you want, I can give you the tattoo. No pressure."

I consider her offer. "Yeah. Let's do it."

Cam opens the top drawer of her dresser and pulls out her H-tatt kit. I lift up the shirt sleeve over my right shoulder, and Cam dabs my shoulder's centre with alcohol. She holds up a silver metallic H-tatt gun that will inject the tattoo as a tiny chip implant.

"Count to three?" she asks.

I smirk. "I'd be lucky if you got to two."

Cam grins. There's a click. The prick stings a little more than a painful shot, and Cam smothers the wound with a cotton ball. I hold the cotton ball in place. After a few minutes, I remove it and regard the H-tatt projecting an inch from my shoulder. Although they're not actually moving, the light green Chinese characters look magical, as if they're dancing.

"It's awesome", I say. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome", Cam says.

I stay a few minutes longer. I say goodbye to Aster and to Cam's parents. Before I leave, I hug Cam tightly. As I leave the house, I'm left with an intense desire to return, with the hope that more nights like tonight await us.

Over the next two days, at the gym in Riverside, V gives me a crash course in karate. A lot of it I already know, but she takes everything a step further, telling me to be creative, to be mindful of my surroundings, to use walls and other settings to my advantage, some real Jackie Chan bullshit.

"Improvise", she says. "Don't be an open book. Don't telegraph your punches or kicks."

By the end of the first day, I'm wearing a shiner so noticeable that both Dad and Eneca ask me about it. I say I got jumped by a gringo, but neither of them finds it funny. Somewhere in the middle of day two, I begin blocking and checking everything V throws at me, and I tag her in the ribs with a counterpunch that's just hard enough to let her know I have solved her. In response, she unleashes a flurry of kicks and punches, swarming me with combinations, rivulets of sweat scurrying down her face with each swing, but my defence eludes some and blocks others, holding strong, protecting me for the rest of the day.

After the two-day beat down, on day three, I meet Greg and V at the same house where I went through the SOW initiation. When I arrive, I pick up on something I didn't notice before. V is sitting on the sofa, wearing black spandex pants, her knees angled toward Greg. Although there's no contact between them, their body posture, as well as their expressions, are enough for me to suspect they're a couple.

"I thought we never meet at the same place twice", I say.

"The point being, things change", Greg says. "Try not to take me literally."

"I don't", V says.

I shake my head. "Weird."

"You look like someone roughed you up", Greg says, glancing conspicuously at V.

"So says everyone", I say. "I'm training for my permanent gig as a punching bag."

V grins. "You'll be doing the punching soon enough."

"How soon?" I ask.

"Very", Greg says.

"There's one final step", V says. "You'll be doing firearms training today with Greg."

Greg and I leave in his Chevy harrier. He waits till we get into the sky before striking up conversation.

"I hear you're making progress", he says, looking straight ahead as we fly east.

"If that's what getting your butt kicked is called", I say.

Greg chuckles. "You got in a shot or two."

"Don't worry, I'm pulling the hard stuff."

"You won't want to pull anything when you're on assignment", he says, turning toward me during halted traffic. "You'll be teaming with V, you know."

This is news to me. Until now, I had only viewed her as my trainer. I detect a hidden concern in Greg's voice.

"Are you guys an item?" I ask.

"SOW discourages such relationships", Greg says.

A few seconds pass, the traffic dispersing.

"So you wouldn't tell me if you were", I say.

We land in a barren area at the midpoint between L.A. and Joshua Tree National Park. Greg parks and leads me on a two-hundred yard walk through the desert to a poor man's makeshift shooting range. He uses the GPS on his H-phone to guide him to a particular spot in the desert, then begins kicking away dirt until the silvery metal of an electronic padlock appears. He crouches down to the ground, punches in numbers on a console, unlocks a small door, and removes two handguns, a TEC 9 laser pistol, a packet of ear plugs, two silencers, and boxes of

ammunition. He hands me some ammo and one of the handguns, a Colt 9mm, and we enter the shooting range, much of which is unsheltered.

There are five lanes with concrete shelters for the shooters as well as aluminium roofs over the targets, which consist of clay figurines of criminals past: Charles Manson (forehead swastika included), Adolf Hitler, Osama bin Laden, Joseph Stalin.

"Pick a lane", Greg says.

I study the figurines. "Kind of hard to choose."

"Take your time", Greg says, looking over the guns. "The right scumbag does wonders for your concentration."

Even though there are bullet holes in his cheek and forehead, a bit of clay protrudes above Hitler's upper lip, forming a formidable but narrow moustache, and I think what a rush it would be to shoot it off.

"Hitler", I say.

"Can't go wrong with the Fuhrer", Greg says.

We amble into the lane facing the Hitler figurine. Greg asks if I've ever shot a gun before, and I tell him only in VR. Besides, VR is as close to the real thing as you can get without being real. There's VR target shooting, which features pistols and rifles that mimic the kick you get from a steel gun, but it's not half as fun as the VR games, especially Cartel Jack, the first-person shooter I've been playing for the last two years. Cartel Jack features a catalogue of weapon options that includes every model of gun made in the world. (Hint: do NOT choose the semi-auto rifle made in Swaziland!). You're on a six-person assault team that ascends, commando-style, upon organised crime fortresses and haciendas in Italy, Mexico, Columbia, Russia, Brazil, etc. The blood looks real, but not splatteringly excessive, the body count never ending.

"We've found the last American virgin shooter", he says.

He runs through the basics: loading the clip, checking the action, aiming and positioning, breathing. We put in our ear plugs. Witnesses and survivors of mass shootings say gunshots

sound like firecrackers, but even with the ear plugs, the deafening crack of Greg's first shot sounds nothing like a firecracker, but rather rattles every bone, muscle, nerve, and blood vessel in my body, as though a reminder, and a warning, that danger and death are waiting on the horizon and are realized, at some point, by everyone. Another black hole appears in Hitler's forehead.

Then he hands me the Colt and gives instructions. I aim at Adolf's chin, compensating for the kick. When I squeeze the trigger and the pistol fires, my whole being trembles as though some deeply hidden force of existence is erupting, nudging me to the edge of that great wall that divides the living and dead.

"Good shot", Greg says, surprisingly impressed.

It takes me a couple of seconds to see the result: a hole beneath the Fuhrer's nose, half of his moustache is gone. I take five more shots, each one shocking me less than the one preceding it. Danger tends to work like that, lulling you into a comfortable carelessness that can easily take your life. When the clip runs out, the Fuhrer is missing his nose, most of his moustache, and half his chin.

Greg looks at me. "You're a natural."

Then he holds up a silencer.

"Never fit a silencer onto a loaded gun", he says. He twists the silencer onto the barrel, then loads the clip and checks the action. Fires. I take the gun and do the same, cropping Hitler's earlobe. I'm surprised at how quiet the piece fires, and it makes me think of all the killing that is done in silence, all the murders carried out in the dark, how the dark heart of humanity prefers it that way.

Finally, Greg aims the Tec-9 laser and fires, leaving the very top of Hitler's head smouldering. He hands me the weapon, which is warm.

"There's still some kick, but not much", he says. "So you don't need to compensate in your aim."

I aim for the middle of the face. After a calm, measured breath, I squeeze the trigger, and a red blade of light discharges, radiating warmth from the stock and barrel, burning a sliver through Adolf's eye. I take a half dozen more shots. When I'm finished, Adolf's face is no longer recognizable.

"You really don't like that guy, do you?" Greg asks.

I hand the gun back to Greg.

"I bet it's not that easy when the person's real", I say.

"It depends on the person", Greg says. "V's training you. She's the best. You'll do fine."

The next night, V picks me up beside a laundromat in a Ford Ranger harrier and jets into the sky at the first exit. She's wearing a black skirt, perfume, and more makeup than I've ever seen on her.

"Going on a date?" I ask.

"Appearances", she says.

"Gotta smell good when you shoot someone", I say, grinning.

"Now you're sounding like Greg", she says.

"Speaking of", I say.

"Don't", she says.

In ten minutes she exits the sky highway and enters Santa Monica, dropping down onto the roof parking lot of KLA, the largest TV station in the L.A. area, and parks in a corner parking space. She takes two rubber masks from the console: one is that of Ho-Lite, the other of Donovan Gershon. She hands me the mask of Gershon.

"You don't think much of me, do you?" I say.

"We can scramble our ID's until we reach the studio." She pulls two pistols from the console, hands me one. "The station's security are unarmed, so these are loaded with darts." She brandishes a small electronic device coated with die cast steel and presses a button on its side: a green halo of blue light envelops us, then fades.

"ID scrambler?" I ask.

V grins. Then she pauses. "You ready?"

I nod.

"Don't shoot unless our lives are threatened", she says.

"I'm not thirteen", I say.

"In gun years you are", she says.

We exit the harrier and stroll across the lot and come to a secure entrance. V passes a card across a sensor and punches in a number for the security pin. The doors slide open and we step into a carpeted, air-conditioned hallway. I pad inconspicuously behind V, who is strolling as though she is an employee and not a hostile invader, the Gershon mask tucked inside the rear top part of my pants. We take the elevator to the basement. Before entering a room, V pulls me aside.

"There should be two guards", she whispers. "You tag the first. I'll tag the second."

I nod. I enter the room right behind her. There are two men in white long-sleeve shirts sitting in desk chairs, casually minding surveillance monitors. One man is drinking a Nostalgic Coke.

"Can I help you with somethin'?" the other man asks.

"Have you ever had a whoop-ass dart?" V asks.

Simultaneously, we draw our pistols and fire. V's dart hits the second guard in the chest, right in the breastbone; my dart hits the first guard in the nose. The nose victim clutches awkwardly at the dart, then slumps forward into unconsciousness. With a few dozen strokes of the keyboard, V disables the surveillance network and erases the last thirty minutes of footage. Then it's back up the elevator, to the second floor.

As we follow the maze of the corridor, a tall man in his fifties with a widow's peak saunters past, smiling politely as V returns the favour. We come to a heavy door with a yellow warning sign saying "Authorized Personnel Only." V pulls another card from her back pocket, presses it against the scanner, and the door unlocks.

Inside, we're surrounded by a maze of various coloured wires and blinking lights. There's a palpable heat and hum of electricity. V stops looking around the room, then at me. Is she confused?

"Is this a good time?" I ask.

"For what?" she asks.

"To let me in on the plan", I say.

V narrows her eyebrows. "Plan?"

V zeroes in on a gray module of switches and lights, partly nestled beneath a tangle of wires. She squats down and holds up her H-phone next to it, and there's a beep from the module. She stands up and turns toward me.

"The last time KLA was hacked, it immediately cut the power", she says. "We're making sure it stays on. Now for that plan." She scrolls across the screen of her H-phone, settles on an image, turns it toward me. "Guess who's in the studio."

"Chance Dondlinger", I say.

"Excited?" V asks.

"Should I be?" I ask.

V shrugs. "A certain Underground teacher thought you might be. He's a pretender. After we hijack the studio and hack the system, we grab him." V watches my reaction as this sinks in. "The guy's an asshole. You'll see."

As we leave the room, the same man from before passes us again, this time wearing an expression of suspicion. He opens the door to the control room, and V pulls out her pistol and shoots him in the butt with a dart, and he falls to his knees inside the room, slumping over as the door closes.

"He was threatening", I say.

V doesn't answer. We get back in the elevator.

"No alarm", V says, her eyes tranquil and confident. "We're doing good. You're not nervous, are you?"

I shake my head, but the base drum of my heart is pounding. The surveillance is disarmed, and the security staff doesn't carry lethal weapons, but I could eventually be arrested if my identity were made. Or the cops could show up and arrest V and me now. Which would mean

county jail and even real time later in an Underground prison. Still, I feel good being teamed with V. She's prepared me for this, and I know she's looking out for me, kind of like a big sister, one who kicks everyone's ass.

When we reach the tenth floor, we pass a lobby before coming to a door labelled *Production*.

"Same thing", V says. "Okay?"

"Wait, these are the producers", I say. "Don't we need them?"

"No", V says.

"How many of them are there?" I ask.

V gives me a blank look. "I don't know."

"Let's go", I say, nodding my head.

Another swipe of the card. Another unlocked door.

Three people are seated in desk chairs, facing computers and a sound mixer, with another man standing behind them. The four faces turn toward us. The number of targets—four instead of two—should spook me, but there's not enough time for the surprise to register, and V and I plug them with darts with the same methodical precision as before. A middle-aged four-eyed woman with wavy red hair gets it in the forehead, and as she slumps forward V prevents her head from pounding the keyboard, cradling her by the chin and easing her head to the side of her chair. V stoops over the keyboard, opens a web browser, types in a web address, and begins downloading a hacking program.

Through tinted glass windows I see the studio, with conservative talk-show host Vanessa Carlson sitting in the centre of the broadcast desk next to Chance Dondlinger, who is wearing a brown suit. A young woman is brushing makeup on Vince's face while two cameramen position cameras suspended from the ceiling. A huge monitor comprises the entire wall behind the broadcast desk, with additional monitors scattered about the room.

"They can't see us, can they?" I ask.

"Only if they come close to the glass", V says. She looks away from the monitor, drums her nails on the desk. "Thirty seconds. Get your mask out, Mister President."

"Do they all get a dart?" I ask.

"Everyone except Vince", she says. "He gets to choose. Come willingly, or go to sleep."

When the video begins playing, the monitors in the studio turn black. The words "SLOW DEATH" appear in white Constantia. Chance and Annabel look confused. Footage depicts the squalid conditions in the Underground and poor areas off the hill: dozens of rows of sleeping bags in downtown L.A., the meth dens, and in the Underground; troops in black punching and kicking citizens during sweeps.

"Under the guidance and direction of the Corporate Council", Donovan Gershon's voice says, "the United States will prosper like never before."

As a mix of Gershon's statement repeats, V pulls her Ho-Lite mask on, so I put on my Gershon mask. It's hard to tell just from her eyes, but I think she might be laughing. She nods, and I follow her through the door into the studio. We take out the cameramen first, each with a dart in the backside, before we both simultaneously hit Annabel Collins.

"Oops", V says, shrugging.

"The fuck is this shit!" Chance says, standing up.

"Sit down, Waldo", V says, casually making her way to the desk, plugging the make-up woman in the side, as an afterthought, at point blank range.

We converge on Chance, who throws his hands up impatiently.

"Go ahead", he says. "Shoot me with your cheap-ass dart."

V gives a fake chuckle. "We might. Gershon here is gonna decide."

Chance looks at me, then back at V. "I know who you are. You're that group that's been screwing with the billboards."

"Which you pretend to support", V says. "Go ahead, tell Trump who you really are. Tell him who your uncle is."

"Go to hell, bitch", Chance says.

I pop him in the mouth, and the blow sends him back into his chair. He checks his lip for blood.

"Sorry", I say to V. "He's got a mouth."

"Told you", she says.

I tilt my head, sizing him up. "He looks fatter in person."

Chance glares at me with a demented look. "You're dead. Do you know who you're messin' with? The Council will be all up in your shit."

Which is when I shoot Chance in the face.

When Chance regains consciousness, he's sitting in t-shirt and shorts (to make him comfortable, V said), in a rickety wooden chair in a dingy room, his hands tied behind him. Overhead, there's a single weak light bulb in the ceiling's centre, just like in the movies. The locale, another old warehouse, isn't far from the KAL building. My scalp and underarms itch from the heat.

V holds a cup of water to Vince's mouth, and he takes a drink. Then V sets the cup on the dirty cement floor and turns to me.

"This is called an interrogation", she says. Without warning, she slaps Chance viciously across the face. "Who's trying to remove Donovan Gershon from the chairmanship?"

Chance rubs the reddening spot on his face. "What am I now, the Council secretary?"

V slaps him again, this time across the side of the head, disheveling his hair.

"Geez!" Chance says. "You can give someone a concu-"

Slap!

"Do you know how many laws you're breaking?" he asks.

Punch!

"Fuck me", Chance says, licking blood from his lip.

"Hey", I say.

Without looking at me, V holds up a hand. "We will have this conversation. Just not now."

Okay, I think. If not now, maybe after you kill the guy?

"There are two choices", she tells Vince. "A, tell us what you know. Or B, I mess up your face, and you tell us what you know."

Chance offers a disgusted look of boredom. "Is there a C?"

V throws a punch, and Chance closes his eyes in anticipation, but V's fist stops inches from his nose. Opening his eyes, Chance observes V's clenched fist poised two inches away. And just like that, V eases up, her muscles going completely lax.

"And that's how you interrogate", she says spryly, turning to me with a smile. She strolls out of the room.

I stand still for a second, confused. I want to shake my head, but I can't let the enemy perceive any dissent. I leave the room and find V retrieving a translucent square glass container from an adjacent storage closet. Inside, a black tarantula's front legs lie perched against the glass wall.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"He's gonna talk", V says. "He always was. That was just for your edification."

"I feel edified", I say, grinning.

V gives me a you-don't-know-the-half-of-it look. She pulls out her H-phone and scrolls through files, then turns the screen toward me, showing me an H-video. A naked man who looks to be in his mid-twenties is being waterboarded, gurgling as a man with a buzz cut shoots water from a black hose into his mouth. In the next clip, the same victim is tied to a chair, and red ants are biting his arms and legs, which are splattered with what appears to be golden smudges of honey. In the final clip, the man is hanging from a horizontal metal beam, his hands tied together above it, and another man is shocking him with an electric prod, touching the metallic tip to his underarms as the tortured man screams.

"Is this what you wanted?" V asks. "A discussion on ethics? He was one of our informants."

"What happened to him?" I ask. "Did he die?"

"We don't know", V says, closing the screen and shoving the phone into her pocket. She sighs, then fixes me a serious look. "Those in power manufacture ethics. Don't tell anyone I showed you that."

I nod, letting it sink in. I gesture to the glass container.

"It's not the most poisonous spider", I say.

V grins. "We do our homework. You might want to stay out here. Things are gonna get crazy." She pulls out some ear plugs from her pocket and stuffs them into her ears, then re-enters the room where Chance is seated and closes the door.

Ten seconds later, I hear a yelp, then another, followed by a series of maniacal wails. I can't help but laugh. Who's afraid of a little tarantula? Whatever Chance has to give, he's going to give it.

When I get home, it's eleven p.m., and Eneca is waiting on the sofa. She's not wearing her gown yet, but I notice a hint of turquoise eyeliner. Must be one of Dad's lucky nights. I can't

remember the last time I actually had something of a curfew, at least not at Dad's place. He is already in bed, or at least in his room, probably reading *Harrier and Driver*.

"Want a beer?" Eneca asks.

"Sounds good", I say, plopping down in the recliner.

"I'll get it", she says, padding into the kitchen.

I hear the snap of bottle tops being opened, and she comes back with two opened Modelo Lights.

"Thanks", I say, accepting the chilled bottle and taking a sip.

Mexico makes the best beer, real vanilla, and according to meth users, authentic meth.

Eneca takes a drink. "What did you do to your knuckle?" Asked in a calm, non-accusing tone.

My knuckle? I think. I glance at my right middle knuckle. It's still red, the skin scraped, from hitting Vince. I hadn't even noticed. Nothing gets past the A7's. If she didn't care about me, she wouldn't ask.

"I hit someone", I say.

I wait for her to ask for more details, but instead, she nods and looks at her beer.

"You saw the news about the TV station?" she asks. I nod. "I think some people are on edge."

"That's probably the point", I say.

Though subtle, I sense Eneca trying to read me. Like Cara, she's treading the line that divides honesty from privacy. And now that I've developed a rapport with her, do I let her cross over?

"If you were involved with something that was dangerous or could get you in trouble, would you tell me?" she asks.

I think of taking a drink, but that would be a dead giveaway that I'm hiding something. And even though I resist taking the drink, my delay in answering might be just as revealing.

"It depends", I finally say. Eneca doesn't answer, but raises her eyebrows, waiting for me to explain. "If I thought you could help, I would tell you. But if I thought you could get hurt, I wouldn't."

Judging from Eneca's even keel expression, which borders on a grin, the answer appears to satisfy her. But with androids, you never really know.

The next day, I'm driving around, hunting for Professor Eaglethorn. I've bought a double cheeseburger meal from McDonald's to give the first methhead who has solid info, and the oily aroma of fries is making me hungry. I strike out at four meth dens and three abandoned warehouses but catch the prof's tracks in Temecula, where an old woman with a withered face and whiny Southern voice talks my head off, each sentence ending with rising intonation, like a question. A dead rat lies on its back ten feet from her sleeping bag.

"Never mind him", she says, following my eyes. "That's Otis. He's nappin'."

Wow, I think. A methhead who's at least partly sober. If I called Ripley's Believe It or Not, they wouldn't believe me.

"That's the Chief", she says when I show her the professor's photo from my H-phone. "Ya just missed him. He left yesterday."

"Did he say where he was going?" I ask.

"The Chief ain't much for info", the woman says. "He's just a singin' his songs."

Meth smoke trails from a guy smoking a pipe twenty feet away, forcing me to turn away and sneeze.

"Hey, Cheesy!" the woman says. "Where's your GD manners? Can't you see the young man's talkin' to me?"

"Well, excuse me, Queen Elizabeth!" Cheesy says, extinguishing the pipe with his thumb.

"Killer name", I say. "Cheesy."

"He's got sebaceous cysts all over his back", she says. "He don't eat nothin' but KFC and Reeses Peanut Butter Cups. When the cysts pop they smell like cheese."

Nice image, I think. *Instantly Cure Your Pentecostal Teen of Masturbation!*

"What's his real name?" I ask.

"None of us gots a real name in here", the woman says. "When you hit the pipe, you float away from your real self and become just a bad memory to everyone you used to know. I wouldn't recommend it to no one. You lose everything that's worth a damn. But once you start, you can't stop."

I offer the woman the bag of McD's, but she says she's not hungry, so I thank her for her time and give the food to Cheesy.

On the drive home, I'm struck by the desire to check the warehouse where I saw Professor Eaglethorn. What could I possibly lose? Anyway, I could get an update from the methhead I talked to last time.

It's dusk, and inside it's nearly pitch black, so I shine my phone ahead of each step. As I approach the den, I smell an aroma of a different sort, with only a faint residue of meth, and I hear singing to the accompaniment of a Jew's Harp. Perhaps due to certain medicinal influences, there's more lyrical variety this time. As I get closer, I hear the professor's words:

Meskin meth gonna hang down low

CC boss gots to play it slow

peeps and rats done look the same

don't try to wake my dead friend Joe

I meander through the maze of sleeping bags, lifting my feet over glass and ceramic pipes, spoiled food, and a platoon of cockroaches. When I reach Professor Eaglethorn, I shine the light on him, and he stops singing, and the methhead playing the Jew's Harp gives it a rest. The professor is sitting Indian style, legs folded in front of him, leaning his back against the wall. A sharp odour streams from a smouldering white ceramic pipe beside him.

"We got us a visitor", he says in a deep voice. "What can I do ya for?"

"Professor Eaglethorn", I say.

"I ain't been called that in years", he says. "The smokers call me Chief."

"I don't smoke meth", I say.

"That's two of us", he says.

This throws me. "Then what do you smoke?"

"Peyote", he says.

I send V an H-text explaining that I've found the professor, and she promptly texts me back, telling me to stay with him and that she's coming. Professor Eaglethorn's friend lifts the Jew Harp back up to his lips, and it looks like the two are going to sing another song.

The professor's eyes take on a sombre hue. "You're with SOW, aren't you?"

"Maybe", I say.

"Yep", he says, smacking his lips. "And I know why you want me. I have the keys to the Corporate Council's annihilation." He points to his head. "In here." Then he starts laughing.

Lying on my bed, looking up at Volcana, I briefly consider masturbating, to let off some steam, but decide to delay gratification. I call up Dr. G on the VR, and he shows up in neon green and black cyclist's spandex, standing next to a racing bicycle.

"No", I say.

In the next instant, Dr. G's in his office, wearing jeans and a t-shirt that says "Thank you, sir, may I have more homework!" Which I find acceptable.

"Nice try, Doc", I say. "But I don't have homework anymore."

"Oh, but you will", he says playfully.

"How do you know?"

"That brain of yours, diminutive as it sometimes is, can't live on VR games alone", he says.

Quickly, I decide to take the gauntlet bait and run with it. "You were purchased for two hundred dollars at Shrinks-a-Million."

"Your dad watches midget porn", he says.

"Gross", I say, grimacing. "At least I have a real dad. Yours was a programmer who gave you up and ran off with another chip."

"I can belch a Swedish belch, which you couldn't do if you tried. Plus, I can play a song in farts. Wanna hear "Beethoven's Fifth?"

"Rain check!" I say.

Doc sighs. "Emile, it would be the century's single greatest travesty if you didn't go to college." He pauses for effect, making sure his point sinks in, and I nod to let him know that it does. "Let's hear some thinkin' from inside that shell."

Without mentioning the name, I share the details of my involvement with SOW, including those of my training, but I keep V's name out of it. When I finish, Dr. G rests his chin in his palm, thinking. After a few seconds, his office vanishes and he appears dressed in an topaz tuxedo, standing in front of a Porsche harrier mounted in front with slick laser cannons, the Monte Carlo Casino behind him.

"Does this ninja chick have a boyfriend?" Dr. G asks.

"The ninja part might be accurate, but don't call her a chick", I say.

"Ooh, defensive! Might there be some attraction?"

"It's not like that", I say. "I mean, she is attractive. She's skinny. But it's a different kind of relationship. Maybe sisterly?"

"Big sis?" Dr. G asks.

"Maybe", I say. "And besides, she has a boyfriend, and I have Cam."

"Yeah, well, there's more than one basket to spread them eggs. Just sayin'."

I pause. "Are you really going to give me girl advice? You haven't dated anyone outside of a program."

"Hey, keep your shots up. I've got goals, too, you know."

"Whatever", I say, chuckling.

"Speakin' of", he says, "what is it you want to get out of your political activist shindig? A general inclination to bring change isn't enough. We need something specific. Concrete. Have you thought about it?"

"I have", I say. "But I don't really have an answer."

"Something to keep in mind."

"Thanks", I say.

"And Emile", he says. "Be careful."

"I will."

"If anything happened to you—"

"You'd be broken into a bazillion point three-five shards of electric matter", I say, finishing one of his sayings. As I sign off, I'm left thinking how much I love Dr. G.

V picks me up in her harrier and drives us to Brighton, an affluent non-CZ suburb twenty minutes north of Corrales. I couldn't take the Camaro on account of it being old and therefore a "security liability." She also told me to wear something "decent", so I've slapped on a collared short-sleeve button up shirt, with a small sketch of Johnny Cash over the breast pocket, and some original blue jeans.

The house is a large two-story Spanish stucco with a parlour that would equal a small house in itself. Inside I see five or six young people close to my age, scattered about the carpeted dining hall and living room, talking while drinking beverages like beer and Coke. I also see Mr. Galen.

"Get something to drink from the fridge", V says.

I help myself to a can of Nostalgic Coke, and as I close the fridge door there's Mr. Galen, leaning against the kitchen counter, holding a bottle of Coors Light.

"I take it you're getting the proper ass-kicking treatment", he says.

"You should try it sometime", I say.

"Too old."

"Principals are never too old for ass kickings", I say.

"Says the guy getting his ass kicked."

I can't suppress a grin, and as I mosey out of the kitchen I open the Coke and take a drink. The flash hits me instantly and vividly: I'm tickling Illy, who is yelping with delight. I think of sitting down, from the intensity of the flash, but then I see Torbin, dressed in a long-sleeve shirt similar to mine, and wearing dress pants, talking to another young man.

"Torbin?" I ask.

"Emile", he says. When he realizes I'm speechless, he says, "I guess you're surprised."

"Yeah", I say. "A little. I figured you'd be going to school."

"I am", he says.

"Stanford?" I ask, trying to remember where the geeks at Dick Cheney High planned to study.

"Harvard", he says.

I nod. Apparently Stanford's not good enough for some folks. He asks about my own plans, and I mention the University of New Mexico.

"New Mexico?" he asks, his eyebrows wrinkled. "Even after today's accident?" I look aloof. "The radiation spillage? Forty-six dead, two-hundred injured?"

I shake my head in ignorance. What happened to New Mexico? I wonder. Dad says people used to go there for vacations, as much for its clean air as its pristine pines and streams, that artists and actors frequented its high deserts for peace and inspiration. Now half the state is filled with nuclear waste. My prospects for attending UNM look dimmer now.

"So what's your role with SOW?" I ask.

"IT and data analysis", he says. "What about you? Are you in RF?"

"Yeah."

"Badass", he says.

I become aware of V coming up beside me. As I turn toward her, she grins.

"I want you to meet someone", she says.

She leads me up a winding white wooden staircase to the second floor, where we pad through a carpeted hallway. A collection of art and artefacts hangs on the walls: paintings of Thomas Jefferson, Lincoln, and Geronimo; copies of the Emancipation Proclamation, the Bill of Rights, the Treaty with the Six Nations, and the 1867 Treaty with the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache. At the end of the corridor, a bedroom door is open, and as V leads me through it, I turn into stone. Standing before me, clad in tight jeans and a dark green t-shirt, looking more casual than in her posters and videos, is Volcana.

V introduces us, using Volcana's real name, Heather. Her real-life bio comes to mind: Heather Linski, 24, from Boise, Idaho, honours grad of the University of Oregon. She sets down a glass of wine and shakes my hand. I notice the warmth and softness of her palm, the light fragrance of Europa, a midscale perfume.

"Hmm", V says. "I bet you two feel like you know each other." She flickers her eyes at me. "I'll leave you now." As she trails away, I realize I'm alone with the hottest woman this side of the planet.

"V tells me you're quite the recruit", Heather says.

"That's not what she tells me", I say.

"She wouldn't", Heather says. "It's her job to keep you sharp." She takes a sip of wine. "Have they given you a major assignment yet?"

I shrug. "I don't know what a major assignment looks like to them."

Heather chuckles. "You're new. I'm not privy to all the decisions of the higher ups, but I do know that whatever they have in mind for you, it's not grunt work."

"If that's true, then why would they let me serve in something as dangerous as RF?" I ask.

"Generals cut their teeth in war", she says. "They're watching to see how you handle adversity. It's a series of steps. Tests."

I grin, more at her incisive thought than at the comment.

"How involved are you with SOW?" I ask.

"Sometimes more than others", she says. "Mostly intel. I keep my ear to the ground, let SOW know what I hear. Sometimes we donate, as a band." She smiles. "Come on. Time to go."

We leave the room and descend the stairwell, with eight pairs of eyes homing in on us, including a hologram of Annalisa standing up in front. Everyone's seated on sofas and extra chairs in the living room. I take a seat beside Torbin, who gives me a fist bump, while Heather sits in a saved seat up front.

"We, the leaders of SOW", Annalisa's hologram says, "have asked you here tonight to let you meet some of the other new recruits in the greater L.A. area. We recognise that the initial training can be an isolating experience, and we want you to know that you're not alone. For security reasons, we decided to limit each meeting point to less than ten people. Don't be mistaken. SOW has units all over the US Still, our numbers are quite small, and we are selective with those who want to join us. We only allow the brightest, toughest, and most ethical. For every thirty-nine applicants who wanted to join, we accepted one. We're well-financed, and our tech team is at least as skilled as the government's, allowing us to connect with the Underground and remain undetectable. However, I want to be clear about something. By participating in SOW, you are putting your lives and careers at risk." Annalisa looks directly at me. "This is especially true for those on the RF team.

"While the RF functions as our militant wing, SOW does not consider itself a militant organization. Although our RF teams do occasionally encounter government forces, we don't possess the physical weaponry to engage them directly. Our overall strategy focuses on intel and messaging. We use intel to uncover truth and disseminate it to news outlets, both foreign and domestic, and to citizens. Our goal is to motivate the people, to stir the lower class, the proletariat. When that occurs, we have a chance for real change."

Annalisa introduces Volcana (Heather), who stands at the front and talks about her support for SOW and of its importance. There is shifting in seats, guys, including myself, trying to hide their erections. When Heather finishes, there's applause, and Mr. Galen gives a short talk about SOW's financial backing, emphasizing that the organization expects us to attend college and is willing to help pay for the costs. Finally, Annalisa's hologram stands up again.

"Before we leave tonight", she says, "I want to update you with regard to current political events. Our informants have advised us of a recent rift among the leaders of the Corporate Council. The organizational cracks of the CC are significant enough, we believe, to warrant an acceleration of our own timeline. My message to you is this: be prepared. You may be needed at any hour. We will not rest until all of our citizens are treated equally, until all of them are truly free."

At Mom and Cara's, I take Peppy out for a walk, and he pulls assertively at the leash, forcing me to run as he breaks into a mini gallop. The sound of nearby gunshots, however, make me pull up on the leash, and we come to a stop. I turn Peppy in the opposite direction, leading us back to the condo.

Mom makes lasagne and we finish it off with her dessert specialty, red velvet cake. Afterward, we migrate to the living room and watch one of Mom's favourite movies, *The Dream Team*, about these four mental ward patients who take a field trip in New York City. It's a remake of an old character-driven film, and the three of us, including Cara, get a serious laughter workout.

Later, alone and with Peppy at my side, I'm about to flick the channel to Sinaloa TV when Cara, wearing a lavender gown, ambles into the living room and sits beside me on the sofa. I leave the TV on CNN, which is reporting rumours of infighting on the Corporate Council. I lower the volume. Cara starts with the usual: how have I been feeling? What do my plans look like? She raises the radiation disaster in New Mexico and says she has serious concerns, etc.

"I know you're occupied with something", she says. "Something besides Cam. I'm inclined to think that's good. The other side of that is I don't know the nature of everything you're involved with."

"I can't tell you everything", I say.

"You used to", she says.

"Yeah, when I was a kid", I say. "But as one gets older, the secrets mature. They become more intense. Painful. At least they would be if you discovered them."

"Not if my advice can prevent something tragic from happening. We did this before."

"Yes, we did", I say.

"And you eventually told me what happened."

"I know", I say. I lower my head in pseudo fatigue. Peppy nudges my palm. *Scratch me!* he's saying.

"The truth is I don't know what's being planned", I say. "I haven't been involved in anything too dangerous."

Cara pauses, studying my eyes. "What about the TV station? Were you a part of that?"

"Yes", I say.

A tense, quiet moment passes between us. Cara takes a deep breath.

"I've been seeing more young people lately", she says. "A few of them are eighteen. Can you guess what I'm seeing them for?"

"Yeah, I guess I can", I say.

"The reason they always seem to give, in every case, is 'Person A destroyed my life.'" Cara looks at the TV, gathering her thoughts. "A young woman killed an older woman who she blamed for breaking up her family. Now she thinks constantly about suicide. There are always repercussions for taking a life. Sometimes they don't show up until later. The National Psychiatrist's Association was conducting a study about this."

"What about, exactly?" I ask.

"The psychological effects on the killer", she says. "They published one article about their initial findings. The results showed no improvement in the psychological wellbeing of the subjects. In some cases, there was a deterioration. It didn't appear to matter that the murder was deemed legal. The government cut its funding for the study, and a prominent psychiatrist claims it pressured the association to shut down the experiment."

V lowers the harrier beside the H-billboard platform. She hands me a small blue H-drive.

"It's easy", she says. "Open the cover. Middle right side. Push in the drive. You'll hear a click."

"Got it", I say.

"And watch your step as you get out", she says.

"Don't accidentally hit the gas", I say.

V's face beams. "Not a bad idea."

I open the door. Between the one-foot gap between the harrier and platform, a chasm of cool darkness greets me. In the distance, lights rise and fall along the hilly highway. I step onto the grated platform. Before me, projecting from both sides of the billboard, is the hologram message: *All-New MacBook H! Now with Free Injectable ID Chip!*

I tread slowly across the platform, bend down to the control box, pull open the plastic cover, and push in the H drive. *Click!* I hear an electric percussion as the program loads. On my way back to the harrier, the new message lights up in thick blue letters: *YOU Have the Power: Remove the Corporate Council.*

I get back inside the harrier, and V drives toward the sky highway.

"How's the professor?" I ask.

"More blissful than ever", she says. "And talking non-stop, thanks to an all-you-can-smoke stash of peyote."

We reach Ventura in five minutes. V lowers the harrier to the land highway, then parks along a residential street.

"There's a party five houses down", she says. She scrolls through documents on her H-phone, brings up a hologram of a young man with straight auburn hair down to his neck. "John Barnes. He has murder permits for people at the party."

"Permits with an 's'?" I ask. V nods. "How did that happen?"

"We don't know. Could be a glitch in the system. But we can't take a chance on a bloodbath. Telling the police is useless. They won't do anything if there are legal permits."

V opens the console, begins looking for something.

"I know murder's tragic and all", I say, "but how does stopping this guy advance SOW's agenda?"

V pauses and looks up at me. "SOW has a conscience." She pulls out a Colt 9mm, hands it to me, along with an extra clip. Then she pulls out a TEC 9 laser for herself.

"I'd prefer the laser", I say.

"I know you would", V says. She makes an aloof face. "Budget." She reaches in the back and grabs two laser- and bullet-proof vests, handing one to me. "Put this on under your shirt. Don't worry, they're comfortable."

I take my shirt off, slide on the vest and fasten the straps, then put the shirt back on.

"Plan", I say.

"They're not going to let us into the party and warn the target, so all we can do is keep an eye out for John and disarm him when he shows up." V glances at the clock on her phone. "And according to his permit, that should be in fifteen minutes."

We exit the harrier and casually stroll along the sidewalk. Heavy bass reverberates from the party house, and we stop at the house before it, pretending to be a couple talking and passing the time. Pot and tobacco clouds drift from the porch and side of the house where smokers are gathered, laughing as they share jokes and anecdotes, paying us nothing more than an occasional glance.

At the scheduled time, V and I keep our eyes out for John Barnes. Carefully, we slide the safeties off of our concealed weapons.

"Remember the rule", V says.

"Yeah", I say. "Shoot if you feel like it."

V answers with an austere look.

From both ends of the street, black SUV harriers roar toward us, blue lights flashing.

"Shit!" V says.

We start running toward the backyard fence of the nearby house, but two black-clad government troops burst through the fence's gate, rifles in hand. One trooper fires a laser at us, and V returns fire, hitting the trooper in the chest area of a laser-proof vest and knocking him back against the fence. Troopers spill from the harriers, firing M20 lasers at us. I fire my pistol, the hollow crack reminding me that death is near, and the shot hits a soldier in the protected chest area, knocking him to the ground.

Outnumbered, V and I scramble down the street, finding cover behind a pickup parked along the curb. Shards of laser burn into the vehicle's metal and tires, the air redolent of smoky electric ozone. I become aware of the horror that my flesh could, at any second, comprise part of the smell. I don't know how many troops there are in total, but from what I can see when I fire the Colt, I estimate about eight. The pickup is being burned to a crisp. I peek from the side of the pickup, fire the pistol, and a burst of a laser wings past my head. I hear V yell, and I see her fall onto her back in the air, her chest aglow from a laser's impact, and she hits her head against the asphalt, the Tec-9 pattering a few feet away.

"V!" I yell, scrambling toward her.

She's out cold. Leaning down, listening for breathing, I feel a warm gust of air from her mouth and lungs. I shove the pistol into my pocket and grab her by the underarms and pull her closer to the vehicle's rear, behind secure cover. I pull the pistol back out and prepare to take another shot, but as I turn to the side, a soldier shoots me at near point blank range in the chest, blowing me backward into the air and onto my back, but my head lands on the soft grassy part of a lawn, sparing me the loss of consciousness.

From somewhere down the street, a motorcycle's engine cries out like a wildcat and a high-powered laser rifle whines, and I hear the troops being struck and lofted off their feet. When my

head clears and I'm able to sit up, I recognise the bike, as well as the person. Eneca. She's firing a Hecklar and Koch laser assault rifle, practically melting the last two troopers' rifles in their hands. She disembarks from the bike and engages the troops hand to hand, discarding them with a series of karate strikes that resolve with spinning back kicks. Then she sprints toward me.

"Are you all right?" she asks.

"I think so", I say, getting to my feet.

Eneca scoots toward V, bends down and touches two fingers to V's neck, feeling for her pulse. Then she touches V's forehead.

"She'll be okay", Eneca says.

Carefully, using both arms, she scoops V up from the ground, and we hurry down the street to V's harrier. Eneca finds V's keys in her pants pocket, opens the doors, and slides V into the back. Then I get into the passenger's side as Eneca drives away.

I'm sitting in a carpeted hallway outside the imaging room at a small clinic. V has regained consciousness and is getting a CAT scan as a precaution. I've already been checked by a doctor.

"Go ahead, ask", Eneca says.

"Do I need to?" I ask.

"SOW reached out to me and asked if I could watch over you", she says.

"When?" I ask.

"The beginning of your senior year", she says.

I rummage through all the events that have occurred since then, picking through the warped strands in my memory.

"You've been watching me", I say.

Eneca nods. "These days most people are being watched by someone."

"When do you not watch me?" I ask.

"When you're aroused", she says. "And during other times of privacy."

Great, I think. That keeps my sessions with Dr. G and thoughts of Volcana off limits.

"Where did you learn to fight like that?" I ask.

"It's part of my programming", she says.

Greg strides toward us from the reception desk.

"What the hell happened?" he asks.

When I hesitate to attempt an explanation, Eneca does it for me.

"It was a setup", she says. "An assault team of nine troops hit them."

"Fuck", Greg says. "They lured us there. The multiple murder permits. They gambled that we'd be there."

Greg tells Eneca her bike was retrieved by an RF team member, and when V is released she thanks Eneca for coming to our aid. Later, as I ride home on the bike with Eneca, I realize a nuance of change in our relationship. We're closer now. There's an element of security. I think back to earlier in the evening, when Eneca unloaded on the CDF troops. She was strong, brave, well-trained. She's a warrior, like V and me.

We're sitting in the living room of the SOW initiation house. V and Greg are both fixed with grave dispositions. When I arrived I asked for a Nostalgic Coke, but they declined, saying it wasn't the time.

"We have some bad news", V says. "We believe Torbin was picked up by the Feds."

"What?" I ask, confused. "How?"

"We don't know", Greg says. "The CDF may have listening in on one of his conversations."

"Where is he?" I ask.

"He's being held at a black site in Arizona", V says.

Black site, I think. The government doesn't acknowledge their existence. I think of Torbin being tortured: sleep deprivation, solitary confinement, electric shock. He's eighteen years old, the same as me. Is his life basically over? Will he spend eternity in prison? Will the government execute him? A sense of dread, then of anxiety, builds within me.

"I don't get it", I say. "Why is SOW leaving him there?"

"No one's *leaving* him there", Greg says with resolve.

"Then let's go get him", I say.

"It's not that easy", Greg says.

The quiet is like being buried alive. The air conditioner hums faintly. I think of turning on the TV, anything to break the monotonous silence.

"So?" I ask.

V lightly shakes her head.

"No one will approve it", Greg says.

I take in a breath, staring at the TV, considering my options. "All right, then I'll do it myself."

Greg's eyes pierce me. "You would, wouldn't you?"

"Damn right", I say.

"How would you do it?" V asks. "You don't know where he is."

"I'll find out", I say. "It might take a while, but eventually I'll learn his location."

"And if/when you do, there's the little question of weapons", Greg says.

"I'll buy a piece on the black market", I say. "They're easy to get in this town."

"But a laser?" he asks. "It would cost an arm and a leg."

I shrug. "I'll ask Eneca. I kind of like her H&K."

V glances at Greg, then leans her head against her hand. A moment passes. V sighs.

"We'll think about it", Greg says. "We'll discuss it with Annalisa. At least give us a chance to do that."

"Okay", I say.

Cam takes me to the local music store in De La Hoya, and we stand in the carpeted shop, before a locked glass counter, the black horn with nickel-plated keys lying inside it, between a flute and oboe. A thin old Chinese man, the owner, waits beside us. The place has a weak scent of chai and spearmint.

"That's the one?" I ask.

"Yeah", Cam says. "She stood right there and pointed at it."

The old man and Cam have a short conversation in Chinese.

"He says it's a Yamaha, the best instrument in the store", Cam says. "It will last a lifetime. Guaranteed."

I ask Cam to bargain with him, and she talks him down to seven thousand dollars, and I agree. The man throws in five reeds and an accompanying new green case, and afterward we stop at a five-dollar store and buy a gold bow. When we get to Cam's house, we put the clarinet in Aster's room and wait for her to come home. While we wait, her mother makes me a glass of iced tea, and we sit on the sofa, watching a Chinese language TV show. Her mother thanks me for my generosity. Before deciding to buy the clarinet, I had floated the idea, since saving face is big in their culture, of just giving some or all of the money to Cam or her parents and letting them buy it. When Cam refused, I offered to make it a gift from the two of us, but she declined that as well.

"I think you want her to have it more than anyone else", Cam said. "She deserves to know that."

When Aster arrives with her dad, we act normal, pretending to watch TV. Aster says hi and then disappears into the hallway, in the direction of her bedroom. A few seconds later, we hear a squeal. Aster runs back into the living room and nearly leaps into my lap, wrapping her arms around me for a hug and thanking me, and for the second or two that we're embraced, I remember what it feels like to hug one's little sister.

Cam's father also offers his thanks, and I stay for dinner as Cam's mom makes various dishes including fish, broccoli, bamboo, chicken wings, and rice for a traditional Chinese feast. While we wait for the meal, Aster assembles the clarinet and plays Ho Lite's hit "Spank-O-Meter" from her room, the horn producing a rich, resonant tone.

I think about what the gift means. It's more than just doing something nice for someone, or an act of friendship. It's an investment, I decide. A pendant of hope that can last a lifetime.

A week rolls by. As a medical precaution, V uses it to rest from her injury. I spend the week lifting weights, running three miles a day, and training at Buford's Gym. Then on a Saturday night, Greg calls.

"Okay", he says. "It's on."

I meet him and V at a cafe and we go over the plan. With a printout of the site's facilities spread before us, Greg takes me from start to finish, detailing our approach, method of attack, and exit, emphasizing my need to study the building's layout. Meanwhile, V sips an Arabica coffee, looking almost nonchalant. I ask her what she thinks about the plan.

"Solid", she says. "But we don't know who's manning the fort."

"How many government troops are we looking at?" I ask.

"The typical black site has no more than ten", Greg says. "A smaller site like Kingston's could have as few as five."

I give incredulous looks at V and Greg. "That's it?"

"It's not as easy as it sounds", Greg says.

"If it's National Guard", V says, "we'll have a higher chance of success."

"Who else could be there?" I ask.

"CDF Special Ops", Greg says.

I think of the seriousness, the difficulty. "Shit."

"Yeah, shit", Greg says.

Two days later, at 2 a.m. Monday morning, with her permission, I borrow Eneca's H&K laser assault rifle, zipping it up in a duffle bag that I strap over my shoulder, and V picks me up in a black Shelby Mustang harrier.

"Holy hammerhead", I say, touching the seat's black leather. "Where'd you get this?"

"Greg thought you'd like it", V says. "It's part of a donor-funded fleet." She hands me a bottle of iced coffee. "Our ETA is two-fifty a.m. The site's twenty miles outside Kingston. Ten minutes out, we'll cut the lights and approach incognito."

We jet onto the sky highway, which is virtually empty, and she turns up the air conditioner colder than usual, I assume to help us wake up. I sip the coffee while reciting the plan to V, starting with our entrance through the complex's sewer system, and finishing via the same route.

"Don't worry about the sewer", she says. "We have nose plugs."

"Approaching Arizona", the harrier's computer announces. "Enter at your own risk."

Soon V cuts the lights and lands the harrier in an arroyo surrounded by saguaros and creosotes. We sort out the equipment: laser assault rifles, bullet/laser proof vests, night vision goggles, sleep and smoke grenades, dark blue ski masks, and various incendiary tools. We strap on the vests and exit the harrier with the rifles and other gear. Overhead, there's a glossy white half moon as well as a faint glimmer of the Milky Way. Wearing the night vision goggles, we walk two hundred yards along the arroyo to the sewage drainage entrance, which smells like a mixture of mud and shit. Before entering, we insert our nose plugs.

Crouching, we tread through the tunnel, the ground wet and grainy. We come to a grated iron barrier that leads into a basement maintenance room. After we remove the nose plugs and pull on our ski masks, V unlatches the grate and we hop down onto a plain cemented floor. Next to one wall is a large hot water heating tank, and in the corner, fanning warm air, stands a dusty old air conditioning vent. The musty odour makes me sneeze.

Outside the room is a corridor, with the surveillance room just one door down. After we traipse into the corridor, V drops a sleep grenade into the surveillance room and closes the door. We wait a few minutes for the smoke to settle, then enter to find a guard slumped over his desk,

with a cup of Starbucks mocha in front of him. V uses the H-console to disable the security system.

We follow the corridor and find ourselves looking from the third level of a stairwell into the detention facility's processing room. On the lower level, on opposite sides, are two doors leading to cell areas A and B. Slowly and quietly, we descend the stairwell, then split toward the separate doors.

The door before me is cracked, and I nudge it slightly to get a better look at the small room behind it. A guard in a gray CDF t-shirt and desert camou pants is sitting at a desk, looking at an H-phone, apparently minding a heavy door that I know from the building diagram leads to Torbin. I do a double take. Are my eyes deceiving me, or is the guard Stacy Forsett? As I focus, I realize it *is* Stacy. (His buzz cut threw me.) He's unarmed. What's he doing here? Must be interrogation training.

I slip inside, lay my weapon on its stock in the corner. Coming up from the side, I greet Stacy with a right to the jaw, knocking him out of the chair. As much as I feel like taunting him, I can't let him hear my voice, since that would let him I.D. me. No, he cannot know who's kicking his ass. He recovers quickly, leaping to his feet and responding with a spinning back kick, which I dodge. I throw a combination that ends with a high kick, but everything misses, and Stacy counters with a short right to my chin. The punch dazes me, jarring my equilibrium, and when Stacy recognises this and throws a flurry of punches, I clench him and shove him against the wall, winging an elbow that grazes his temple, my faculties returning from the blood rushing to my head.

"Fuckin' SOW rat", he grunts, a piece of spittle shooting from his mouth onto my mask.

I come close to making a comment about his mother, but bite my tongue. He tries to knee me in the groin: I block it. I throw another elbow: miss. I back away and regroup. I wait for him to miss and then counter with a brutal combination: I land a short right to his nose, kick him hard in the knee from the side, and finish with a one-two that sends him flipping over his desk and onto the ground. He's out, his eyelids fluttering. I reach into his pants pocket and find a set of keys.

After grabbing the H&K rifle, I pass through the heavy door and see two doors in a small dark hallway. I open the door to the first cell and find it empty. In the second cell, however, I find Torbin, barefoot and unshaven, lying in ragged shorts and a t-shirt on a simple cot. The silver metallic rim of a toilet gleams from the corner, and as I step toward him, Torbin's body odour slaps me.

"Torbin", I say, "Come on, let's go." In half a minute, Torbin puts on socks and tennis shoes, and he follows me back into the small guard room, where he instinctively grabs a bottle of water off Stacy's desk, guzzling the stuff as though it's the last water in Arizona.

I nod toward Stacy, still unconscious. "What was he like?"

Torbin rolls up a sleeve, revealing a patch of bruises. "He gave me these."

We meet up with V back at the processing room.

When we reach the second level of stairs, a trio of CDF guards emerge and open up on us from below, their lasers burning into the stairs and walls around us. V and I take out a soldier apiece, but as V takes a step up the stairs, toward the third level, a shard of laser slices into her side, in an exposed space between the vest, and she grunts as she slinks onto her hip. I return fire, hitting the soldier in the head, his forehead smouldering as he slams backward against the wall. I scamper toward V, examining her blackened wound of seared flesh. It appears cauterized, but I know this is a mirage, that she's bleeding profusely internally.

Despite his weak state, Torbin picks her up and carries her down the corridor to the maintenance room, and I follow behind, watching for CDF troops. I help him lift V into the tunnel, and as I trail behind, he carries her all the way to the arroyo, and then to the Mustang harrier. Before ascending, I get the first aid kit from the trunk and give V an injection cocktail for pain and infection. Torbin stays with her in the backseat, monitoring her vitals, but ten minutes later, as I'm gunning it along the sky highway, he tells me she's dead, and I look in the rear-view mirror to find V's eyes staring off, their dark river calm and at peace.

When we arrive in L.A., I drop the harrier off in Chinatown behind Kifu's Bar. Greg doesn't say anything. He gets into the back seat and sits beside V's body, gazing at her, cradling her head in his lap, looking lost. I stand beside the car with Torbin, both of us silent. Some minutes later, a SOW agent picks up Torbin in an SUV, and Greg drives away in the harrier.

Carrying Eneca's rifle in its case, I take a taxi back home. When I get there, I take a steaming shower. I want to be happy for bringing back Torbin safely, but I sit on my bed, my insides knotted, thinking of V. Eventually the tears come, and I can't seem to stop them. There's no remedy. Not Dr. G. Not Eneca. Not amelioration. Nothing.

That night I drive to Mom and Cara's. Usually the sight of Peppy lifts my spirits, but not tonight. Still, the setting seems right for grieving. After dinner Cara sits down next to me and asks about my sombre mood, and I start sobbing. She hugs me and puts her hand on my head, letting me grieve until I'm too tired to cry anymore. Afterward, instead of peppering me with questions, she lets me be.

Later I try to watch TV as always, with Peppy sprawled next to me, eyelids fluttering. My attention wanes. I'm watching but not really listening. Then a local news station cuts from the broadcast to an office of some kind. A really nice office. There's a huge desk and, behind it, sitting in a black leather executive chair, a sixtyish man with a small balding head. He's typing on a desktop computer. He looks familiar. I sit up in the sofa, focusing. Then I remember: Ken Aschoff, the CEO of Freeport McMoran and a member of the Corporate Council.

The next week, early in the morning, I meet Greg, Annalisa, and four RF members who were close to V at a quiet spot near Dana Point. There, sitting in a circle on the beach, we hold a memorial for V. The sky is clear and there's a cool saltwater-laced breeze. Each person recounts a memory of her that stands out. When my turn comes, I recall the first sparring session with V in the cage and how she choked me out even though I was tapping.

"I don't think she wanted to be hard on me", I say. "But she wanted me to survive. She couldn't be too nice and train me at the same time."

After a pause, Greg grins and says, "She kept telling me, 'The kid is tough. I keep beating his ass and he just keeps getting back up.'"

After we share our memories, Greg opens a small bag containing V's ashes and sprinkles them in the ocean.

Later, I meet Greg and Annalisa at the old Kifu's Bar in Chinatown. When I get there, I find the bar just as we left it, with Greg standing behind the bar, drinking a mug of beer while filling another with Coke from the tap. Annalisa is sitting on a stool, drinking a Coke and busying herself with an H-app. As I stroll up to the bar, Greg shoves the second mug toward me.

"Nostalgic?" I ask.

"Regular", he says.

"What was your GPA again?" Annalisa asks.

"Four point two-two", I say. "Why?"

"One of V's old teachers thought you might fill a need that we have."

"What kind of need?" I ask, moseying toward the H-screen.

"There's an opening for an agent in a CZ zone", she says.

I stand beside her, looking at the sprawling campus of Stanford, the roses and lilacs forming an S on the entrance lawn, with a generous spread of traditional and bubble buildings, the Silicon Valley rising in the background.

"Who's V's old teacher?" I ask.

"Leann Kinerson", Annalisa says. "She went to Dick Cheney High." She notices my stunned expression. "I guess you never asked. And even if you had, V may not have disclosed this." She looks at me, waiting for a response. "Consider this your official offer of acceptance. Do you accept?"

It's almost too much to process. But Stanford. Could I really attend such a school? It's way outside of the box, but it would be stupid and cowardly to pass on it.

"I'll give it a shot", I say.

"You'll fit in just fine", Annalisa says. "One more thing." She enlarges an H-screen and positions it in the centre of the room. "You'll like this."

Pundits on Fox News are conversing, laughing. A minute goes by. I drink my Coke, then give her a look of boredom.

"It's coming", she says. "I hope you don't mind. We appropriated your hacking program. We tweaked some of your original code to bypass the government firewall."

A minute later, the screen cuts to a meeting around a long oval conference table. I immediately recognise many of the faces at the table. It's the Corporate Council. Near the middle of the table, the CC chairman Donovan Gershon is speaking.

"Our future means of production are secure", he says. "By the end of the decade, the majority of our workforce will be androids, who provide higher efficiency and less potential for resistance than do the lower and middle classes. It's time to expedite the filtering of American society. The human working class is no longer useful."

The next day, I visit Cam at her house. Her parents are at work, and Aster is in her room. The living room smells like sandalwood, with the aroma of steamed rice intruding from the dining room. The thick black river of Cam's hair shimmers along her collarbone, where she has steered it from the back. We sit on the sofa, watching TV.

"Your hair's lovely", I say, practically in monotone.

Cam takes my hand, rubs her thumb over the back of it. On CNN footage rolls of protests across the country: people burning tires and federal vehicles, throwing Molotov cocktails at government troops, and the troops beating and shooting "lawbreakers."

"How are they even showing that?" Cam asks.

Before I can respond, the channel goes fuzzy, accompanied by static. Puzzled and concerned, Cam and I look at each other. Cam changes the channels via the H-screen. Some news networks are failing to televise any news at all while others are delivering week-old news.

In the kitchen, a plastic cup taps against the kitchen's Formica counter, and I see Aster pouring herself some Coke from a two-litre bottle. She pads into the living room in a t-shirt, shorts and white socks with pink lining at the ankles.

"Hi, Emile", she says, holding her drink. "I haven't seen you in forever." She gives a pseudo sad sniff.

I offer a weak smile. "Hi."

Aster picks up on my mood. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah", I say, lying through my teeth.

"He's had some tough days, Aster", Cam says.

I think Cam is on the verge of telling Aster to go back to her room. Aster places her drink on the coffee table, leans down and wraps her arms around me, her head resting on my collarbone.

"Hugs are for honeys", Aster says, squeezing me tightly. "Give me your pain."

For a second I'm stunned. I regard her precious features—her small head, diminutive hands and arms, the neat tuft of hair. I can barely breathe, and my eyes start to well up. I feel Cam watching, and I fight back the tears. Then, instead of wrestling with my emotions, I roll with the moment, placing my hands behind Aster's shoulders and squeezing.

"Thank you", I say, my voice strained.

"You're welcome", Aster says, patting my back.

She releases her grip, backs away, and stands up.

"Be nice to him, Cam!" she says. Then she picks up her drink and hops along the carpet back to her room.

"Wow", Cam says, her eyes wide.

"Yeah, wow", I say. "Who's the big sister?"

"Really", Cam says.

"You liked that, didn't you?" Cam asks.

I nod. Then Cam turns off the TV and lays her head on my shoulder. Several minutes pass. I take Cam's hand. The glum hopelessness of V's death starts to wane, and it seems like time is braking, coming to a blissful stop where things almost make sense again.

Over the next few days, when Cam texts and calls, she says Aster is asking about me, wanting to know if I'm feeling better. Whenever I think about it, it makes me grin.

I tell Dad and Eneca that I got into Stanford, and they react with surprise, but not terribly so. They congratulate me, and Dad takes us out to eat at a nice Japanese restaurant to celebrate. While there, he orders a bottle of Chilean wine and we toast to "An exciting and rewarding first year" at Stanford.

The next day, Cara calls and asks me to come over. She won't tell me why, but there's an optimism in her voice that she's unable to subdue. When I reach the house, Cara answers, and I walk inside. Peppy jumps up and I let him lick my chin. I know something's different when we amble into the living room and Cara starts grinning. Sitting on the sofa, Mom does a double take when she sees me, her face white with shock.

"Emile!" Mom squeals, losing her breath.

Sobbing, she hops off the sofa and drapes her arms around me, squeezing the breath out of me like she hasn't seen me in forever. Through my watery eyes I see Cara watching with delight, and even though I don't completely understand why Mom is acting the way she is, I'm thinking it has to do with her SDI. After a minute or two, Cara intervenes and helps Mom settle down. Instead of telling Mom that I was just here a week ago, or asking her why she has turned into a volcano of emotions, I let Mom know that I'm glad to see her. After a half hour of talking, I wander into the kitchen to grab a Coke, and Cara follows me.

"You adjusted her levels", I say, referring to Mom's SDI.

Cara nods. "She's on a new drug that stabilizes her neurotransmitters. Her serotonin and dopamine levels won't fluctuate as much anymore, so her levels don't need to be as high. Her doctor recommended the drug and okayed the decrease in her levels."

It takes a moment for me to process this, not so much the science behind it as the fact that something I had hoped for has actually happened.

"I just saw her a week ago", I say. "Doesn't she remember?"

"She does", Cara says. "But it's a different kind of memory. Her perceptions are more lucid now."

"It's like she really sees me", I say. "She's not as spaced-out as before."

"One analogy might be people who are high or on pain meds", Cara says. "They see and remember people and events through the haze of the medicine."

"Anyway, thanks", I say, and give Cara a hug.

I grab a Nostalgic Coke and pad back into the living room and sit with Mom and Peppy. The dog wants to play, and he lurches toward my face and licks me.

"Emile, he's been licking his balls all day", Mom says with her old snark.

I burst out laughing, and Cara chuckles. Mom peppers me with questions, asking what I've been up to and what I'm planning to study at Stanford. She peruses her crocheted shawls and doilies and wonders when she made them. It takes me a while to get used to this version of her, to realise this is not the sedated copy of my mom, but the original, the version I haven't seen in many years. We continue talking through the night and later watch a movie as we eat ice cream.

Later, I hug Mom and Cara and tell them goodnight, and I sit on the sofa with Peppy, massaging his neck and stroking his beard as he drifts into sleep. At some point I'm struck with a peculiar feeling of peace, of almost total calm. At first I distrust it, thinking it's a lie. But slowly, as I hold my hand on Peppy's beard, I begin to embrace it, to hold onto it and keep it from dissipating. And why not? I know that the world is in flux, that things, people, and events come and go. Sometimes you lose what is most valuable, and once in a while, when you least expect it, you recover a bit of what was lost, and your life is rejuvenated, or reincarnated, like the great Phoenix. I just need to remind myself that no loss or setback is permanent, that something good will come my way again.