
Strange Future

**A 23rd Century Guide
for the 21st Century Cynic**

By Joshua Smith

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Special thanks to all my friends who read the early drafts, and to my mom who told me that she “didn’t get” the first one.

According to some scientists, there are an infinite number of universes. Some of these universes are so bizarrely different from ours that we can't possibly begin to describe what they must be like...

Others are nearly exactly the same as ours, with the exception of one tiny detail. For instance, there is a universe somewhere that is a carbon copy of this one, except in that universe, you put on blue socks this morning instead of white ones...

If this theory is true, then it means that somewhere there is a universe where the following story is NOT a story. Somewhere there is a universe where the events described herein have actually occurred...

Let's hope that the theory is wrong.

1

The world was a strange and scary place. Across the globe, world governments fought cold wars behind closed doors. Corporations used their vast amounts of money to buy off politicians to get laws passed that would help them make even more money. Computers had become the norm, and people were using these immensely powerful tools to do equally immense tasks and perform terrible crimes. The climate was changing due to pollution and other unnatural human activities, but very few could seem to accept this fact, and those who didn't fought endless, bitter battles with the ones who did.

This was all rather depressing, but fortunately, this is not the point of this story. This story is about one man. His name was Thomas. He was twenty-five years old, average height, had thick, brown hair, green eyes, glasses, and was just plain fed up with the world. Everything he saw was all depressing, all the time. And what's worse, he had the horrible feeling that soon, the entire mess of it all would result in several major cities exploding into giant, fiery balls that would be visible from space. This, of course, was a very bad thing. But Thomas tried not to think about that too much. Indeed, he spent very little time thinking about anything except for work...

Beep beep beep beep!

Thomas groaned and wondered what time it was. He looked over at the clock and groaned again when he got his answer: 5:00 AM. He groaned once more as he swung his legs onto the floor and sat up on the edge of the bed, rubbing his eyes. He felt as if he hadn't gotten any sleep at all. This was, of course, entirely possible. He wasn't quite sure when he had gotten to bed last night. All he remembered was doing paperwork until the numbers became indistinguishable from letters, at which point he decided that it probably wasn't wise to continue working. He got up and stumbled towards the bathroom, mentally reviewing his to-do list.

Finish checking and organizing papers. Transfer key points of speech to note cards. Grab something for breakfast. Catch the subway. Stop over on 33rd to pick up the dry cleaning. Get to office before 8:00. Thomas stopped moving his toothbrush back and forth. Something caught his eye. Could it be... No, that wasn't possible. He spit then looked again. Maybe it was... He leaned in towards the mirror to get a closer look.

“Gotta be kidding me...” Thomas said quietly. He looked intently and saw that it was, indeed, a gray hair. “I’m overworked,” Thomas muttered as he exited the bathroom. He quickly got dressed, deciding to wear a navy colored suit instead of his usual black. After taking care of the papers and note cards, he ran to the kitchen to grab something to eat. A bagel sounded good. Thomas reached for an onion bagel, then realized he had already brushed, and grabbed a plain one instead. He found his briefcase and threw everything in. He started to run out the door, then paused and laughed at himself. He opened the briefcase again, pulled the bagel back out, and took a bite as he left and locked the door behind him.

Thomas walked briskly down the hallway towards the elevators. He stole a look at his watch and realized—with quite a bit of surprise—that he was actually on time. Perhaps he would take the stairs instead. A bit of extra exercise would do him some good, and fifteen floors of stairs would certainly get his heart pumping. He dashed to the left, burst through the doors, and began running down the stairs as quickly—and carefully—as he could. Finally he reached the first floor landing, panting but feeling much more awake and energized.

“Morning Mr. Gordon,” Bill the doorman said as Thomas approached.

“Morning Bill,” Thomas said in response.

“Off to work early again I see,” Bill said. He smiled the all-knowing smile of an old friend.

“Yeah, as always. At least I’m on time this morning.” Thomas chuckled. “Say Bill, you ever wonder what the purpose to this rat race we call life is?”

“Every day, Thomas,” Bill said with a deep exhale.

“Really? Found an answer yet?”

“Nope.”

“Well that’s a shame. Oh well... I’ve gotta run. Catch you later Bill!”

“Have a good day, Thomas!” Bill yelled after him.

“I’ll try!” Thomas shouted over his shoulder as he rushed out the door. As Thomas walked north on Park Avenue towards 86th, the cold winter air set in, making him shiver. When Thomas was younger, he had loved winter. The sledding, fort building, snowball fights, and the slight chance of a snow day made it all worth it. Now that he was all grown up and part of the working world, he hated winter with a passion. He had long since contemplated moving to a warmer climate, but couldn’t bring himself to do it. He wasn’t at all attached to his job, but he had a great condo, and about twenty years worth of memories holding him in his place. Thomas sighed as the subway station came into sight when he rounded the corner

on 86th. Another day, another commute.

Thomas bounded down the steps into the station. He swiped his MetroCard, passed through the turnstile, and joined a throng of fellow commuters on the downtown platform. As they stood and waited, a 5 express train roared through the station. Thomas looked at his watch. He still had plenty of time. A minute later, a 4 pulled into the station.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the conductor announced, “this is a Brooklyn bound express train. Express! If you want local stops, wait for the six, which should be right after this one.” Thomas would normally take the express, but had to get off at a local stop to pick up the dry cleaning, so he waited. “Stand clear of the closing doors... Stand clear...Hey! You with the hat! In or out already!” The doors closed and the train departed. True to the conductor’s word, a six pulled in less than a minute later. The doors opened and Thomas boarded, miraculously finding a seat.

“This is the six local train. Next stop is 77th Street. Stand clear of the closing doors.” The train departed without incident, and Thomas settled in for the ride. The dry cleaners was near the 33rd Street station, so Thomas had quite a few stops to go through before he got off. Thomas began going over his mental checklist again to pass the time and ensure he hadn’t forgotten anything, pausing where needed to hear the conductor’s announcements.

“This is Grand Central station,” the conductor said after a time. “Connections can be made here to the A, C, E, N, Q, W, R, and S trains. If you want any other letters of the alphabet, you’re out of luck. Next stop, 33rd Street.” Thomas sat up and got his things together. Moments later, the train stopped and Thomas made his way to the street. He walked a short distance and entered the dry cleaners. He approached the unmanned counter, expecting to see someone coming from the back, but no one was visible. Thomas hesitated, then rang the bell next to the register. Silence. Thomas sighed and turned around to watch the traffic on the street behind him. The sun was rising ever higher, signaling Thomas that he would be late if he didn’t get this dry cleaning and get back on the subway soon. He turned around to ring the bell again, but was surprised to see a man now standing at the register, looking at Thomas impatiently.

“Oh,” Thomas said, “when did you get here?”

“I’ve been here, you’re the one wasting my time staring out the window!” the man said in a gruff voice.

“Well sorry! You could’ve said something to let me know you had gotten here.” The man just tapped his fingers and looked at Thomas expect-

tantly. "I'm picking up two suits, under the name of Gordon."

"You got a claim ticket?"

"Yeah, just give me a sec," Thomas said as he dug for his wallet. He flipped through its contents, searching for the claim ticket, and didn't find it. He started over and searched for it a second time. Still nothing.

"No claim ticket?" The man asked impatiently.

"No, no, hang on, I know I have it!" Thomas flipped through everything a third time and still didn't find it.

"No claim ticket, no clothes! Goodbye!" The man walked off towards the back.

"Wait, can you just—I have to have that suit today!" The man was gone. Thomas sighed. He flipped through all the papers a fourth and fifth time and still couldn't find it. He couldn't believe his luck. Dejected, he left and headed back to the subway, wondering where on Earth he could've left that ticket. About ten minutes later, he arrived to union square and began walking to work.

"Hello Janice," Thomas said to the secretary as he arrived at the fourteenth floor office.

"Good morning, Mr. Gordon," she replied courteously. "Big day today."

"Yeah, unfortunately. Let's hope I survive..."

"I'm sure you'll be fine. Just watch out, Mr. Corbin is in a pretty rotten mood today."

"Thanks," Thomas gulped as he pushed the office door open, "let's hope you're right about things being OK..."

"... that's why I told you to get it done! No! I can't have it tomorrow, I needed it yesterday! Fine. Fine. Well hurry it up!" Marty Corbin hung up the phone in disgust. "Ugh! You can't just find good help these days Thomas. Fortunately, you've never let me down, you've always been there for me!" Thomas flushed, horrified about the prospect of telling Marty about the dry cleaning. "So, Thomas, let's go over the schedule for today shall we?"

"Yes sir," Thomas said nervously. "You have the speech to the board of directors today at three. I've got your note cards right here," Thomas handed them over. Marty took them and began leafing through them. "You also have a meeting today with the president of the company right after the meeting with the board, discussing the figures on this paperwork," Thomas said as he placed the stack of papers on the desk. "I finished them last—"

"Thomas, this speech is all wrong! What IS this speech? It's all wrong,

what happened to the talking points I gave you?”

“What? What do you mean? I used the talking points that Janice gave me yesterday!”

“I don’t know what talking points you’re talking about, because these are certainly not the talking points Janice would’ve given you.”

“I ... I’m sorry sir, but that’s all I have! I didn’t know that—”

“It looks like I was too quick to give praise. This will do, though... I suppose.” Marty sat in silence, flipping through the note cards and grimacing occasionally. Thomas was horrified. He wasn’t sure if he should just wait or proceed. If he did proceed, he didn’t know if he should acknowledge and apologize for the error, or just pretend it didn’t happen and move on.

“I’m sorry sir, it won’t happen again...” Thomas hesitated, waiting for a response, but none seemed forthcoming. “About the meeting with the president at four, I—”

“Did you pick up my dry cleaning?” Thomas was horrified.

“What?” Marty stopped flipping through the cards, put them down on the desk, and folded his hands together.

“Thomas,” he began, “I asked you to drop off my favorite suit at the dry cleaner yesterday. Do you remember that?”

“Yes, I just—”

“Did you drop the suit off two days ago like I asked?”

“Well, I...”

“Did you?!”

“Yes!” Thomas answered. He had never seen Marty like this before.

“So you dropped it off. Did you pick it up this morning?”

“You see, that’s—”

“Just answer the question: yes or no.”

“No,” Thomas said, bracing himself for the verbal missile sure to come his way.

“Why not? You know I always wear that suit when I speak to the board.”

“I know sir, but I—”

“And I DEFINITELY want to be wearing it when I’m having to give a speech like ... like this,” he said, pointing to the note cards. “So why didn’t you pick it up?”

“I tried sir, but ... I lost the claim ticket.”

“You LOST the claim ticket?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sure I just misplaced it somewhere, I can try—” Marty raised his hand and stopped Thomas in his tracks.

“Don’t speak.” Marty sat in silence, head facing downward, massaging

his temples with his index and thumb. Finally he sighed and looked up again. Thomas was sweating bullets.

“I’m sorry, Thomas, but this is unacceptable. I pay you far too much for you to be making major mistakes like this. I know this is your first time, and ordinarily I’d let a mistake—even one as big as this—slide with a warning. However this whole week has been quite revealing. The incompetence shown at nearly every level in this company has made it clear that it’s time for some restructuring.”

Thomas stood there, too shocked to understand what was being implied.

“I’m sorry Thomas,” Marty said, “you’re fired.”

Flabbergasted, Thomas gaped. Finally, his brain told him to start moving, and he slowly turned to gather up his remaining things. Suddenly, his brain felt outraged, and he turned to give his boss a piece of his mind. He swung around to find Marty staring at him piercingly. Thomas sputtered and lost his nerve, spinning back around to leave.

“Marty Corbin’s office, please hold,” Janice was saying as Thomas exited the office. He shut the door and then propped himself up against it, looking rather pathetic. Janice looked over and saw Thomas standing there.

“Thomas! What happened?” He continued leaning on the door, unable to force himself to move. He opened his mouth, tried to talk, failed, swallowed, and tried again.

“I got fired,” he squeaked.

“What?!” Janice shouted. “Oh Thomas,” she said, much quieter this time, “I’m so sorry...”

“He said that I was incompetent, and that it was time to restructure.”

“I ... I don’t know what to say... You’re the best personal assistant he’s ever had! I don’t see how he could say something like that...”

“Well, watch out, you may be next.” Janice seemed shocked by this, and was quite prepared to deny it. It wasn’t long, however, before the cold hard truth of the statement set in, and she fell silent. Thomas finally peeled himself away from the door and began to leave.

“Janice?” Marty said over the intercom.

“Yes Mr. Corbin?”

“Place an ad in the classifieds for a new personal assistant. I want the ad to say that...” Thomas closed the door behind him, walked down the hall to the elevator, and left work for the last time.

2

To say that Thomas felt miserable would be quite the understatement. He did, indeed, feel miserable. However, it went far beyond that. There was a complex network of emotions he was feeling on the ride home: anger, bitterness, and despair, just to name a few. When he arrived back at his apartment, he was finally starting to feel a slight bit of optimism. How fitting it was, then, that Cathy McAllister and Theresa Wellington happened to be in the lobby of the apartment building when Thomas entered.

“Thomas Gordon? Is that YOU?” Cathy shrieked from across the room. Thomas stopped dead in his tracks and exhaled slowly. He really didn’t want to deal with this now, but he could hear his father yelling at him about proper social etiquette. Thomas turned around and walked in their direction. “I knew that it was you! I told you it was him, didn’t I Theresa?”

“Yes, and I was sure you were wrong, so sorry dear,” Theresa responded.

“Don’t worry, we all make mistakes. Thomas darling! How are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m doing OK, I guess,” Thomas said in a thoroughly unconvincing tone.

“That’s lovely,” Theresa said. “You know, my Joey was accepted to Harvard Law—did I tell you this already? I think that maybe I have. Oh well, no matter, he’ll be graduating at the end of this coming semester you know.”

“Really? That’s wonderful, tell him I said hello.”

“Oh I’ll be sure to do so, you can count on that. He’ll be coming to visit over the holidays, but he’ll be awfully busy. I’ll ask and see if perhaps he can take some time out of his schedule to have some coffee with you or something. I know you two used to be such good friends.”

“Yes, it’s such a shame you couldn’t go to Cornell with Joey and my Robert. I mean, it’s understandable given the circumstances, but you three used to be so close! I hardly ever see you going out on the town to have a good time. I can’t help but think that your social life would be much more fulfilling if you would have gone to Cornell with Robert and Joey.”

“Now Cathy, that’s awfully unkind of you,” Theresa said in a rather harsh tone. “I’m sure that Thomas has many friends from whatever ... college ... he went to. Just because you don’t see him coming and going with

friends all the time doesn't mean he doesn't have a social life."

"Well Theresa I'm just saying, I think poor Thomas here really missed out on some great opportunities!"

"Of course he did, but that's not his fault, now is it?"

Thomas stood there, somehow managing to endure the abuse. It was quite impressive, actually. But Thomas had long ago come to terms with the fact that every time he saw these two old birds he would have to put up with their degrading comments. In his estimation, this was probably fifteenth time this year—at a bare minimum—that he had heard this conversation.

"Theresa! I'm surprised at you! You can't possibly imagine that I would be so cold about the death of his parents! It's clearly not his fault, I'm just saying that it's a shame that things happened the way they did."

"Yes, but I think Thomas has managed very well with what he's been given!"

"There's no denying that."

"No, certainly not. He seems to have quite a good job. Isn't that right Thomas?" Thomas hesitated. He should have just said yes and ended the conversation. At the very least, he could've ignored the question or changed the subject. But Thomas made a critical mistake: opening his fat mouth.

"Not anymore."

"What?" Cathy chuckled. "Come now!"

"Nope. I got fired today." Theresa and Cathy's faces dropped, but their eyes sparkled with delight.

"Oh Thomas," Theresa gasped, "how horrible!"

"Absolutely dreadful!" Cathy said. "Whatever are you going to do?"

"I'll be fine. I've saved quite a bit of money over the years, and as you know, the condo is paid off, so I don't have a lot of bills to worry about."

"Well perhaps it's quite a good thing that you haven't had a very active social life. You've been able to save a lot of money that way, and that can tide you over for the time being," Cathy said, smiling.

"I guess so," Theresa said, "and you've lived so conservatively these past few years. Yes, you should be just fine until you find something else."

"Oh I'm quite sure of that," Cathy agreed, "it's quite a shame though really. You're going to be rather limited. The only thing you really have left is your condo."

"This is just all so depressing, let's not talk about this anymore," Theresa said.

"That's OK, I really need to get going anyhow," Thomas lied.

“Aww,” Cathy said. “Well Thomas, if you need anything, you know who to call.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you. I’ll see you two around. Tell Robert I said hello as well Mrs. McAllister.”

“I certainly will, goodbye dear!” Thomas left the two women and went off in search of a wall to bang his head against. The women didn’t seem to mind and continued talking as if nothing of any significance at all had happened. This wasn’t unusual. To them, the preceding conversation was, in fact, of no significance at all.

Thomas burst into his apartment, mentally and emotionally exhausted. He kept running over the day’s events in his mind. It just didn’t seem fair. He had never made a mistake like this before, and was still shell shocked that his first big mistake resulted in his immediate firing. Then, to top it all off, he had to come home to be lectured by Tweedledee and Tweedledum about how deprived he was and how horrible his life would be now that he had lost his job.

“Hmph!” Thomas scoffed audibly. Of course, Thomas knew he was completely fine. He had budgeted and saved wisely over the past few years, so he had quite a large chunk in the bank. On top of that, his parent’s life insurance policy had paid off the condo, leaving him with minimal bills. He wasn’t going to be in any trouble at all. But the insinuation by Cathy and Theresa that he was now going to be limited infuriated him. If anything, the exact opposite was true! Thomas had lived the large majority of his adult life locked in a single pattern. Few, if any, opportunities for change had ever presented themselves to him and those that had, Thomas had rejected to maintain the status quo.

Now, however, the status quo had been broken. Thomas was once again the master of his life. He was free to make whatever choices he wanted to. Countless doors had been opened! A new, better, more rewarding job could be his! He could make some new friends and have a more active social life. Hey, he could even move to a smaller, more manageable place if he wanted!

Thomas mused on this last point. Work had always kept him sufficiently distracted, preventing him from really thinking about what was going on around him. Thomas would notice the craziness in the world, but it would immediately get filed away at the back of his mind while he attended to Marty’s every whim. For the first time in a very long time, Thomas wasn’t worrying about Marty. Gone was the constant mental to-do list. Instead, Thomas could think clearly, and his mind was busy piecing things together. It was building a picture that was, to be frank, not pretty.

As the picture became more and more complete, it also became clear to him that he did not fit in anywhere within the social strata of the city. This wasn't upsetting. It was actually a relief. The lack of a social life had always bothered him on some level, but he was understanding for the first time that it wasn't necessarily his fault. There was simply no place in the city where he belonged.

On top of all of this, Thomas had long had a personal theory that human society could only handle so much pressure. With the pressure from the strife and anxiety in the world increasing exponentially, it was only a matter of time before society's limit was reached. When that time came, Thomas had reasoned, being in the city surrounded by ten million people was probably not the best idea in the world. Now Thomas was free. He could move wherever he wanted!

Thomas began envisioning a quiet life in the country away from the hustle and bustle of big city life. He could see the green, lush grass surrounding his house. Stretched above him, a clear blue sky could be seen without the obstruction of skyscrapers. At night, countless stars were visible, filling the inky void. And best of all, he wouldn't have to worry about getting axe murdered on the walk home!

"Yes!" Thomas exclaimed to no one in particular. "I'm going to do it! I'm going to get out of this city!"

3

Patricia Murphey sat at her desk, sorting paperwork. She paused momentarily, looked over at the half-finished game of solitaire displayed on her computer screen, and sighed softly. Patricia had been a secretary for nearly twenty years—not always at this office of course—but she still fondly remembered the first time she used a computer for her job. It was a beautiful workstation with all the options: word processing, spreadsheets, and, best of all, solitaire. Patricia smiled. She loved working with computers on her job. But being a secretary wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

Patricia looked up to see Thomas reentering the office from Dodge Avenue. She sighed deeply. This was the part of her job that got her down: the people. It wasn't that Patricia hated all people. To the contrary, Patricia did enjoy the company of her workmates and got along very well with her boss. The people who bothered her the most were the clients. This made her work as a secretary rather difficult, but Patricia put on her professional hat when needed, and trudged through the days. Most of the time it wasn't too bad, but Thomas was challenging her much more than the average client. He sat down on the couch and picked up a copy of *National Geographic* from the coffee table.

Patricia shook her head. Thomas was more than two hours early, and she had made it clear to him that morning when he arrived that Ms. Tharpe would not be able to see him until after three that evening. Yet here he was, several hours early. Patricia shook her head again. She could not understand why some people had no concept of time at all. It seemed like a fairly straightforward, important concept. But here was yet another person who had apparently failed to learn. Patricia dismissed the thoughts from her mind. What did she care, so long as he didn't bother her?

Thomas sighed softly and put the magazine down. The cover article hadn't turned out to be very interesting after all. He looked around the office and wondered idly what Ms. Tharpe would be like. He had never dealt with a Realtor before and hoped that she would be trustworthy. He spotted a bulletin board on the opposite side of the office littered with notes, business cards, and fliers. With nothing else to do, he wandered over to take a look. He quickly skimmed over the posted items. Someone lost their dog and was offering a reward. There were going to be childbirth classes down

the street at the community center in a month. A local school was going to be holding classes for American Sign Language starting next week. Thomas paused for a second. Sign language. That might be fun... He then noticed the flier right below that. It simply read this:

“Fed Up?”

Below it were precut strips in the paper, each containing an identical name and phone number. None had been taken. Thomas always felt awkward about taking pull tabs from fliers. He once had a bad experience in which he took a tab from a flier advertising a bike that was for sale. After he called, he was suddenly thrust into the middle of a very strained relationship between the girl who was selling the bike, and her ex-boyfriend who actually owned the bike.

Thomas had vowed to never again take the chance and call a number on one of these fliers, but this flier spoke to him on several deep levels. The simple words “Fed Up?” expressed everything he had been feeling about the world recently. He took out his cell phone, and carefully dialed the number. It rang three times, and finally, there was an answer.

“Hello...”

“Yes, hello! My name is Thom—”

“Thank you for calling!” the recording said. “You have seen our flier and you are clearly, and quite simply, fed up with it all. We share the feeling, and that’s why our group of clear thinking and concerned community members is inviting you, a fellow groaner and sigher, to our next meeting—on December 11th, 2007, at the Old Fort Library Branch, meeting room B, at 2 PM. At the meeting, we will discuss a conclusion we have reached that we believe will finally give resolution to all of the problems you’re having with Earth and the people who live on it. Please, be punctual.”

Thomas looked at his watch: 1:45 PM, December 11th, 2007. If he was going to make it to the Old Fort Library in fifteen minutes, he was going to have to start running the twelve block distance immediately. He looked over at the receptionist, back at his watch, at the receptionist, and at his watch again. 1:46.

“Excuse me, miss?”

Patricia slowly and painfully turned her head away from the game of solitaire in a way that would send a message of her disdain of being disturbed as clearly as possible. When it was finally in position, she slowly

moved her hand to push her horn rimmed glasses up her nose. When she succeeded in doing that, she cleared her throat and said in the driest tone imaginable, “Yes, sir, may I help you?”

“Uh ... Hi ... so sorry to bother you,” he paused as Patricia started to smile, drinking in the success of years of practice. “Well, I was just wondering if Ms. Tharpe will be able to see me soon?”

Patricia looked at him with a profound sense of awe. She had encountered this many times before, but every time she couldn't help but wonder how such scatterbrained, unobservant people could get by in the world without losing their kidneys to fast talking con-artists. She did the only thing she could do in this situation. She reached across the desk and slowly moved a plastic sign that had a clock face and two plastic hands on it towards him. She cleared her throat loudly and went back to playing solitaire. Thomas looked at the sign that he hadn't noticed until that very moment and read it. It said “Will return at:” and had the plastic hands pointing at 2:30. Thomas was profoundly embarrassed.

“Ah... right then, well, thank you, I'm going to take care of some other things, and I'll be back later. Thank ... thank you for your, uh, help.”

Thomas dashed out the door and stole a look at his watch. 1:48. He turned out of the office on the corner of 42nd Street and Dodge Avenue, and began running north, saw the sign for 43rd Street, and quickly turned around and began running south. The Old Fort Library was located on the corner of 30th Street and Dodge, and Thomas didn't have much time. As he raced down the streets, he bumped into countless people, got cursed at by several others, and received at least one death threat. He ran as fast as he could, hesitating at crosswalks and dashing between cars where he could do so safely. He crossed 36th Street and stole a look at his watch. 1:55.

“There's no way I can make it on time!” He thought to himself, but he came this far and couldn't let himself stop now. Thomas was fairly athletic, but the streets were simply too crowded to get through quickly enough. Had the streets been empty, he mused, he would be able to get there in no time. Finally, at long last, he burst through the doors of the Old Fort Library and saw the clock on the wall: 2:00.

“Quick!” He shouted. “Where's meeting room B!”

The librarian looked up at him slowly, raising her head in a way that would express her utter contempt for all things human.

“Ahhh, I don't have time for this!” Thomas looked up and saw a sign that said “Meeting Rooms.” It was accompanied with a rather friendly, helpful arrow pointing in the direction of a hallway straight ahead of him.

He ran off in that direction, down the corridor, and finally located Room B in the middle of the stretch of hall. He panted and looked at his watch. 2:01. He turned the knob slowly and entered the room...

4

“You’re late,” said a strange wobbly looking man standing in the front of the room. He looked about 50, some gray hairs here and there. Thomas recognized his voice from the recording he had listened to. He glanced around the room. Sitting in the corner adjacent to him were two other men and two women. The one man looked to be as old as time, hunkered over in his chair. He was, by all appearances, asleep. The other man looked to be in his mid twenties, and otherwise had no immediately noticeable features. The first, older woman was probably in her late thirties—possibly early forties—and fairly pudgy. She had on a white lab coat, large, coke bottle glasses, and long, ruby red nails. Putting those things together, Thomas reckoned, was not a normal combination by any “standard” definition of fashion. Last, but certainly not least in Thomas’ eyes, was a beautiful young woman. She had long, flowing black hair, a fashionable looking sweater and khakis, beautiful blue eyes you could lose yourself in, and big, pouty lips that Thomas imagined would be very soft and loving...

“Ahem!” The wobbly man cleared his throat, jolting Thomas from his thoughts and back to the present.

“Oh, err, yes?” said Thomas.

“I said you’re late! I can’t stand it when people are late. Didn’t you hear the message? Be punctual! I tell you, you can’t plan on starting anything on time in today’s world. Well go on, sit down!”

Thomas looked around awkwardly for a chair, something that was completely unnecessary given that the group had the entire meeting room and about fifty chairs available to choose from. Thomas started to walk one way, then the other, and finally plopped himself down on a chair that he deemed a safe distance from everyone else. He had this paranoid feeling that he may need to bolt from the room and wanted to be out of arm’s reach of the small, ragtag looking group. He was unsure of why he was so anxious, but it certainly wasn’t the first time he had felt that way. His breathing was still irregular, but Thomas couldn’t be sure if it was from the run or the feelings of paranoia.

“Well Doug, it’s 2:05. Check your...computer thing and see how many people called in.”

The young looking man produced a notebook computer from a back-

pack and set it in his lap. Thomas now noted that Doug was wearing blue jeans and a baggy, ill-fitting sweatshirt that appeared to be at least three to four sizes too big. A few keystrokes later Doug announced his findings. “Server says only two people called, one yesterday and one today, about twenty minutes ago.”

“Well twenty minutes ago must’ve been this fellow here given the way he stood there panting. He probably ran here from somewhere. That or he was just completely captivated by Vera...” The wobbly man cracked a smile.

Thomas flushed, and glanced over at the girl, who was equally, if not more, red. “Realtor’s office on 42nd and Dodge...” He muttered.

“That is quite a ways. Well Doug, I don’t think anyone else will be coming now if they’re this late, so whoever called yesterday is a lost cause. Let’s get started.” He glanced at Thomas. “What’s your name?”

“Thomas.”

“Have a last name?”

“Gordon. Why?”

“Just curious is all. My name is Frank, that’s Doug with the laptop, Ervin next to him asleep ... again ...” Frank looked slightly worried about this fact for a short time. He finally shook his head and proceeded. “That’s Flo there, and I believe you already noticed Vera.”

Thomas flushed again, getting slightly angry with this Frank character. “Do you all have last names?” He said sarcastically.

“Of course we do!” Frank said, staring at Thomas as if there was a loud parrot perched on Thomas’ shoulder that had hurled an insult at his mother. “What kind of question is that?”

Frank obviously wasn’t getting it. Thomas sighed and decided not to fight it, no matter how obvious the question was in his mind. There was a period of awkward silence. Thomas fought the urge to leave. Finally, he got the courage to ask the question that was running through his mind.

“So, what are we doing here?”

“Ah,” said Frank, pausing for a period of time longer than what Thomas deemed necessary. He seemed lost in thought. “Oh. Right then, well, you see, we’re all members of this little group of people—coalition if you will—that are simply sick and tired of the world as we know it. We see the way things are heading and we’ve basically come to the conclusion that humanity is in a rough spot right now and things are only going to go downhill from here. After all, things must get worse before they can get better.” He chuckled to himself. Thomas attempted to grasp why that statement was so funny, and failed. “Well, anyhow,” Frank continued, “we’ve come

up with an idea that we think can help solve this frustration—for some of us at least. You see, for years now, Ervin, myself, and Flo have been working on something that you might at first think of as impossible: cryogenics.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow.

Frank paused, looking for a more averse reaction. Upon not finding one, he continued. “You know ... human cryopreservation?”

Thomas allowed his eyebrows to trade elevations.

“Well the research has been going on for years now. Scientists in San Diego have been working for over two decades, freezing cell matter from different species of rare animals for their ‘frozen zoo.’ They have one at the University of New Orleans as well. All very fascinating, but there’s not been much work done on the process of preserving a full living body. At least not so far as anybody in the public knew. Can you imagine the backlash certain groups would have created?”

Thomas gaped. “Wait ...” he started. He stopped. “But... that’s just science fiction and urban legend! You can’t seriously expect me to believe that you can freeze a human and then just thaw them out later, good as new. That’s impossible!”

This was the argument Frank was waiting for. “Ah, but nothing is impossible if you put your mind to it! That’s precisely what we’ve been doing now for many, many years—Ervin, Flo and I—working on preserving a full human body for—in theory you see—an indefinite period of time!”

“So you’re looking for guinea pigs?”

“What? No, we already have those, they’re frozen down at the lab now.”

“You have frozen guinea pigs already?”

“Well, yes, along with several other animals. We’ve had great success!”

“OK, but what I meant was that now you want human test subjects...”

“We have some of those now too, yes.”

Thomas prepared to bolt from the room...

“They’ve already signed up and are due down to the lab in a week.”

Thomas relaxed again.

“Well ... so how does this apply to the fact of being fed up with life? I mean you can’t solve Earth’s problems by freezing people!”

“Obviously not!” Frank scoffed. “No, no, we don’t want to freeze everyone, just a select few who wish to volunteer to get away from it all, to essentially go to sleep and then wake up in a brave new world—no pun intended of course and all the love in the world for Huxley—but don’t you see? If you’re fed up enough with the world now to even come here then you’re leagues ahead of everyone else out there! Most people are so content

to go about their sad, pathetic excuses for lives that they don't even notice how chaotic everything is around them! But you! You know what's going on, you understand what's happening, you want to see change. Maybe before you only envisioned changing yourself or your comfort zone, but what if the whole world were to change, and for the better? Wouldn't that be spectacular?!"

Thomas thought about this. Fleeing the city was, at best, only temporary, and it probably wouldn't be without its own problems. The future... That could be completely different, and it would have to be better than the present, it would have to be! He grinned, and then quickly grimaced.

"Getting frozen?" he thought to himself. It didn't sound at all pleasant, or safe.

"I don't know, the whole freezing thing just sounds so ... strange, so dangerous." He said.

Frank looked baffled for a split second, failing to comprehend the danger of his life's work. He then remembered that he was dealing with a naïve outsider, and he had to be more understanding.

"Well, Tom, I'll tell you what: here's my card. That's my number there at the bottom. You go home and think about it. If you're at all interested, in any way, shape, or form, give me a call, and we can arrange for you to come see the lab for yourself."

Thomas took the card, handling it as if it may spontaneously combust for no apparent reason at all.

"Thanks," he said, "I'll definitely be doing a lot of thinking about this, you can be sure of that."

He stood up to leave and turned one way, then the other. Finally, just as awkwardly as he had picked a seat, he made his way to the door and left. As the door clicked shut, Ervin sat up suddenly.

"What? Meeting start yet?"

5

Thomas left the library and walked in the direction of the realtor's office, his mind swimming in a pool of a million thoughts. The future! In his mind he always envisioned time travel as taking place in a shiny looking car. The car would dash off and obtain a mystical speed of eighty-eight miles per hour before leaping through the space-time continuum and arriving at the predetermined time period. Something like that he would readily take advantage of, just for the chance to drive a car with doors that opened the wrong way. But traveling in the future, frozen in a tube? It seemed completely impossible. More implausible, even, than the aforementioned car.

It seemed like too much work to even think about doing something so crazy. He decided to just file it away in the back of his mind and ignore it for the time being. As he walked back through the doors of the realtor's office, the secretary glanced up furtively. She watched him as he sat down in a chair and stared vacantly into the air around him. Patricia wondered if she should even bother, but decided that it could be fun. She searched her memory to find the best tone of voice to use for this situation to express her utter and complete contempt for him.

"Excuse me, sir," she exhaled. "I hate to interrupt your deep, important thoughts, but according to the plastic clock hands, Ms. Tharpe is done with her lunch, and has been for some time. The clock also informs me that you are late and that it would be in your best interests to go back and see her now before her next appointment in ten minutes."

"Oh, er, yes. Thank you. Very much." Thomas flushed and walked back towards the office. He made a mental note to never attempt to befriend a secretary, lest his self-worth be completely shattered. He found a door labeled "Caroline Tharpe, Realtor" and knocked timidly.

"Come in!" A voice from inside said. Thomas entered. "Sit, sit, we're already behind and we've got so much to discuss! Hello! How are you? I trust you're well and ready to sell otherwise you wouldn't be here!" She laughed at her rhyme, briefly thought about pointing it out to showcase her brilliance, thought better of it and smiled brightly instead. She appeared to be in her early forties, wore bright red lipstick, at least three strands of pearls, large hoop earrings, and the most horrible wig Thomas had ever seen in his life. It took great effort for Thomas to not stare blankly into the wig's

deeply entangled fray of orange curls.

“So tell me what you have for me, I know you’re a walk-in, but I hope you brought me some pictures!”

“Ah, yes, here they are.” He produced an envelope from his pocket. It was badly mangled from the run. “Sorry,” he said sheepishly as he handed it to her.

Caroline sighed and reached for the envelope. It was all she needed to have another one of these types of people. But a customer was a customer, a sale was a sale, and money, was glorious, green, shiny money. She fiddled with the envelope, intentionally giving the appearance of struggling with it to make a point, and finally opened it to pull out the photographs.

“My my my...” she said as she flipped through them, laboriously straightening each one out as she went. “It’s even more beautiful than I would’ve imagined! Thomas, even in today’s relatively poor real estate market, I can tell you now that you aren’t going to have a single problem selling this place. Now, not that I wish to discourage you of course,” she laughed and reached for his arm, firmly grasping it and suddenly changing her tone, “but may I ask why you’re selling such a wonderful place?” Thomas didn’t appreciate the physical contact at all, but chose to ignore it for the time being.

“Honestly, I’m sick of the big city life, I just want to get out of here and move to an area where it’s wide and open, where you don’t have a couple thousand neighbors within a few blocks, and where I can enjoy nature.” He moved his arm back towards him. Caroline’s grip didn’t budge.

“I see, I see,” she said quickly, “and where, may I ask, do you intend on moving to to obtain such a thing?”

“Well, I’m not entirely sure... I know land is cheap out west in some places. I’m sure you can find cheap land in the country near here too. I was thinking of taking the money I get from the condo, combining it with my savings, and buying a nice, small house with a large plot of land.” Caroline’s face dropped. All sweetness was suddenly absent in her voice and mannerisms.

“Honey, I’m going to be completely honest with you. I don’t have time to be taken on a wild goose chase with someone who’s going to list their place and then suddenly back out on me. Time is money and I’m not going to let you waste my money! Now before you even think of listing, I strongly suggest you do some research into where you want to live and find a potential new home there—with the help of a fellow realtor of course. Once you’ve done that, compare the new house and environment, espe-

cially the neighbors, with what you have here. After you've seriously evaluated things, come back to me. I'm not going to help you out unless you've done some more research, especially since this is such a ... drastic decision."

Suddenly there was a rap on the door and Caroline's demeanor changed back to what it was before. "And that'll be my four 'o' clock!" She walked to the door and opened it. "You have my number Mr. Gordon, you think things over now and give me a call. Hello hello, how are you?" She said to her next customers, ushering them into the room while simultaneously ushering Thomas out. Thomas stood in the hallway, his mind lost and refusing to be found. He left the office and headed home, unable to think of anything but his bed, and how much he desired to slide into it.

6

Thomas awoke that morning to the sound of traffic, just like every other morning. He lay there for a time, attempting to figure out what he did the night before. He couldn't remember anything except walking into his house, entering the bedroom, and collapsing onto his bed. It all seemed very anticlimactic after the previous day's events. His mind leapt momentarily, then settled back down. The mere thought of the previous day still seemed to instill angst, but after getting up, stumbling to the kitchen, and having a fresh cup of coffee he felt more prepared to tackle the matter.

Despite all of his excitement over the prospect of time travel, he couldn't seem to focus on the strange encounter at the library. All he could think about was that detestable Caroline Tharpe and her sudden, rash personality change that was accompanied with an iron grip. However, part of him couldn't help but feel that she was right. Perhaps more research, maybe even a trip to the country was in order after all. He dug around in his pockets and pulled out a card that simply said "Frank" and a number. Thomas pondered. He came to the conclusion that this whole affair must be some elaborate scam. He paused and thought again, then came to the conclusion that it couldn't possibly be a scam: not once was an exchange of money mentioned. Perhaps instead it was part of some larger sociological or psychological experiment these people were running. Perhaps they wanted to see just how long a person will believe something seemingly outlandish—masked with the guise of science—will actually solve their problems.

Either way, even if it was a scam—Thomas was now relatively convinced that it was in some way—it certainly wouldn't be any harm to him so long as he didn't pay into anything. He decided to take the leap and call the number: he had absolutely nothing to lose. A few rings later and Frank answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Yes, Frank? This is Thomas."

"Oh good, glad you decided to call Tom. I suppose you want to come down and see the lab now, eh?"

"Actually, yes, that's exactly what I'd like to do. When can I come down? For that matter, where would I be coming to?"

"Well that's easy, just head on down to 625 East 68th Street. Can you

come right now? We're about to start a test on a lab rat, but we can wait till you get here if you'd like."

"Oh. Sure, as long as that lab rat isn't me!" Thomas laughed. Frank didn't. "OK ... so yeah, I'll be right down."

"OK, see you in a bit."

Thomas hung up the phone and walked out of his condo, turned right, and went up the street to the subway station. This was one of the rituals of day-to-day life he found fascinating. Masses of humanity would pile down stairs, swipe cards and go through gates (or, alternatively, go through gates without swiping cards). After that, they would pile down more stairs and stand on hot, crowded platforms to wait for one of the elusive trains to arrive. Once it did, everyone would push and shove in an attempt to gain the privilege of sitting down on one of the benches contained within. Everyone who wasn't close enough to get a seat would pile in and pick an armpit to stand next to for duration of their ride. This particular day, Thomas was fortunate enough to get next to someone who ranked as a "mild" on his mental stink-o-meter.

After a few stops, Thomas finally arrived on 68th Street and began walking towards his destination. It was quite a long walk, but something he was used to, having never owned a car. He knew how to drive, but living in a city with a fantastic public transportation system had spoiled him. As far as he was concerned, there was no point in owning a car if there was no one outside of the city you ever go to visit. Finally, he arrived at his destination. It was an inconspicuous looking building, nothing out of the ordinary about it at all. Thomas approached the door and peeked in the window. The door seemed to simply lead to a foyer that was the gateway to the rest of the building. He imagined living quarters, an office or two, and the actual lab—if there really was one—all connected through this main entryway. Painted on the glass were the words "Cryotech, Inc." in a dark blue color. He rang the bell and waited, turning around to view the other buildings on the street, all of which looked just as innocent as this one. Thomas began to wonder who it was that had built all of these buildings, but his musing was interrupted by the arrival of someone in the foyer coming towards the door. He turned back around, expecting to see Frank or someone else he had met yesterday, but was instead greeted by someone new.

"Hey, you actually came," Doug said.

"Oh, errr," Thomas muttered. This was definitely the same Doug, but he looked completely different than the person from the day before. Doug

motioned him to step in, and he did so, then stood back as Doug secured the door again. It was the same person all right, but Thomas realized that he had never seen Doug standing the day before, only sitting in a slouched position. Now Doug was wearing completely different clothes. The bulky looking sweatshirt from the day before was gone. Instead, he now sported a standard looking t-shirt and shorts. As Doug stood in front of him, he seemed at least four or five inches taller than Thomas, and appeared very athletic. Doug finished fiddling with the door and turned around.

“Something wrong? You didn’t seem like you knew who I was.” Doug smirked.

“Oh, well, nothing, it’s just that I never saw you standing yesterday so I didn’t realize how tall and, well, big you were, that’s all. I mean what with talking about all that computer stuff you didn’t seem to be the type of person who worked out or anything.”

Doug laughed. “Well, let’s just say I got tired of being the neighborhood punching bag, but never got tired of being a geek. Come on, Frank and the rest are waiting.”

They walked through a door on the right side of the foyer and down into the basement. Thomas marveled as they entered a wide, open room. It was much bigger than one would ever imagine the building containing simply from seeing it from the outside. The floors were covered with checkered tile, and the walls were painted a nice, clean white. The whole environment seemed exactly like the stereotypical lab seen in most Hollywood B-movies, except that the contents of the lab actually seemed organized, sterile, and there were no dead animals in jars on the shelves. Computers and other scientific looking instruments were scattered throughout the room: some mounted on walls, some on tables, others were free standing. Frank poked his head around the back of a row of strange looking machines and beckoned them to come over. Doug walked that direction and joined Flo and Ervin. Ervin was, once again, asleep. Before Thomas could get to the group, however, he caught sight of the machines that Frank was working on and stopped dead in his tracks. He stared in awe at three large, cylindrical tubes about three feet wide and seven feet tall.

“Wow...” he gasped.

“Heh,” chuckled Frank, “yeah, those are the freezing tubes. Right now one of them is occupied by a guinea pig—and has been for about a week—and the other two are free, though we’re about to put Bob the rat into one of them now.”

Thomas was not very inclined to understand all of this. Sure, he could

use a computer, knew how to email, surf the web, download music, all the things typical of his generation. He was certainly not computer illiterate, nor was he completely science illiterate, but the things he saw went straight over his head. First Frank injected something into Bob, hooked up some wires and tubes (“For monitoring and supporting bodily systems you see!”), and finally stuck the little guy onto a platform inside the tube.

“When we have humans in here, we won’t need any platforms or chairs or anything aside from a few restraints, they’ll just stand and freeze in place.” Frank closed the door, punched a few buttons and turned a few knobs off to the side of the tube, and finally turned around to face them. “Ready?” he grinned like a kid who knew a present was coming. “Here we go!” He pulled a lever and Thomas watched as the rat, who was sniffing at the air in his strange new environment, became still and frozen in the blink of an eye.

“Heehee!” blurted Frank, nearly giddy. “Do you see now?”

“I see,” said Thomas, “but how do I know the rat will come back to life, perfectly normal and healthy?”

“Well that’s what Kiki is here to show you.” Frank gestured towards the guinea pig. “We’ll revive her now.”

Thomas glanced back at Doug, Flo, and Ervin, all of whom were simply smiling, seeming to enjoy watching Frank get a kick out of his work. Even Ervin seemed to have a smirk on his face, though Thomas couldn’t be sure whether he was still sleeping or not as his head was still angled downward. He turned back towards Frank who was punching more buttons.

“This,” he explained, “takes a bit longer, as we have to restart the body’s systems, perfectly safe if you’re healthy of course.” Time was definitely passing at a normal speed, and though aware of this fact, things seemed to be moving extremely fast for Thomas. Frank was explaining what he was doing, but it all went in one ear and out the other as Thomas stared at Kiki with deep anticipation, waiting for her to suddenly resume life.

“Here we are!” Frank said. “Time to start up the body’s systems again and she should be good to go!” He pushed a button and Kiki—who had during the process of thawing become limp appearing—suddenly straightened up and began smelling the air around her much like Bob had moments before. Thomas gaped. Frank laughed, opened the door, picked up little Kiki, and began petting her.

“See? Perfectly fine!” Thomas boggled more, started to ask for a detailed explanation of the workings and mechanisms of the machine, but decided against it. Instead, he decided to take a safer, easier to understand path.

“That’s incredible...” he said. “I don’t know how you did it, but I don’t think I want to know. But, well, I do want to know when you’re going to test it on humans. I’d like to be here for that. Who are you testing it on anyhow?”

Frank smirked. “You know how there are beauty product companies that do testing of their new products on people? These people are given a very small sum of money for testing a product they could react very negatively to, but they’re willing to do it simply for the token amount of money and the small amount of adrenaline they get from trying something new and exciting. We basically offer the same thing: something new and exciting for the test subjects to try. We had to offer a substantially larger sum of money though, but the people were more than happy to sign the required waivers and agreements. They’ll be here next week on Wednesday morning at 10 AM sharp. We’ll freeze them for a week, and then, if all goes according to plan, we’ll be sending you off on your fantastic voyage shortly thereafter! Provided you’re still interested of course...”

Thomas was caught off guard by the question and shifted his weight a few times. He glanced back at the others, but they, even Ervin, who seemed to awaken for the occasion, were simply watching him, waiting to see what he’d say.

“Well, honestly, I’m not sure yet. I’m really impressed by what I’ve seen, but I still have some concerns, and I’m in the middle of selling my condo. Well,” Thomas hesitated, remembering that horrible Caroline, “I’m trying to anyhow. Would it be OK if I got some things settled before I let you know for sure?”

Frank was silent for a while. “That should be fine I think, yes, you can let me know when you come to see the human test subjects going in next week, but no later than that. We’ll have to find someone else if you don’t want to do it you see.”

Thomas said he understood, thanked them, and walked back to the front of the lab with Doug trailing behind. They went back up the same stairs and arrived in the foyer. Thomas and Doug exchanged formalities and Thomas was back out in the world. His mind was still boggling, unsure of how such a thing would work, but he shoved the thought aside and focused on the unfinished business now at hand.

7

Thomas arrived back at his condo feeling energized. What he had seen could have just been a cheap parlor trick, but he was now convinced that it was a possibility. With option number one clearly defined, it was time to take the advice of that wretched Caroline Tharpe and do some research on some additional options: new homes. Thomas walked into his father's old study and looked at the large map of the United States pinned to the wall. He placed his finger on the west coast near the California-Oregon border and ran his finger slowly eastward, looking for a rural area that he could possibly move to. Fortunately, the route his finger was running was abounding with rural locations, but without a frame of reference, Thomas was overwhelmed with possibilities.

"Hey," he said suddenly as his finger reached Wyoming. "Highway 80... I know that road, it runs through New Jersey. I didn't know it went that far out west though." Thomas thought for a while and decided that Wyoming would be a good place to start. It was nearly entirely rural, after all. He walked over to the desk, booted up the computer, and hopped on the internet. After a quick search, he found himself reading a local news website for a town in Wyoming.

Thomas scanned the headlines and found that it didn't seem all that different from the news of the city. Most of the same old problems, but with a country twist. Man charged after soliciting sex from minors near lake, Five dead in small plane crash outside of Cheyenne, Cattle mutilators strike again near Laramie, Man shot dead in Casper, it just went on and on. Thomas sighed. Perhaps he wasn't meant for the country. Or maybe it was just Wyoming. Thomas went back to the map and started to search for a new location, found one, and once again looked for local news from that area online. Sadly, it was much the same as the news Thomas had found from Wyoming.

Thomas sighed and reclined his head back against the chair, eyes closed, trying to figure out what the problem was. He had honestly expected there to be far less problems out in the country, but from the looks of it, he was very, very wrong. Everything that went wrong in the city went wrong in the country too. Thomas sat up again. Maybe there was some middle ground. What about the suburbs? He quickly began looking up information about

different suburbs. Of course, once again, the same problems came to light. Even worse, he realized that a lot of the suburbs in the area would be in New Jersey, a place not even remotely livable.

And so it went. Over the next few days, Thomas spent countless hours researching. The time he didn't spend online was spent at the library reading books. When it was all said and done, Thomas had read five books about alternatives to city living, had researched countless possible destinations, called several realtors across the country, and had stumbled across a rather entertaining website that advocated fleeing the big cities and using tinfoil caps to prevent the government from controlling your mind. As Thomas sat at a table at the library reading yet another book, he finally came to the realization that it was no use. No matter where you lived, the same problems abounded. He stood up and slowly, dejectedly, walked over to the shelf and replaced the book. As he went to leave he looked up and saw the sign that directed visitors to the meeting rooms. It seemed as if Thomas had come full circle.

"If the people of today are all the same no matter where you go, what about the people of tomorrow?" Thomas thought to himself. "Perhaps I shouldn't be looking into where to go, but when... It is time," Thomas resolved, "to call Frank."

He left the library and made his way back home, trying to remember where he had put Frank's business card. Once he arrived, he went straight back to his dad's office and began digging through the papers on the desk. Not there. He searched through a stack of envelopes on the kitchen table, but it wasn't there either. He thought for a minute, and then went to his bedroom closet and dug through the clothing hanging within.

"Ah ha!" he said out loud to himself as he felt a paper inside a pocket on a suit jacket. He pulled it out and found that it was not, in fact, the business card, but the missing claim ticket for Marty Corbin's dry cleaning. Thomas flushed, angry with himself. But the rage quickly subsided as he turned and spotted a piece of paper on the nightstand next to his bed. He walked over and identified it as the missing business card. He grabbed it, handling it delicately, and made his way to the phone in the kitchen. He picked it up and dialed Frank's number, slowly and methodically pushing each button to ensure there was no mistake. Given the time, he anticipated another conversation with a machine, but someone surprised him by answering. He recognized Doug's voice.

"Hello?"

"Oh, hey Doug... Thomas here... Just wanted to let you know I'll be

there tomorrow for the trial run of the experiment. Sorry to call so late...”

“It’s not that late,” Doug interjected, “only nine ‘o’ clock. We’re usually here for at least another couple of hours.”

“Oh. OK,” Thomas said, still hearing etiquette nag him about proper telephone manners. “Anyhow, Frank said he wanted me to let him know when I decided if I wanted in or not, and I have an answer for him.” He paused.

“Yeah?” inquired Doug.

“I’ll do it.” Thomas said triumphantly.

“Great! Well, we’ll see you here tomorrow morning at 10 AM, alright?”

“Yup, sounds good! See you then.”

Thomas hung up, set his alarm, and dived into bed, pleasant dreams taking the place of endless nightmares for the first time in several weeks.

8

The next morning, at precisely 9:45 AM, Thomas found himself back on the stoop of Cryotech, Inc. After Frank's last rant at the library, Thomas made sure he would be fashionably early rather than fashionably late. Doug let him in once again, making Thomas wonder if he was also the guard as well as the techie. They entered the basement and joined the others who stood by and watched while Frank lectured one of the test subjects who had already arrived.

"No, I told you already, you don't have to take your clothes off to enter the chamber, they can stay on, there will be no harm done to you or the clothes."

"Are you sure? I don't want to put myself at risk and mess my body up..."

"Yes, as one of the inventors of this machine, I'm positive that it'll be OK and we really don't need you to get naked to get into the chamber."

"Well ... if you say so... but if I—" The complainer was cut off by the arrival of another subject led in by Doug. Frank hurriedly ran to greet them, happy to abandon the first needy and annoying subject. Moments later, subject number three arrived and Frank was overjoyed to finally be able to begin. After arranging the subjects in a nice, straight row, he looked them over. There were two men and one woman: all were poster children for the word 'average'. There was nothing extraordinary about any of them.

"Thank you very much for coming and, most importantly, being on time!" Frank beamed. Thomas, Vera, Doug, Ervin, and Flo stood looking on behind him. "I'm so glad you all could make it. Now you all know the basic premise of what we'll be doing here, but I'm going to tell you what to expect. First off, you do not," he said, looking at the first subject who had complained earlier, "need to take your clothing off. You can leave it on when you enter the chamber and no harm will be done to your person or the clothing itself. Simply enter and stand there at attention, as if you were in the armed forces. The freezing process is quick—quick enough that you won't be aware of it as it's happening anyhow. During the time you are frozen, you won't be conscious of anything at all, so you won't remember the time that's passed by. Basically, it'll be like falling asleep and waking up the next day; you have no idea what happened during the night—except in

this case it'll be for a full week. When you're being revived, you shouldn't be conscious of that happening either, it'll be just like waking up. That's all there is to it. You've all signed the waivers so you're all set and ready to go! Shall we proceed?"

The subjects nodded and Frank gave each of them an injection of the chemical compound that remained a mystery to Thomas. Frank then motioned them into the chambers. They entered, looked around almost simultaneously, seemingly awestruck by the design of the chamber they were now standing in. Flo walked over and attached the various wires and tubes, and Frank followed behind, doing the final inspection of each subject and sealing the doors. Frank walked over to the controls, and, after some fiddling, the first person suddenly stopped looking around and froze in place. A monitor above the first chamber flickered on and displayed numbers, figures, and charts that were very nice looking, but meaningless to Thomas. Shortly thereafter, the second and third subjects were also frozen.

Thomas looked on at the scene in front of him. It was very eerie to see the three people inside these strange looking chambers remaining absolutely motionless. However, the charts and information displayed on the monitors at least gave Thomas some encouragement that things were still OK, even though he wasn't exactly sure what they meant. Frank stood there for a while, simply watching. He finally seemed satisfied and walked back to the group that had been observing all this time.

"That's that," he said. "Flo and I are going to stay here and watch the monitors. One of us will be here at all times to look for anything out of the ordinary. Why don't you kids go out and enjoy yourselves, get to know each other! After all, you're going to have to rely on each other once you arrive in the future, so you'd better become dependable friends fast." He smiled and walked away, his mind preoccupied with myriads of thoughts.

"Wait, it's Doug, Vera and I going to the future?" Thomas asked.

"Well someone who knows how to monitor these machines has to stay behind sweetie." Flo said in that sickeningly sweet tone. "Plus, Frank, Ervin and I—Ervin especially—are just too old to be going on an adventure like this. Who knows what the future will be like? You three are young and adaptable and will be able to handle whatever is thrown at you. Don't worry about us. It's important that you three take the big leap. Now go on, get out of here. Go to a restaurant or a bar or something, and get to know each other better!" Flo walked over to Frank and looked over some printouts with him.

"Well," said Doug, turning to Thomas and Vera, "there's a great hot

dog place over on the corner of 6th and 8th if that sounds good.”

Vera lit up. “Wait, how about Italian instead? There’s an awesome place I know down on Mulberry Street!” They all agreed and ventured out of the lab to get some much needed sustenance. After ordering, they began to engage themselves in the strange social activities connected with getting to know someone you’ve only recently met.

“So,” Doug started, “I know a little bit more about Vera’s background, but don’t have a clue about you, Thomas. Did you grow up here in the city or what?”

“I was born in Indiana, actually, but we moved here when I was just a baby, so I don’t remember anything prior to the city. I’m an only child, so no siblings. My parents were only children too, so no aunts or uncles or anything. It was just mom, dad, and me. I’ve never met any of my grandparents... I assume they’re all still living in Indiana—if they’re still alive anyhow.”

“Are your parents still here in the city then?” Vera asked. Thomas hesitated.

“They’re both gone now ... they died in a car accident about three days after I graduated from high school.”

“I’m ... I’m sorry, I didn’t know.” Vera stammered.

“No, no, don’t be sorry you asked, you’d have to find out eventually. At the time I was pretty shocked, but, well, they looked out for me, even in their death. They both had life insurance policies, and the money was enough to completely pay off the remainder we owed on the condo along with a few other bills, so I didn’t have to worry about a mortgage at least. From that point I just worked my way through college.” Thomas took a sip from his soda. Vera still looked anxious. “Don’t worry about it at all, it’s no biggie. When we do get frozen,” he paused, double checking to make sure what he was about to say was accurate. “I basically won’t be missed or looked for; otherwise I probably wouldn’t be doing it. I assume you both have a similar situation. What I’m curious about is what Frank, Flo, and Ervin get out of all of this. We go to the future and they stay here and monitor things. Don’t get me wrong, that’s great, I’d love to not die while we’re frozen, but it seems like they’re not putting much into this otherwise.”

“THAT’S NOT TRUE!” Vera shouted, causing half the restaurant to turn and stare. She turned red and waited for most of the onlookers to get back to what they were doing before continuing. “You don’t even really KNOW anything about Frank or what he does, do you? Well let me tell you...”

9

Vera woke up, sat up in her bed, and listened. Silence. Wait, no, there was something. It was very faint though... She hopped out of bed and wandered out to the living room, and there was her dad on the computer again, checking his stocks.

“Awww dad, how long have you been up?” Vera whined.

“What? Oh, not too long, no, just watching to see what’s going to happen with this company’s earnings. I’m selling short, hoping to make a nice profit off of it.” Vera just stared blankly. “Well, you see...” Frank said, trying to think of how to explain it. Vera looked bored already. “Ah never mind, it’s complicated and I can tell you really aren’t interested.”

“No, I’m interested in what you do,” Vera protested, “I just never understand it, so I don’t want you to waste your time with a long explanation. So what’re you going to be doing today?”

“Well, assuming this money comes in, we need to take it and buy some more equipment for the lab, and then I’ve gotta work more on the formula for the—”

“Dad! All you ever do is work on that project of yours! You never take any time for yourself! You can’t keep going like this, it’s going to kill you eventually! If mom were here, she’d set you straight...”

“Look, dear, I know you miss your mother... I do too ... but the lab is important to me. I just can’t bear the loneliness. I need to keep busy. The lab—and you—are the only things I have left...” Vera sighed. This was the umpteenth time they had been over this and it was always the same.

“I know, I know, just take care of yourself, OK?” Frank was silent. And so it went, day after day, Frank would pursue his stocks and then head to the lab, investing his time and money diligently. Then one day, Vera arrived home after a long and miserable day of work. One thing was clear in her mind after that day: the customer is most certainly NOT always right. She took off her shoes in the hallway and started walking towards the living room, taking fleeting glances at some of the family photos lining the walls. She could hear Frank talking excitedly to someone as she entered the room.

“Oh!” She said, surprised to see Flo and Ervin sitting on the couch along with some other man she hadn’t seen before. “Sorry dad, I didn’t know you had company. Who’s this?” She said, looking the man over, not-

ing that he was probably around her age and definitely not the type of person her father would normally be hanging out with.

“Ah, this is—what is your name again—oh right, yes, I remember now, this is Doug! He knows Flo and has been helping us out some with things down at the lab.”

“OK, well nice to meet you Doug.” She shook his hand. “So what’s going on? You seem pretty excited about something.”

“Vera, dear! It’s done! We’ve done it!” Vera gaped.

“Wait, what? How can it be done? I thought you still had quite a ways to go?”

“Well we had a few breakthroughs! We just finished testing it out on a lab mouse a little bit ago and it worked splendidly!” Vera then noted the bottle of champagne that was sitting on the coffee table, perched precariously among stacks of books and magazines. Everyone in the room had an empty glass, except Ervin, who seemed to have fallen asleep before he had a chance to drink it. “Oh, yes, let me get you a glass!” Frank ran to the kitchen, fetched a glass, and poured some of the bubbly beverage for her. “Here we are.” Vera grabbed the glass extended to her and took a sip.

“So where do you go from here? What are your plans? Are you going to take this public and try to get some government funding for more research and development or something?”

Frank appeared thoughtful, a distant gleam in his eye. “Well, no, actually, we want to go the opposite direction. You know how I feel already about the political system we have in place and how everything has been continuously going downhill. We plan on doing something about that, at least for some people, so that quality of life can definitely be improved.” Vera didn’t understand.

“I don’t get it. How does that apply to cryogenics?”

“Well, you see, as I’ve always said, things have to get worse before they get better, but things show no indication of getting any better anytime soon. Going public and getting government funding is definitely not the way to go. They have too many questions and are likely to pull the plug on the project and remove the funding just as quickly as we attain it. We all know that they’re not focused on funding science right now anyhow.” The others nodded in affirmation.

“So, how are you going to make things better with this cryogenics stuff? Freeze all the rotten politicians?” Vera chuckled.

“Oh no, not at all, instead we’ll freeze some people so that they can effectively travel to the future when things will be much better!”

“You’re going to freeze yourself?”

Frank stood up. “Vera, dear, I would love to live in a world where people aren’t total idiots... But it would be wasted on me. I want you to go...”

“What? No! This is your project! This is your dream! You have to go!”

“Absolutely not. It was my dream. Had we completed this ten years ago, I would probably take part. I’m simply too old now; it’s too late for me. Such a journey would be better for someone who is younger and in better health... Yes, my new dream is for my daughter to be able to live in a world where people aren’t total idiots.” Frank beamed.

“But what will you do?”

“I’ll stay behind of course. I’ll continue investing money and turning a profit so that we can keep the lab running, and I’ll take the helm of the controls. I’ll have to train others to help me of course. We have three chambers we’ve built that we’ll need to monitor.”

“Well if you’re too old to go, Ervin is definitely too old to go. So you’re going to send me, Flo, and...” Vera tried to remember Doug’s name but was too flustered to do so. “This guy?”

“Not quite. Flo is going to stay behind to help me with the machines as well.”

“So you’re just sending me and him?!”

“No, of course not!”

“Then who?”

“Well we have an idea for that. We’re planning on trying to get someone from the outside interested. A fresh face if you will, someone who has no familiarity with any of this but who deeply desires to get away from the madness.”

“Oh? And how will you find this person?”

“Well we’re going to schedule a meeting at one of the local libraries and post fliers. Doug here is going to take care of that.”

Vera sat and thought for a while. “I don’t know dad. I don’t like this very much. What will you do without me when I’m gone?”

“Oh dear, please don’t worry about me. I’ll survive. The main thing is that you get to experience a new, better life. Before your mother died, she made me promise to give you the best life possible. As far as I’m concerned, this is how I’m going to fulfill that promise.”

They hugged.

10

Thomas poked at his lasagna. “Well, my turn to be sorry I guess.”

“That’s OK, you didn’t know either. I’ve just seen how much my dad’s invested into this project and I want to be sure you know what he’s done for us.”

“I understand. Now who is this Ervin guy? He doesn’t ever seem to do anything. I think every time I’ve seen him, he’s been asleep, except for maybe once or twice.”

“He’s my grandfather, actually—an absolute genius in math. You can present him with basically any problem and he’ll figure it out. Of course, half the time he does sleep, what with being old and all. But many times I’ve asked him a question, he falls asleep, but then wakes up hours later and bursts out the answer. So any time Frank or Flo need help with a math problem, they can ask him.”

“Speaking of Flo,” Thomas quickly said, “who is she? Another family member?”

“No, she’s not family, just a close friend. My dad used to work at the university with her. See, dad has his doctorate in biology, and she has one in chemistry. They had worked together a few times on different, smaller projects back when they were both at the university. They worked very well together, so once dad started this project, he asked to get her involved as soon as possible, and she agreed.”

Thomas turned to Doug. “OK, so now I know the basics about all the other people involved. Where, exactly, do you fit into this puzzle?”

“Heh, well, there’s not much to add before the point where Vera met me. I went to school majoring in computer science, but I decided to minor in chemistry. During my organic chem classes, I helped out Flo—she was my professor—with some computer related stuff and helped calibrate some of the instruments we used in lab sessions. Flo knew I was good with computers, so she offered me a job at Frank’s lab to help get some of the equipment up and running. That’s how I got involved.”

“I’m still shocked you’re into computers. Most people your size would be off playing basketball or something and majoring in General Studies.”

Doug sighed, but was used to this. He went into his usual spiel. “My parents were both pretty tall, mom’s 5’10”, dad’s 6’3”, and I was a late

bloomer. My sophomore year, I was 5'6" and pudgy. I wasn't always heavy, but we got a computer when I was really young. I was instantly hooked and outside became some strange and weird place. Why would I want to go out there when I can play Oregon Trail on my Apple II? So I gained weight pretty quick and took a lot of flack for it, but I became really skilled at coding in C, Java, and a few other languages by the time I was finished with high school, and I love it. By the time I was starting my sophomore year, I was sick of always being picked on, so I forced myself to work out. By the end of my sophomore year, I had dropped about thirty pounds and started a growth spurt, grew six inches in one summer. By the time I graduated, I was 6'5" and stronger than the majority of the athletes at school. They hated me for it, of course, but at least they didn't pick on me anymore! I vowed to never let myself get fat again, so I keep working out to stay in shape. But I still keep up with computers and technology. Does that explain enough?"

"Yeah," Thomas said. "It makes a lot more sense now at least."

"Good. Now tell me your story," Doug said. "Why are you here?" Thomas thought for a moment and then laughed at how ridiculous it was all going to sound.

"Well, let me just start from the beginning. See, I was on my way to work one morning..." Thomas recounted in great detail the day he got fired, the morning at the realtor's office, his journey to the library, the horrible Ms. Tharpe, and the dreadful hours spent researching new homes.

"No!" Vera said, stifling her laughter. "You spent an entire week doing nothing but reading up on new places to live?"

"Yes!"

"Come on now," Vera said, finding it unbelievable. "You must have done something else."

"I'm serious! I spent the entire week trying to find paradise!"

"It took you that long to realize that there is no perfect place to live?" She asked.

"Hey, I've spent my whole life in the city! How was I to know that everywhere else was basically the same?"

"I'm sorry Thomas," Vera said, giggling, "it's just funny to me."

"It wasn't to me!" Thomas insisted, "I was sure there had to be somewhere better! When I realized that there wasn't, I wasn't exactly happy about it."

"I still can't believe you spent so much time on it," Doug said.

"Neither can I," Thomas said. "I'm mostly annoyed that it took me so

long to realize the cold hard truth.”

“Me too,” Vera teased.

“Oh ha ha,” Thomas said, grinning. He was actually enjoying this. The waiter came over and deposited the bill on the table. “After it was all said and done, I came to the conclusion that I had nothing to lose, and that I might as well see what the future has to offer. So I found Frank’s card, made the call, and here I am.”

They finished eating and began digging out their money to pay for the food. The waiter refused to split the bill, using the excuse that their computer program was only able to split it two ways. Doug muttered about this either being a lie or a really bad program, and offered to make them a new one. The waiter rolled his eyes at this and cleared away the dishes to let them debate about what they were going to do in his absence. Fortunately everyone had enough cash on them to pay their share of the bill, and after hunting down the waiter and shoving the money in his hand, they left.

Over the next week, Thomas, Vera, and Doug spent what seemed like every waking minute together, getting to know each other. Thomas had to admit, these were some pretty neat people. Their overall attitudes and personalities were fairly laid back, yet, they weren’t likely to let others walk all over them. This was one thing Thomas always had a problem with personally. He was about as assertive as the directions on the shampoo bottle: he could sound strict and official if he wanted to, but no one would listen to what he had to say. So Thomas was happy to have some friends who would be firm when needed, but otherwise friendly.

And, as is the case in nearly every other situation involving friendships between men and women, Thomas found himself growing rather fond of Vera. Unfortunately for him, Doug was feeling the same way. Vera could tell this was happening, but at least these were decent guys compared to the normal group that would be falling all over her. She did the only reasonable thing she could: enjoy the attention while she had it.

During all of this, however, Thomas did have a few unanswered questions that flitted through his head. What would happen to his condo? What about the money in his savings account? How many years would they actually be frozen for? Fortunately for him, these questions would be answered, and soon. In the meantime, they ventured back to the lab for the unfreezing of the first human test subjects.

11

Vera, Thomas and Doug entered the lab and joined the others in the basement.

“Well, are you ready?” Frank asked. He actually seemed to be more nervous than excited this time around. They repeated the process that had been done on Kiki weeks before. The bodies of the three subjects quickly thawed and slumped over slightly. The monitors beeped, seeming to indicate a state of readiness. Frank took a deep breath, changed some settings on his controls, and pushed a button. Subject one awakened and immediately checked his clothing over to make sure it hadn’t been damaged. Frank and the others breathed a sigh of relief. He revived the other two subjects who both seemed as relieved as Frank that they were alive.

“Wonderful! Splendid!” Frank said, walking over to each of the subjects and looking them over. “You all seem perfectly fine! How do you feel?”

“My clothes are wrinkled.” Subject one said in a tragic, moaning tone.

“I feel great, actually,” subject two burst out before Frank could chew out subject one. “That was really refreshing, feels like I’ve had a great night’s sleep.” The other subject nodded in agreement.

“Good, good!” Frank said. “Now tell me, what was it like while being frozen and being revived? Were you conscious of anything at all?”

“I knew I had been frozen.” Subject three spoke up. “I wasn’t aware of it during the time or anything, but I was just standing there one minute and the next I was awake. But somehow I knew that it had happened. There was a strong feeling that I had lost some time from my life.”

Frank raised an eyebrow. “Elaborate.” The subject paused for a while, trying to gather his thoughts.

“Well, you know how when you get tied up playing a game or reading or something in the evening? Before you know it, it’s 3:00 AM, and you need to get to bed if there is any chance of you waking up in the morning. It was like that. You weren’t really aware that all those hours had passed while you were reading or playing the game. But afterwards, you felt like that time could’ve been spent on something much more efficient.”

“Interesting...” Frank pondered. “Did you two feel it?” he asked the other two subjects.

“It was kind of similar for me, I knew I’d been frozen, but I didn’t feel

like I'd lost any time in my life or anything, I just somehow knew. It was kind of weird." Subject two shrugged.

"I don't remember anything but waking up and finding my clothes wrinkled. I thought you said there would be no damage!" Subject one yelled.

"Oh just shut up about your clothes already!" Frank said. "OK, well, we've got things set up here for you all to stay for twenty-four hours to make sure there are no side effects."

The subjects looked at each other and then back to Frank.

"I don't want to stay!" Subject one moaned. "I need to go find an iron!"

"As annoying as it will be for all of us," Frank steamed, "I need you to stay."

"Well I don't want to! You never told us this!"

"It was in the papers you signed you nincompoop!"

"I didn't see it!"

"Maybe if you had READ it, you would have!" Frank rarely lost his temper, but this particular gentleman had broken him.

"Whatever! I don't need your attitude! I want to go home now!"

"Fine," Frank said, slowly counting to ten mentally. "Fine. You need to sign this release stating that you have been advised to stay and are leaving despite counsel telling you otherwise." Subject one snatched the paper that Frank had produced, signed it, and stomped up the stairs to the foyer and out to the street.

"Can I get in on that too?" Subject two asked. "I really feel fine and would like to leave."

"I'd rather you didn't," Frank replied. Subject two looked extremely disappointed and put on a pouty face. "Fine," Frank breathed and produced a second form. Subject two signed it and galloped up the stairs, closing the door loudly behind her.

"I'll stay," said subject three, "I haven't got anything to do today and don't have to be to work tomorrow, so might as well hang around."

"Great!" Frank said happily. "Well, we've set up a bed and have things all ready for you over here. If you want anything, food, magazines, books, whatever, just ask and we'll get it for you." Frank closed the door to the small room and walked back towards Flo. "WE DID IT!" He shouted as he leaped toward her. Flo, sadly, wasn't expecting this, and dodged Frank instead of embracing him, leaving him embracing the floor instead.

"Oh my! I'm so sorry Frank, I wasn't expecting that!" Flo said, fighting back laughter. Frank looked up back at her and started laughing as well.

The others laughed nervously, unsure whether or not they should be more concerned for his health. He seemed fine, however, so it wasn't long before they were all rolling with laughter.

"Oooohhhhhh wow..." Frank said, fighting back the ongoing giggles. "That was fun. Well, we have more work to do. We've got to prepare for your trip now," he said, looking at Doug, Thomas, and Vera. "How about we order a pizza and discuss things?"

They agreed, found a phone book, and looked up the closest pizza place. Frank called and ordered two large pizzas: one pepperoni and sausage, and the other half vegetarian and half supreme with anchovies, his favorite.

"Well that's that," Frank said, hanging up the phone. "Let's discuss some of this now while we're waiting for the delivery boy. Where should we start?" They looked at each other, no one wanting to initiate the conversation. Finally Thomas decided to just get it over with.

"I guess my question is," he started, "how long are we going to be frozen for? I mean, sure, we could say we're going to be frozen for a hundred years, but how do we know that there won't be some catastrophe that kills the power to the lab and kills us right along with it? Who's to say this building will even still be here that far in the future? Who's to say this city will even be here?"

"I've thought a lot about that," Frank quickly answered. "Once we freeze you, we—Flo and I—will immediately hire some people to help us monitor you, and we'll train them so they'll know everything about these machines, inside and out. I'll write a manual for everything as well so that if there's something we missed, they can look it up there. If you're frozen long enough for us to have passed—which I'm sure you will be, it's not that long off after all—the people we've trained can continue to maintain things and keep the lab going."

"OK, that makes sense, but how do you anticipate dealing with the matter of funding? You can't run a lab forever without fresh money coming in."

"That's the ingenious thing about it all! Many years ago, Ervin here found out that you can predict nearly anything on the stock market using mathematics and know with near certainty when something will make money and when something will fail to return. We basically have a set of formulas that we can use to predict the right move at the right time, and generate piles of cash! That's how we've been funding our work so far. All the money we earn is split up and either put back into the lab or reinvested

to return more money. We've also saved up quite a bit in many different banks so as to prevent all our eggs being in one basket."

"What if the economy collapses like in the thirties and bank runs prevent you from getting to your money?"

"Well my boy, I have a solution to that as well. I've stockpiled a large amount of cash in a safe and secure location that can be accessed in the event of such an emergency. That way the bills can still be paid and you can stay frozen till things get better. After all, that is the goal. Now that the research and development is finished, the cost to maintain the lab is vastly reduced. We just need to pay the electric bills and the workers. Simple stuff really."

"OK, well you'll be fine monetarily then..." Thomas thought.

"Oh absolutely," Frank insisted. "As a matter of fact, we're going to take ten-thousand dollars and stick it in a high-yield savings account at three percent interest after you're frozen. Provided we have the excess funds to do so, we'll add an additional thousand each year. If you were frozen for even only fifty years you would come out with over \$160,000! You'll arrive to the future financially secure and free to explore the world in whatever way you desire."

"Wow... That's a relief at least. But that still doesn't explain what we would do in the event of a catastrophe of some sort, or at the least, a power outage."

"I have an answer for that too! We have battery backup systems capable of keeping everything important running for twelve hours alone, and provided it's sunny outside, the solar panels on the roof will supplement things for much longer. In addition to that, we have gasoline powered generators that we can use for as long as there is a supply of gasoline. We'll keep at least a week's worth of fuel on site, and can purchase more if need be. Of course, if fossil fuels ever go out of style, we'll just upgrade the equipment to use whatever the next big energy source is."

"You really have thought this out haven't you?" Thomas smirked, realizing that Frank likely had an answer for nearly anything he could ask him.

"Most certainly! Basically we've designed this so that as long as this city exists in some form or another and there is access to electricity, the equipment can be maintained. If an emergency arises, of course, we can always wake you up early."

"Oh!" Thomas shouted, suddenly remembering. "How long ARE we going to be frozen anyhow?"

"Well that's the other thing we wanted to discuss. Personally I think

you'll definitely need at least a hundred and fifty years to see any improvement at all. If I were to pick, I'd say a bare minimum of two-hundred years..." They sat in silence for a while.

"That's a long time..." Doug finally said, stating the obvious.

"Yes, yes it is..." Frank reiterated the obvious.

"A very, very long time..." Vera punched the obvious in the face.

Fortunately, the doorbell rang and killed the obvious before someone else could punish it further. Doug instinctively went up to greet the visitor and returned shortly with two delicious smelling pizzas. Everyone began to drool more than Pavlov's dog and quickly devoured the large majority of the two pies. Test subject number three, upon smelling the pizza, poked his head outside of the room he was stationed in for observation. When he saw what he had smelled, he hurried over to claim some for himself before it was completely obliterated. Overall it was a very joyous night. At the end of the day, all their questions were answered. Thomas, Vera, and Doug made their way home feeling reassured, happy, and very full of pizza.

12

The alarm went off and Thomas jolted up in bed.

“Today’s the day!” he announced to no one in particular. He hopped out of bed, took a shower, shaved, and ran back to his room. He decided what to wear and packed the remaining outfits he liked into a few select suitcases. After this was done, he set the suitcases by the door, went back to his bedroom and started making his bed. He laughed as he realized the futility of the effort, but finished making the bed anyhow. Once he downed a bowl of sugary diabetic death knell cereal, he rinsed and threw the dishes into the sink and ran out the door carrying his two suitcases. As he traversed the subway system, Doug just happened to enter the train at one of the stops along the line.

“Oh, hey!” he waved to Thomas and sat down next to him. “Funny timing.”

“Yeah, pretty nifty!” Thomas was in a ridiculously good mood. “So, ready for the big trip?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be! I am pretty psyched about it though, overall. It’ll be interesting regardless, and even if it doesn’t work or we’re revived early, we’ve got nothing to lose.”

“Yup, that’s the way I see it.” Thomas said in a sickeningly happy tone.

It wasn’t long before they reached their stop. They got off and lugged their bags along as they made their way to the lab. Thomas walked up the stairs to the front stoop, rang the bell, and was surprised to see that it was Frank and not Doug opening the door. Then, he remembered that Doug was right beside him, and laughed.

“Come in, come in, yes it’s the big day, alright now are you ready? Good, good,” Frank answered for them, “I can’t even begin to tell you how thrilling this is!” They walked down the stairwell, Frank bubbling over with excitement all the way. “We’re pioneers for science! For the future! For a better life! Yes, well, let’s get moving, we’re going to keep your personal effects in this closet here, so you can put your bags down right there.” He opened the door and they set their bags down on the floor next to what Thomas guessed were Vera’s bags. “Alright, good, well, here we are.” They stood in front of the chambers. Thomas felt a chill go down his spine and was unsure of what it signified... He decided that he must just be nervous.

“Well, here we are,” said Vera as they approached, smiling broadly.

“Yup!” said Thomas, “and I’m ready to go!” Doug nodded in agreement. “OH!” shouted Thomas, suddenly remembering something he meant to ask long ago. “What am I going to do with my condo? I meant to ask before and forgot!”

“I can take care of it,” Flo volunteered. “Since you’ve got it all paid off, we can just maintain it, so long as that building exists anyhow. If, by some miracle, the building isn’t destroyed by the time you’re unfrozen, you’ll all have a nice place to live!”

“I guess that’ll work.” Thomas stepped forward and handed Flo the key, then returned back to the neat and orderly line he, Doug, and Vera had formed.

“OK, here we are... here we are...” Frank surveyed them, much the same way he had surveyed the three initial test subjects. “You all know what comes first.” Frank grabbed the syringes and gave them each an injection of the substance that still remained a mystery to Thomas. He expected to feel some sort of mystical tingling sensation or perhaps some nausea. To his surprise, he didn’t notice anything unusual happen at all.

“Into the chambers now, let’s go!” Frank suddenly seemed more like a drill sergeant, but at least he was a happy drill sergeant. Thomas, Doug, and Vera looked up into the chambers nearly simultaneously as they entered them, inspecting their surroundings. Everything seemed sterile, and all visible surfaces were smooth. Aside from at the top of the chamber, no wires, pipes, or anything else could be seen.

Flo came and attached the sensors and tubes to each of them one by one. Thomas once again began to wonder what exactly each of these sensors was for, but now was certainly not the time to ask. Frank sealed the doors behind Flo and went back to his station at the controls. Thomas was in the third and final chamber and watched what Frank was doing through the clear front. Frank was looking off to the right, probably staring directly at Doug in the first tube. He pushed some buttons and then looked relieved. From this viewpoint, Thomas mused, everything was more human and less scientific. Now that they weren’t standing behind Frank as casual observers, you could actually see his emotions, his thinking process as he did his work. Suddenly, Thomas realized that Frank was making eye contact with him—and all went black.

13

Though time passed normally for mankind in general, time for Thomas, were he conscious of it, appeared to be passing very rapidly. Outside, the sun rose and set, the moon waxed and waned in a never ending cycle, and pinpoints of starlight danced in countless circles. Wars sparked and raged, and after many struggles, peace was made. Billions of children were born, aged, and died. All the while mankind was dreaming, innovating, and creating as part of the endless cycle in the name of progress...

“Beep...beep...beep...” went the monitors. Thomas became aware of this change in environment and suddenly remembered where—and when—he was. He raised his head and tried to open his eyes, but the brightness was too much. He instinctively began pulling off the wires and tubes that were attached to him.

“Hey...” a woman’s voice said. “Are you OK?” Thomas squinted in the direction of the voice and tried to make out the figure of the grayish blob standing in front of him.

“What?” Thomas asked blearily. “Why wouldn’t I be OK? Did something go wrong? When am I?” The woman snickered at this unusual question. “Are Vera and Doug awake?”

“Yeah?” said Doug in a sleepy tone.

“HmMMM?” muttered Vera.

This affirmation, though small, gave Thomas quite a bit of relief. At least the two people he thought of as friends were here—whenever here was that is—and doing OK.

“Well you made it!” the woman’s voice said. “You’ve been frozen for just a little over two-hundred years: it’s now August 2208. It’ll take you some time to get adjusted to your surroundings.”

Thomas stood there and tried to open his eyes to allow them to adjust to the brightness of the room. The woman that had been talking to them—who now appeared as a blurry pinkish blob instead of a gray one—seemed satisfied with the results. She walked back over towards the controls that Frank had stood at many years before and joined a much bigger, tan colored blob.

“They all seem fine,” she said, “they’ll just need a bit of time to orient their senses again.”

“Good,” a man’s voice said, “I was kinda worried for a second there, that one line in the instructions was a bit confusing.”

“Yeah, it was, but hey, we did it!” The woman’s voice said. Thomas looked away from them and towards his right where he had heard Doug and Vera’s voices before.

“Are your eyes taking forever to adjust to the light too?” he asked in their direction.

“Sort of,” Vera said, “it’s much better now.”

“I’m good,” Doug said simply. “I was the first revived, so I’ve had more time to adjust. My senses seem to be back to normal again...”

They continued in silence for a time, allowing their brains to absorb everything around them. Thomas wasn’t having as much trouble seeing now. The lab remained relatively unchanged, other than a new floor and, he imagined, some new coats of paint. There were many pictures lining the walls now, smiling faces of lab workers from times past. A few other trin-

kets and items had changed but the lab's surroundings were not particularly outstanding. What was outstanding, however, were the two people that Thomas was now surveying.

The blurry pinkish blob was, in fact, pink—or at least her hair was. Otherwise she had fair colored skin and was of average height. She had that coveted hourglass shape that so many women pined for. This resulted in her possessing the type of hips that would cause Henry VIII to marry her for her perceived baby making prowess, only to behead her later for failing to produce. Her clothing wasn't too unusual compared to what most people of the twenty-first century would be accustomed to, just very brightly colored and sporting the strange slogan "Better than Natural." Thomas would've taken more time to contemplate the possible meaning of this but was more distracted by the previous, tan blob he noticed earlier.

The man running the controls had black hair and a relatively dark colored skin tone. If Thomas had to put a label to it, he would've guessed him to be of Hispanic descent. What was interesting about this particular man was not his skin tone or his hair, but his size. He was more than a foot taller than the pink haired woman who had joined him, and was, for lack of a better phrase, built like a tank. Thomas thought that Doug was a pretty big guy, but this man put him to shame. Thomas looked over towards Doug who appeared to be studying the two as well. The pink haired woman looked over to see the three of them staring.

"Oh, hey, you guys feeling back to normal? You can apparently see us pretty clearly now, judging by how much you're staring." She snickered again. The man just smiled. "Well, we should at least introduce ourselves I guess. I'm Lyla, been working here for about seven years, though I guess there's not much work left to do now." She laughed, then elbowed the guy next to her. "Go on, introduce yourself." The guy looked at her and cracked a funny, awkward smile as if he was not accustomed to smiling. Then he turned and introduced himself.

"Hey, I'm Darin, been working here for only two years but, well, gotta start somewhere. So, you made it! Are you ready to see the world of the future?"

"Yeah, two-hundred years, I can't imagine what it's going to be like for you all!" Lyla said in a hushed tone, as if it was somehow a secret. They stared back at her, puzzled over how she knew so much. They had imagined that they would need to explain everything to the people that woke them up, but they seemed to know it all already. Lyla noticed their expressions and caught on to their train of thought. "Oh, we have files on you three,

written by Frank a few months after you were frozen, so we already know some about your history and how you got involved with the lab here.”

Thomas, Vera, and Doug looked uncertainly at each other, but were generally relieved that Frank had apparently done such a thorough job of documenting everything. Just then, something flew quickly past their heads and disappeared up the stairwell that led to the foyer.

“What was THAT?” Doug asked.

“What was what?” Lyla asked, clearly not aware of the fact that a small flying object wasn’t normal to them.

“That thing that just flew by!”

Lyla looked puzzled for a second, trying to figure out what could have been so strange to make Doug react this way. Suddenly her face lit up.

“Ohhh, you mean Toby! He’s my helper.” They stared blankly. “Sorry, I forget that I have to explain some of these things to you guys. I’ll remember eventually, I promise! It’s called a helper, H-E-L-P-R. It stands for Human Essential Life Planning Robot. It’s like a little metal personal assistant.” Just then, Toby came flying back down the stairs and stopped next to Lyla.

“Found your nail polish, Lyla!” It extended a metal arm towards her with a bottle of bright red nail polish clutched in hands that looked like a small pair of pliers.

“Thank you Toby!” she said and commenced applying a fresh coat.

“You are quite welcome.”

“Coooooooooolll....” Doug whispered under his breath. “Actual robots....”

The HELPR robot wasn’t anything like the androids or mechanical men that were popular in the science fiction movies and books of their time period. Instead it was small and did not have limbs aside from the extending and collapsing arms it used to pick up things. Rather than walking, it hovered over the ground using a method that wasn’t entirely clear to any of them. It was about the size of a milk jug, metallic, shaped almost like an upside down bucket, but painted a shiny white color. There was no “face”, but there were two circles that appeared to be its “eyes”. It was otherwise very sleek and smooth without many crevices or other appendages jutting outward from its body.

“Does everyone have one of those?” Doug marveled.

“Huh?” Lyla asked and looked up from her task. “Oh, no, not everyone has one, I bought it when I graduated eight years ago. This is actually the old model, they released a new one last year, but I can’t afford it and this one still works fine.” Doug walked over to it and raised a shaky hand towards it, debating about whether or not it was a good idea to feel it. Toby,

however, didn't give him the time to make such a decision.

"Hello, sir, how may I help you?" it asked.

"Oh, no... I ... I don't need anything now ... thanks." Doug was about to walk away but suddenly decided to try something. "Do you like being Lyla's assistant?"

"Like?" Toby mimicked, the red eyes blinking. "I do not like or dislike anything, sir, I am programmed to fulfill my owner's commands at all times. There is no other objective to my programming." Doug was surprised by this and turned to Lyla.

"Does it have the ability to think for itself and do things without being told?" he asked.

"What? Of course not, unless it's something he's programmed to do."

"So it's not aware that we're talking about it right now?"

"Well it can hear us, if that's what you mean, but unless you are addressing it specifically with a command it can perform, it won't respond. I could say 'make me a sandwich', but unless I said 'Toby, make me a sandwich', it won't do it."

"What kind of sandwich do you desire?" Toby asked.

"Oh, sorry Toby. Disregard command." Toby went back to idling.

"Interesting... so robots aren't self aware?" Doug asked.

"No, of course not, they're just appliances. They do specific tasks and that's it. I think the people who make them do that on purpose. If they made something that could recognize and do anything and everything you asked of it, then they wouldn't sell nearly as many robots."

Doug pondered about this for a while, then turned to Darin.

"Do you have one?" he asked.

"Nope, I don't have a need for anything like that. I can make my own sandwiches and get my own nail polish—or whatever." Darin looked at Lyla as he said this. She tilted her head sideways and smirked back at him. They had clearly argued about this before, but Lyla didn't take the bait this time around.

"So do they use robots instead of humans for a lot of manual labor now?" Doug asked.

"Well," Lyla explained, "when they were first really capable of being used for such specific tasks so efficiently, a lot of companies bought them up and fired many of their human workers. But then the economy started to go downhill fast since so many people were laid off and didn't have any income to spend. So the government responded by passing the Robot Inequality Act, making it illegal for companies to use robots in positions

that were previously handled by humans. That forced the companies that make robots to start focusing on creating them for home and personal use instead.”

Doug started to ask for more information, but decided he would see and understand more later when they started exploring the outside world. He walked over to Vera and Thomas, clearly excited already. Vera didn't look particularly thrilled, and Thomas was feeling like just seeing these two and this robot had taken all the energy out of him already.

“So do you guys want to go exploring now or what?” Lyla screwed the lid back onto her nail polish bottle and set it on the table next to her. The three looked at each other, not sure of what to say.

“Well no offense, Lyla,” Vera said, “I just don't feel too comfortable yet. Before we head out I'd first like to get a nice shower and change my clothes. I feel really gross thinking about the fact that I've been wearing this for two-hundred years without showering.” Vera visibly shuddered at the thought of this. “That's priority number one for me. But the second thing that's bothering me is that we don't even know who you are! I want to at least get to know something about you two before you take us out to see what the future is all about. Does that make sense?” Lyla and Darin looked at each other.

“Yeah, of course,” Darin said, “no problem. You guys can get your stuff out of the store room and then come up to the living quarters to get cleaned up and changed and whatever else you need to take care of.” Lyla nodded in agreement. Darin got up and walked over to the storage room where they had put their bags two-hundred years before. Lyla and the others walked over and stood waiting for him to figure out which key was the right one. Finally he got the closet open and they retrieved their bags. They made their way up the stairs to the foyer, the gateway to the rest of the building. One thing that Thomas immediately noticed was the lack of a window on the entrance door, which now appeared to be made of a heavy, unwelcoming metal. He was very tempted to simply open the door and take a peak outside, but decided that it would be best to wait for the proper time instead.

The party entered the middle of the three foyer doors and walked up a new set of stairs to the living quarters. This staircase led into a long, narrow hallway where Darin stopped to point out their rooms.

“It's pretty easy, we've labeled the doors, but you three have rooms on the left side of the hallway. Lyla and I have rooms on the right. We'll meet you guys back downstairs in the lab in an hour, OK?”

They all agreed and went their separate ways. Thomas walked down the hall and noticed that the doors were in the same order that they were frozen in: his was the last door on the left. As he reached for the doorknob, he paused, sighed for a minute thinking about what might be behind the door, but came to the conclusion that it couldn't be anything excessively horrible, and entered.

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Thomas, fortunately, was right, which was delightful given that he was feeling slightly stressed about everything already. Were the room, in fact, bizarre, he probably would've snapped. It was instead surprisingly ordinary, and looked rather like the typical hotel room of the twenty-first century. The only things that were missing were windows and a television set. This was disappointing as Thomas had hoped to catch a glimpse of the outside world before they got a formal tour. Things were apparently designed to prevent the three from finding out anything too early that may shock them, which was, Thomas reasoned, a very good thing. He was at least familiar with the lab, and now would have time to get familiar with their new companions before they set out to see the world.

Thomas put his bags onto the large, king sized bed and walked into the bathroom. Again, very ordinary, aside from the fact that the shower and tub seemed to be comically large. Thomas mused that it was spacious enough to fit two or three people comfortably. He wondered why this was, but then made the connection back to Darin who would probably find it normally sized. Was this built to accommodate him? Or worse yet, was everyone in the future bigger than the people of the twenty-first century?

"No... no, that wouldn't make sense..." Thomas said aloud to himself. He put the thought of it out of his mind and went to pick out the clothes that he would wear that day. After a nice, long shower, he got dressed and walked back to the bedroom. He looked at the clock and found that he still had fifteen minutes to kill before he had to meet them back in the lab. It was then that he noticed a large manila colored envelope and a piece of paper on the nightstand next to his bed.

"Oh?" he said aloud as he walked over to see what it was. The paper looked to be a small note, folded over one time. The envelope was plain looking and simply said "Thomas" on the outside in cursive handwriting. He picked up the note and a key fell out as it unfolded. The key to his condo! Could the condo really still be there? He bent over and picked up the key and quickly read the note. Written on the paper was this:

“Thomas,

Sorry, but they knocked down the building where your condo was in 2053 to make room for a new skyscraper. Here’s your key, in case you want it for sentimental reasons.

Karen,
Lab Employee”

“Oh well...” Thomas said to himself, feeling the false hope fading away. “I should have expected that would happen. He looked at the key, wondering if there was any reason to keep it. He couldn’t find one, so tried to find a reason to throw it out. After not finding one of those either, he just stuck it in his pocket and decided to deal with it later. Thomas now turned his attention to the other, larger envelope on the nightstand. He squeezed the metal tongs together and broke the seal of the envelope, opening it slowly and methodically. Inside there was a single piece of paper. Thomas pulled it out and looked at it. It was a letter, signed by Frank, and Flo:

“Dear Thomas,

How exciting and yet sobering it must be for you! You have taken the first, huge leap on your journey in search of sanity, peace, and enlightenment. And you’ve made it safe and sound! On the other hand, you have no idea what awaits you on the outside. In all honesty, neither do we. The possibilities are endless! But there is one thing that we are sure of: no matter what awaits you, if you all stick together, you will be able to overcome any obstacles or challenges along the way.

Flo and I haven’t much more time left in our lives, but we’ve already trained our successors. The new head of the lab will be lovely young woman named Karen Pallows. We began working with her shortly after you were frozen, and have the utmost confidence in her. We’re sure she will care for things diligently and train successors to ensure everything will go smoothly when you are revived.

Speaking of the two individuals who will be there to serve as your aides when you’re awakened, I urge you to trust them implicitly. I’m sure what you will see and experience may be difficult to understand, but rest assured that the aides, whoever they may be, were hand selected to guide you

through this new world. Regardless of what happens, your well being will be one of their top concerns.

On a more personal note, Thomas, even though we didn't get to spend a lot of time getting to know you, it's obvious to us that you are a very caring, considerate person. Please, maintain those qualities. In all likelihood it will be very useful to providing stability and balance to the group. Finally, I ask that you please care for Vera. I don't know if it will happen immediately, but I'm sure at some point my passing will sink in. Please be there for her when and if she needs it.

We wish you all the best,
 Frank Thompson
 Flo Wright
 November 16, 2012”

Thomas sat and reflected momentarily. It hadn't even occurred to him till then that Frank, Flo, and Ervin were gone. The letter was a nice touch. Thomas reread it again and then slipped it and the note from Karen back into the envelope and into a drawer in the nightstand. He wondered idly for a moment how Vera and Doug were doing. Surely they had received a letter as well, and theirs was likely longer given the long-standing relationship...

Thomas sat and finally let his mind wander away from the thought of the letters. He looked around at the room, still amazed that it was this simple. He was honestly expecting more from the living quarters of the future. He mused about a special he had seen on TV showcasing all the gadgets that companies were coming up with now. The “smart kitchen” had been especially amusing, featuring a whole slew of Internet enabled appliances. The toaster would retrieve local forecasts and burn an image on the toast of a cloud, the sun, a snowflake, or whatever the case may be depending on the weather for that day. The refrigerator was connected to the Internet as well and would email you reminders when you needed to buy new milk or to remind you, once again, that the leftover Chinese food rotting in the back should probably be disposed of soon. There was even an electronic cookbook that was connected to a database of recipes on the Internet, a virtually limitless collection of culinary information at your fingertips.

It was, of course, all completely ridiculous and unnecessary. However, Thomas had truly believed that eventually all houses would be completely interconnected with “smart” appliances and other gadgets that kept ev-

everything running smoothly. His train of thought arrived back to reality. Here he was, two-hundred years after the invention of the Internet enabled weather forecasting toaster, and his room had only a bed, dresser, two nightstands, some lights, and a bathroom. Not even a TV! It was all rather disappointing. He glanced at the clock. Ten more minutes till they needed to meet up. Thomas decided to just go ahead and make his way down early. He walked out into the hallway, shut the door, and saw Vera coming out as well.

“Hey, perfect timing!” he shouted as he speed walked to catch up with her. “How’s your room?”

“Oh, the room is fine, just fine...” Vera said, clearly distracted. Thomas wondered if she had found the letter, but felt uncomfortable asking about it, so left the matter alone. She breathed deeply, gathering her thoughts. “There was nothing special about the room, really, except for the awesome shower.”

“Yeah, I thought that was nice too,” Thomas said. “So, how are you feeling about all this?”

“I’m OK now. I was really freaking out at first, especially after seeing that robot... But the shower helped me to unwind. Once I get to know these two a little better, I think I’ll be fine and ready to see what the future has to offer.” They rounded the corner and went down the stairs to the foyer.

“I’m pretty much in the same boat,” Thomas said. “I was trying to figure out what to make of these two. I mean, it’s weird, you know? The girl has such a...” Thomas looked behind them and down to the foyer to make sure their new companions weren’t around. “She has such a weird fashion sense. Though I’m betting that’s normal or something now. And the guy looks like he should be off playing some sort of professional sport, not working here in a lab. But I guess we’ll find out more later...”

“Uh huh,” Vera muttered, her mind elsewhere. They entered the foyer and turned down the stairs that led to the basement. Doug, was already there, sitting cross-legged on the floor. He raised his head and looked up to see them coming.

“Hey, feeling better?” he asked Vera. Vera and Thomas joined him on the floor, creating a small circle, and Vera repeated the same spiel that she told Thomas.

“Oh definitely,” Doug said, “that Lyla seems pretty normal aside from her hair, but that Darin guy is huge! I hope that’s not normal or anything...” Doug paused momentarily, his ego somewhat worried about this

point. “But the technology is going to be so cool!” he exclaimed, quickly leaving his ego behind and getting back to his nerdy roots. “That HELPR robot thing was extremely impressive, and I can’t wait to see what else is out there. I was a bit disappointed that it’s basically just a toy rather than a self-aware robot, but hey, you have to start with something, and did you see the thing? It was floating for crying out loud!”

They continued talking about this for quite some time, guessing about what else they may encounter. Soon, however, Darin and Lyla came back down the stairs, Toby following shortly after. They joined them on the floor, changing the small circle to a nice oval.

“So...what do you want to know about us?” Darin kicked off the conversation. The three looked at each other, unsure which of them should be the one to say it. Thomas finally decided to get it over with.

“Yeah, well, I guess the thing I want to ask is...” Thomas didn’t know how to word it tactfully, so decided to be blunt instead. “Well, thing is, you’re big, so I’m wondering if, for some crazy reason, everyone in the future is big too or something.” Darin gaped, turned to look towards Lyla, who shrugged, then turned back to them.

“Umm, well, no, not everyone in the future is big or anything...” He paused, seeming to search his knowledge of the past to try to see what they could possibly mean. “You didn’t have football in 2008?”

“What? Of course we did!” Thomas said, failing to see how this connected to the question.

“Oh, well then, I’m a football player—or at least I was, so that’s why.”

“But that doesn’t explain it. Most football players aren’t as tall or even as strong as you. Or at least they weren’t in our time.” Darin seemed puzzled by this, and Lyla was clearly thinking deeply about it as well. Suddenly she made the connection.

“OH! I know Darin! They didn’t have the lottery or the regulations on players back then!” Lyla turned to Thomas. “See, now they pick all professional football players before they’re born, using a lottery system. Then the lottery winners are genetically altered so that they can reach a certain standard before they can join the WFA.”

“Wait, WFA?” Thomas asked.

“World Football Association,” Darin said.

“Hold on,” Doug said, “you’re telling me that they pick people to join football teams before they’re born and then genetically alter them to make them better players?”

“Yeah. Why?” Darin said, obviously seeing nothing unusual about it.

“You don’t see the problem here? Don’t you get it? Doing this completely destroys the concept of natural talent. If you purposely alter people to make them better, then there is no hope for people who actually work hard and develop talent in a sport. It’s just not fair or right!”

“Now hold on a second here,” Darin said, getting flustered. “It’s not just football, every sport does it now!”

“So what?!” Doug shouted. “That still doesn’t make it right!”

“OK, chill!” Lyla yelled authoritatively. “Darin, we clearly don’t know much about how things were in their time. Let’s just try and figure out why we’re failing to communicate.” Darin and Doug seemed to accept this, sat back, and relaxed. “Doug, athletes in your time weren’t genetically altered?”

“No, no one was genetically altered!” Doug said, clearly still feeling strongly about the matter. Lyla seemed surprised by this. “They didn’t even have the technology to do such a thing. I mean yeah, we were decoding the human genome, but they hadn’t figured it all out yet and they certainly didn’t have the ability to change someone’s genes before they were born.”

“Really?” Lyla asked, mouth agape. “People were allowed to just have kids of their own free will?”

“What do you mean?” Vera piped up. “How could that be controlled? It’s nature, it could happen any time, planned or not.”

“Maybe it could in your time,” Lyla said, “but it doesn’t work that way. You have to apply and be approved by the government before you can have a kid. There’s a form you fill out and you have to prove that you would be able to adequately care for the child. If there is any history of you not taking proper care of your kids, you can’t have any more. Didn’t they have anything like that in your time?”

“There was child protective services and all that, but you can’t stop people from having kids!” Vera said, still unsure how there could be any confusion about this matter.

“Oh, they didn’t fix people back then?” Lyla asked, understanding finally what the communication failure might be.

“WHAT?” Vera, Thomas, and Doug shouted in unison.

“FIX people?” Vera’s mind swam. “The government FIXES people like animals? What is the government thinking? What are the citizens thinking? How can they accept something like that?”

“Well it’s not that big of a deal!” Lyla laughed at what she perceived as a serious overreaction. “Everyone is fixed so there are no accidental or unwanted pregnancies! If a couple wants to have a kid then they just have to fill out the proper forms. After they’re approved, they can go to the nearest

genetic clinic and design their child.”

“Design?” Vera asked, still not getting it. Doug groaned, understanding it all too well.

“Holy cow...” he muttered. “I don’t believe it.”

“Yeah,” Lyla said happily, “the couple gets the approval and goes down to the genetic clinic and a sample of their DNA is taken. Then they choose the gender of the child and a computer generated projection of what the adult would look like is shown. The couple can then have the computer remix the DNA until they get a result they are happy with. Next, the resultant child’s DNA is scanned for any known genetic diseases, and those are eliminated. Finally, they are given a set number of ‘points’ that they can use to make changes about the child’s appearance, or give the child a predisposition to having a talent in a certain area, or make them more intelligent. You name it and you can more than likely do it. Most parents, though, tend to just stick with cosmetic changes. Each change costs a certain number of points, though, so the parents can’t design their child to be extreme in every way, as their number of points is limited.”

“And that’s where the lottery comes into play,” Darin said, picking up the torch. “Once the application is accepted, the granted permit is good for a period of one year. The parents can then submit their name to one of the lotteries and hope that they get picked. Once a year, the lotteries take place. There are all kinds of lotteries, and not just for sports. The fashion industry, actors and actresses, groups of scientists, even some forms of intense manual labor have special lotteries that give the parents extra points to use to help them design their child to meet the minimum requirements for that field. If they win that lottery, of course, that means they’re committing their child to that career path, so some people won’t do it because of the fact that it doesn’t let their child decide. But most people will at least enter, even though chances of winning are slim.”

“So your parents actually won for you to be a football player?” Doug asked.

“Yeah, so they took the extra points they got and used it to make me taller, give a boost to my metabolism, and make it easier for me to gain and keep muscle.” Darin replied, matter-of-fact, as if it was the most normal thing in the world—which, of course, it was.

“So you played professional football and then stopped?” Doug asked, wondering why he only “used to play football”, since he still appeared very young and couldn’t imagine him being retired already.

“Actually... I never played professional football...” Darin replied.

“Huh?” Doug was very confused now. “I thought you said you would’ve been committed to that career path since your parents won? How did you get out of it?”

“I didn’t get out of it, I never got into it.” Darin looked resentful. “I trained and played all through high school and college. But during my last year of college, the commissioner of football announced that the minimum requirements for the league would be changing, and so I no longer met those requirements.”

“They didn’t have a grandfather clause that would let you get in anyhow?” Thomas asked.

“Nope, and there were only two people other than me who were affected, so we weren’t permitted to appeal. My parents made a few mistakes when designing me. See, the WFA gives a list of minimum and recommended requirements for future players, so my parents made me taller than the bare minimum requirement—which was, at that time, 6’8”—but only by a little bit. I’m 6’10”, and the new minimum height for the game is seven feet. Most parents who were designing their kids to play football stuck them between seven to seven and a half feet, so the large majority of the prospective players were fine. My parents, on the other hand, decided to make me just above the minimum and use the remaining points to make me more intelligent and do some other tweaks they thought were important. I’m not particularly angry about it or anything, it was just slightly disappointing. But anyhow, suddenly I didn’t have a career, so I ended up finishing school and getting a job here.”

“Wow...” Doug was simply amazed by it all. “Why would they even make a minimum height requirement anyhow? Football doesn’t need that.”

“Well, as with any sport, the most extreme players always get the most attention. With basketball, for example, the media and fans would always buzz about the new center and how tall he was, and ratings would go up along with ticket sales. With football it’s usually about the biggest player, or the guy with the most stamina. Having height is beneficial for stride and makes it easier to take someone down since you’d have more weight on your side.”

“Being very tall has never been healthy. The people who were very tall in our time usually had limb and joint problems or worse,” Doug said. “How can this be helpful? I mean if football has seven foot tall players, basketball must be ridiculous!”

“Not really, no,” Darin said. “This is different, because it’s all healthy growth resulting from genetics. Back then the height may have been from

pituitary disorders or other similar problems and wasn't what the person's body was made to do. With this all being established right in the person's DNA, the body grows and accommodates the size properly. And yeah, basketball can get ridiculous, most players are far beyond seven feet, centers usually are around nine now. They had to raise the hoop so that it's at twelve feet now instead of ten. Sports have always been about extremes: players, injuries, the game in itself, it's all extreme. Chances are, it's likely to continue that way. That's the reason, though, that a lot of things are made bigger now, to accommodate more of the extremes that are becoming more commonly seen, though certainly not normal for the large majority of the population."

Doug just gaped, wanted greatly to rant about how wrong it all was, but decided to just leave it alone. Vera didn't really care about the ethical dilemmas of altering athletes or movie stars, she still couldn't believe that the government actually "fixed" human beings to prevent them from having kids of their own free will. This was one area she felt no one, especially the government, should be permitted to meddle with. Thomas still just wanted to know more.

"I can see why this would be useful, especially in preventing genetic diseases. But doesn't this system just discourage people from having kids by making it harder for them to do it when they want to?" Thomas asked.

"No, quite the opposite, it's just like the traditional, financial lottery. Everyone wants to have as many kids as possible now in the hopes that one of their kids will be picked for one of the lotteries they choose to enter." Lyla said.

"Oh no... how many people are there living on Earth now?" Vera asked, afraid of the answer.

"Well we just broke twenty billion recently," Lyla said, smiling as if it was something to be proud of.

"That's horrible!" Vera yelled. "I can't even begin to imagine what the environment out there is like now with that many humans polluting and destroying the Earth."

"Hey, chill!" Lyla snapped back, getting fed up with these three already. "I remember how much of an issue that was in your time period from history class, but just relax, we took care of it."

"How can you just 'take care of it'?" Vera objected.

"Let's just relax and not worry about the environment right now." Darin suggested. "You wanted to get to know us better, so that's what we need to do. You'll learn and understand more about the outside world later. So,

you know my story now, mostly anyhow. The only other useful information is that I'm single." He winked at Vera. Vera was floored.

"I'm sorry," she snapped back, "I don't date genetically modified men I've just met." Darin turned bright red, but controlled himself. Vera turned to Lyla. "So, what's with the hair?" Thomas and Doug were fascinated by this side of Vera that they had never seen before. Thomas decided that he liked it.

"I was tired of being blonde so I altered my hair color to pink. I thought it would be fun and different." Lyla stroked her hair as she said this, showing it off.

"So how old are you now, then?" Vera inquired. "What's your story?"

"I'm thirty-three, grew up and went to school here in the city with plans to be a teacher... A history teacher, actually, but I got out of that pretty quickly after I realized it just wasn't for me. I couldn't handle the kids..."

"I'm sorry," Vera said, acting much more like her normal self, "I can understand that though, the kids from our time were pretty rough, and they must be worse now. At least you were able to get a job here though. Plus, it's good for us to have someone with a strong background in history to tell us what's happened in the last two-hundred years."

"Yeah... this has been an interesting job, that's for sure, but pretty boring until the last month while we made sure everything was prepared for you three to be revived. Of course, now that you have been revived, it's been especially fascinating..." She stared coolly at Vera, still feeling a bit of anger. "But, we're going to have to work together at least, so let's just try to get along. It'll be tough because we obviously have such differences in our beliefs and what's normal to us, but I think we'll be OK." She smiled. "Let's say we order pizza and just have a casual chat, huh?" They all agreed and were soon enjoying a pie, just as good after two-hundred years.

16

From the standpoint of Darin and Lyla, things seemed to be good for the three that had traveled to the future. First and foremost, they had arrived safely and with no ill-effects. Secondly, despite the initial altercations, these three turned out to be very nice people after all, and they were taking a liking to them. Finally, the living conditions at the lab were very accommodating. This was something they felt these three should appreciate. However, despite these facts, it wasn't so easy for Thomas, Doug, and Vera.

For them, it was a bit of an emotional roller coaster. It was true that they had two nice—though unusual—new friends, were healthy, and had comfortable, private rooms. However, the basic necessities of life—food, shelter, and companionship—while important, weren't enough. Thomas always had these things in the past, and while he didn't feel fulfilled, he was always at least moderately happy with what he had. This journey, though, had left him feeling uncomfortable and uneasy. It wasn't that he was afraid. He was just suffering from a severe case of culture shock brought on by the revelations of the previous day. After running the same negative thoughts through his head over most of the evening and half the night, Thomas managed to escape from the downward spiral of despair and fell asleep feeling slightly optimistic. The negative thoughts were thoroughly grateful for the break.

Thomas awoke the next morning feeling surprisingly well rested considering the amount of sleep he got. He hopped out of bed and quickly got ready, beginning to feel more confident and comfortable in his surroundings. But his small bubble of comfort would soon be broken. It had been a little under two days since they had been revived, and the group had decided to make that afternoon the first time they would leave the lab for a short little excursion into the city.

"So we're just going to go out and show you a few things," Thomas could hear Darin saying to the others as he entered the lab. "We can't really travel anywhere far yet because there's a few things we'll need to get sorted out first."

"Like what?" Thomas asked, joining the conversation.

"Well, you three don't have government assigned ID numbers yet, and everyone is required to have and know their number." Darin explained.

“You mean like a social security number?” Vera asked.

“It’s a little bit like that, yeah,” Lyla said, her history knowledge kicking in. “But the social security system collapsed in 2022, and the new worldwide ID program was started. So we’ll have to take you down to the ID office and get you a number.”

“OK, fair enough,” Doug said. “So are we ready to go?”

“Lyla and I are ready if you are,” Darin responded. They all nodded and made their way up to the foyer where they stood for a moment in an awkward silence. “You’re sure you’re ready?” Darin asked again. They nodded again. In reality, though, Thomas wasn’t entirely sure. He was still feeling relatively positive. In the back corners of his mind, however, the negative thoughts—having recovered from the workout the day before—were attempting to push their way to the front again. Every effort had been made to keep them in the dark: windowless rooms, no television, nothing to let them have contact with the outside world. What was out there that spurred such protective measures?

“OK, here goes nothing...” Darin said, stopping Thomas’ train of thought dead in its tracks. He opened the door and sunlight poured in. The five of them stepped out into the blinding rays. Once their eyes adjusted, Thomas, Vera, and Doug marveled at what they saw.

The street they were entering was just as broad as times past, but it now consisted mostly of sidewalk. The paved tarmac was just a narrow strip in the center, wide enough for only a single vehicle. However, it was empty aside from a single taxi. Thomas thought this to be extremely strange... until he looked up. In the skies above him, vehicles—quite literally—flew by, speeding to their destinations. Thomas stopped dead in his tracks and gazed up in amazement. He couldn’t believe it. Thomas had never been one to crave the latest and greatest things. In his mind, it was a futile effort. The newest, most mind-blowing piece of technology to be released since last month would come out, everyone would rush to buy it, and it would be made obsolete a month later when the cycle began anew. But there was one thing that he had always dreamed of, one thing that he always knew he would be first in line to get, if it ever came out. He was finally going to have a flying car.

After staring for quite some time, he suddenly realized that the others were nowhere to be found. Panicked, he was about to run off looking for them, when he heard Lyla shout his name. He looked over in the direction of the call, spotted Darin above the crowd, and rushed over. Lyla and Darin were standing near Doug and Vera, and appeared to be thoroughly amused

at their amazement. Doug and Vera were, of course, completely oblivious to all of this, and seemed to be more focused on staring at the cars above them as Thomas had done moments before.

Thomas was just about to start staring again when he suddenly noticed the crowds surrounding them. The sidewalks were bustling with people, just as diverse as before—if not more so. Thomas glanced at them as they quickly passed by, catching fleeting glimpses of every skin tone, hair color, and body type imaginable, including many combinations Thomas had been quite sure were impossible. As the people passed, Thomas caught snippets of their conversations. Some of the bits he could understand easily, but he noticed that a significant percentage of the conversations were completely incomprehensible. This wasn't due to the subject of the conversations, however. It was the languages themselves that were different. He looked over at Darin and Lyla, prepared to ask for an explanation, but Doug and Vera had already gained full control of their attention with questions about the cars flying overhead.

“Hold on, hold on, you guys can ask questions later when we get back to the lab!” Darin said authoritatively. “Let’s just keep moving OK?” They nodded and the group made their way into the crowd.

Had someone from a building above looked down at them, they would've been quite a sight. Darin and Lyla led the way, continuously looking back to make sure that they hadn't left their friends behind. The three visitors from the past were fairly oblivious to everything that was around them. Mouths agape, they looked around in complete awe, noticing one new thing after another. Most of the buildings in this neighborhood hadn't changed—it was designated as a historic district as Lyla would later explain. But off in the distance, countless sleek, shiny, very tall skyscrapers towered over the landscape. They were walking west on 68th Street, heading nowhere in particular.

Thomas began looking at the people around him again: he didn't see a single pedestrian with a cell phone, yet everyone seemed to be talking to someone. At first he thought that perhaps people were talking to their HELPR robots. There were certainly plenty of people who had them. But half the people seemed to just be talking into thin air. One such person seemed to be having an argument with the air. They were screaming, shouting, and flailing their arms wildly! Then, just as quickly as it had begun, the argument seemed to be over, and they started laughing uproariously as they walked down a staircase into the ground.

“Hey!” he shouted to the group, realizing where they were, “Hold up!

We're right near the subway, why don't we take that down to the bay?"

"Huh?" Darin asked. "You mean the pods station?"

"Pods?" Thomas asked back. "Let me guess, something new that replaces the subway?"

"Yeah, the subway has been closed for over thirty years," Lyla said. "The PODS—People Oriented Delivery System—replaced it."

"And just how does this PODS thing work?" Thomas asked. Doug and Vera looked on, just as curious.

"Well ... let's just go down and you guys can see it for yourself." Darin led the way and they descended the stairs into the station. Things seemed no different at first. The same stench and burst of hot air met them as they passed through the turnstiles, walked down a corridor, and then descended the stairs onto the station platform. People were standing around waiting, but not for a train. Instead of waiting in one misshapen line along the platform's edge, people split up and got into small, organized lines. These lines led to familiar looking devices that rested in the pit the trains used to run on.

"That looks almost exactly like the cryogenic chamber!" Doug shouted, pointing wildly at one of the PODS. Passersby stopped to stare momentarily, decided it wasn't relevant to their lives, and moved on.

"Keep it down! You're going to trigger a Crazy Alert!" Darin hissed. "Yes, the design is very similar but the function is completely different. People step in, choose their destination, and get sent there. The machine basically does an analysis of the person's body and then rips them apart, molecule by molecule. The information about the person's structure is encoded and sent along high speed fiber links to the destination, where the data is decoded and the person is reassembled."

Doug stared at the chambers lined up against the wall. It sounded impossible, and as far as he was concerned, it was. As he watched, a person stepped into the chamber, pushed some buttons, and the door closed. It looked like the people were talking once they got inside. Then the green light above the chamber turned red. *BAMF!* The person was gone, only a puff of what looked like steam or smoke remained. The light turned green again, the door opened, and the next person in the queue stepped in. Doug looked across the way to where the uptown train used to board and saw more chambers. Lights would turn from red to green, and a person would appear and exit the chamber, walking casually along to their destination. Doug was amazed and racked his brain trying to figure out what technology could be utilized to make this work, but his thoughts were interrupted.

“Is it safe?” Thomas asked.

“Well, yeah, mostly,” Darin hesitated. “See, when the technology first came out, they tried to use it for long distances. They installed a PODS connection between the city and London, and there was a lot of fanfare about it. It was hailed as a great leap in rapid, affordable transportation. People were using it every day, some people even got jobs in London and commuted back and forth using the PODS. Unfortunately...” he looked at Lyla, who nodded, “some idiot was treasure hunting off the coast of England and dropped anchor right on top of the fiber cable and severed it. All the people who were being transmitted from one end of the link to the other were permanently lost, around one-hundred and fifty people altogether.”

“Good lord!” Thomas exclaimed. “So all it takes is a failure to transmit the data and the person is gone forever?”

“They’ve made improvements!” Darin retorted. “We aren’t completely unconcerned about human life. Give us some credit! The government decided that the PODS simply weren’t fit for long distance transportation and removed the connection between the city and London, and all other similar, long distance connections. The PODS were enhanced and they now store the data representing the person on a hard drive temporarily until the POD unit receives verification that the transmission was successful. But...”

“But what?” Thomas’ brow unfurled and he started smiling ironically instead. “Let me guess, it sometimes falsely verifies that the person was received and they are removed from the hard drive, but since they haven’t actually arrived, they are then lost forever, right?”

“Actually, yeah, sort of.” Darin seemed surprised at the fact that Thomas would know such a thing. “It’s more complex than that really, and the actual causes of failure vary, but it’s only happened about a thousand times since they’ve been operational.”

“Only a thousand?!” Thomas yelped.

“Hey, stuff happens,” Darin shrugged nonchalantly. “And come on! That’s next to nothing when you think of how many millions of people use the PODS every day, most people multiple times a day, so it’s hardly significant. Besides, if people were really all that worried they would just back up their memories every night and keep their DNA on file.”

“Fine...” Thomas sighed and stared vacantly for a time at nothing in particular. “Let’s just go.” They exited the PODS Station and regrouped on the street. Just as Lyla was ready to ask where they wanted to go next,

a loud roar deafened them. They looked up and large string of vehicles passed overhead, completely unlike all the other cars they had seen till that moment.

“What was THAT?” Thomas shouted.

“That was a hovertrain!” Lyla screamed in response. “It was heading east, probably towards a European city.”

“Hovertrain?” Thomas asked. “Some sort of alternative to airlines I take it?”

“No, it replaced airlines,” Lyla said. “All the major airlines collapsed under the strain of tremendous debt once the high speed hovertrain lines went into effect. The hovertrains became popular because they were so much cheaper and efficient than the airlines. But most importantly, they didn’t treat their customers like dirt.”

“So that’s what they use for long distance transportation, PODS are for short distances in cities, and the hovercars must be what people use for personal transit, right?”

“Exactly!” Lyla said. “See, you’re starting to get it, the future’s not that complicated after all.”

“Wow...” Thomas muttered. “This is just like something straight out of Walt Disney’s imagination...”

“DON’T!!!” Darin and Lyla shouted in unison, but it was too late.

“HALT!” a mechanical voice said.

“Oh no...” Darin muttered. The group turned and looked in the direction of the voice. A sleek, black robot floated down towards them. It moved like the HELPR but was much larger, about the size of an outdoor trash can. The robot had bright red colored “eyes” and was holding an intimidating looking baton.

“Which of you said that?” it asked. No one answered. “Second request! Who said that?” They remained silent. “No answer. All shall be held accountable! You five are in violation of the trademarks and copyrights held by the Walt Disney Corporation and shall be punished accordingly!” The robot started moving toward them when suddenly a second robot, the same kind as the first, swooped down and beat the first to a pulp. The second robot looked toward the group.

“Let that be a warning to you! No creature, human or mechanical, shall be allowed to violate any trademark or copyright without prior written permission from the holder of said copyright or trademark! Take this warning to heart!” The second robot flew off, leaving the first one sparking and crackling on the ground in a crumpled heap.

“Copybot,” Darin quickly explained, cutting off the obvious question. “Designed by the media magnates to help protect their works. They patrol heavily populated areas searching for people who are doing anything that can be taken as a violation of a given copyright or trademark. When the first one heard you,” he looked at Thomas, “he couldn’t narrow down which of us said it, so he was going to punish all of us. When the first one was explaining what trademarks you had violated, the second one must’ve happened to fly by at the same time and heard it say that name, so it punished the first one.”

“Why would it destroy another robot trying to enforce the same policy it was?” Doug asked.

“It doesn’t care who or what is in violation, it’s non-discriminatory, and there is no warning for machines.” Darin said simply. “At least with humans it warns them before it starts beating them for the violation.”

“But it can’t recognize that the machine violating the trademark is another Copybot?” Doug was getting fed up with how stupid it all was.

“Nope, it doesn’t care,” Darin shrugged. “As far as it’s concerned, the other Copybot could’ve gone rogue.” Doug sighed and decided to just leave it all alone. He would research the technology on his own later.

“Heeeeeeyyyyyyy, that’s pretty groovy!” a strange voice said. Thomas turned around and saw some girl with purple hair and a striped, rainbow colored sweater staring at him. “Those are really retro, I haven’t seen anything like that since I, like, went to the history museum way back in seventh grade!”

“I’m sorry, what? I’m not sure what you mean?” Thomas was very put off by this strange woman staring at him and making comments that sounded like something his mother would occasionally say.

“Those things on your face silly! They’re so cool! Where did you get them?”

“Oh, my glasses?”

“Yeah, that’s what they were called!”

Thomas looked around and realized that there were, in fact, no other people he could see wearing glasses of any sort. Thomas decided to simply tell the truth.

“Well, they’re very old—nearly two-hundred years old in fact. I got them from my mother before she died in a car accident.”

“Car accident? Far out! I didn’t know that happened anymore! Well those are some wicked awesome...” she paused to search for the unfamiliar word, “glasses, yeah! I’m going to see if I can find some somewhere, maybe

an antique store will have them!” She turned around to leave and then saw the crumpled Copybot smoking on the ground. “Hey! Is this yours too?” she asked Thomas.

“Oh, no, that’s not mine...” he replied, perplexed by the question.

“Whoa!” she marveled at the decrepit pile of metal. “It’s like a work of art!” She looked around, hesitated, then bent over, scooped up the robot, and ran off.

“What a strange woman!” Thomas remarked. “Why would she want that? And how on Earth could such a small person like that pick it up?”

“It’s made of a real lightweight metal, and she’s probably an art student,” Lyla said, smirking. “Come on, let’s head back to the lab, there’s not much else to see if you won’t use the PODS. It’s probably for the best anyhow. I’ll bet you have a load of questions.” They walked together back to the lab.

17

The group entered through the heavy steel door and walked up to their rooms. They planned on meeting downstairs again in two hours to figure out what to do for dinner and discuss any questions they may have. Lyla and Darin went into their rooms leaving Doug, Vera and Thomas standing together, talking about what they'd seen.

"I don't know," Doug muttered, "the fact that all the robotic technology seems so stupid is pretty disappointing. I guess it's fine overall, since the other technology is intriguing, especially the PODS thing. I can't wait to find out how that works. I guess my vision of the future always included a lot of intelligent robots and without them, it seems strangely empty."

"I never really cared about technology," Vera said, "I knew that would always march on undaunted. I mainly worried that people would become either bloody idiots or completely immobile due to so much automation and lack of any imagination, so I'm just happy to find that's not the case. I'm not sure how I feel about all this genetic altering... It's just not right."

"I'm not too sure I like all of this technology," Thomas said. "I mean a lot of it is something I can see being a good idea, but some of it goes too far. Those Copybots, for instance, are pretty terrible, and the way that Darin and Lyla acted like they didn't care about the fact that so many people got lost with that PODS thing was horrifying." He sighed. "Otherwise, I guess the future is OK. And hey, I can finally get a flying car!" They talked a bit more about trivial, little things before Vera announced that she was going to her room to rest. They said their goodbyes and she closed the door.

"I think I'm going to do the same," Thomas said. He walked down the hall, found his room key and opened the door. He collapsed on the bed and woke up with a start about an hour and a half later. Fortunately he wasn't due to the lab for another ten minutes. He stared at the ceiling momentarily, pondering over everything he had seen. There had been so much that it was nearly overwhelming, and he wasn't quite sure about the meaning of most of it. Why were those people talking into thin air? Were the PODS really safe enough to use? Were there other robots out there enforcing laws? Was he going to have to watch every step he made, every word he said? His mind continued assembling questions that he wanted to ask. He was just hoping that he could remember them. He got up and

made his way down to the lab again. The rest of the gang was already there.

“Oh good,” Lyla said, “right on time, we were just about to discuss languages.”

“Yeah,” Vera interjected, “I noticed that so many people weren’t speaking English and I was wondering if it was no longer the most spoken language in the city.”

“As I was telling them,” Lyla continued, “there is still no ‘official’ language, but the most common ones are English and Chinese followed closely by Spanish.”

“Chinese?” Thomas was surprised by this. “I figured Spanish would be right up there, but Chinese?”

“Well she was just about to explain it when you came in,” Doug said, much more irritable than he was roughly two hours ago. Thomas took the hint and decided to just sit down and listen quietly rather than to keep interjecting, holding his own questions for later.

“As I was saying,” Lyla began, “there was a huge Chinese immigration to North America sometime back around the middle of the twenty-first century after the end of World War Three.”

“There was a third World War?!” Thomas shouted, vetoing his earlier decision.

“Well yeah!” Lyla said, “The economy collapsed in 2036 after all the oil ran out, and the governments started the war as a ‘jolly good way to rejuvenate the economy.’ It worked surprisingly well in that respect, but backfired in that it caused all the world governments to collapse. That, though, ended up being a good thing too, because against all odds, the entire Earth ended up uniting under one new system of government.”

“So there’s no such thing as the United States anymore?” Thomas asked.

“Not really, no. The new government copied some of the methods of the United States but ended up improving them substantially. The three branches of government that you all are familiar with are no longer used.”

“No president?”

“Nope, just a congressional body, judicial system, and whatever agencies they create.”

“Fascinating...” Vera said. “So when you keep saying the government did this or that, you’re saying a complete world government?”

“Yup, Pangaea began in 2052 and has been running relatively smoothly since then. There’s no such thing as a third world country anymore, and everything now follows a set of universal standards so things are the same no matter where you go in the world.”

“Unbelievable...” Doug said. “It sounds too good to be true.”

“It is!” Thomas yelled, “there must be something wrong somewhere!”

“Well it’s certainly not perfect!” Darin laughed.

“It sounds pretty good to me!” Vera said.

“But anyhow,” Lyla wanted nothing more than to be able to finish this explanation as quickly as possible, “that’s why we have to get you guys ID numbers. You’ll need them to travel, plus you must have it to get your implant.”

“Implant?” the three asked in unison.

“Yeah, it’s required by law that everyone get their implant by school age, so we’ll have to get you one as soon as possible.”

“And just what does this implant have in it?” Thomas asked, afraid of the answer once again. Lyla turned to Darin and let him answer it since he knew a lot more about it than she did.

“It basically contains everything about a person: their ID number, name, medical history, an electronic copy of their DNA, primary language spoken, current address, all of that stuff.”

“Oh great!” Thomas began to rant, “so any Joe Blow can walk up to me, get my name and address from my implant, and come axe murder me later at his convenience? That’s just wonderful, technological progress at its finest!”

“Calm down! It’s not exactly like that. The implants can communicate back and forth, but only certain information can be publicly obtained. I can see information about Lyla from her implant, but only her name, ID number, and primary language. Only health officials and government workers can access some of the other information.”

“Seriously?” Doug asked. “That’s awesome! Finally! Some technology that makes sense! How do you see the information?”

“Well the implant uses electromagnetic radiation to project an image onto your visual cortex. Usually it’s just plain text, but occasionally pictures and stuff can be displayed.”

“Coooooooooolllll...” Doug breathed.

“But why would it show you someone’s ID number? Shouldn’t that information be private?” Thomas protested, ignoring the other parts that he didn’t understand. “I don’t want someone knowing my ID number, especially if it functions like a social security number!”

“It’s not a secret number. Anyone can know it, but only you can use it because it’s included in your implant and there’s only one you. No one could possibly steal it unless they create a fake implant, and those are virtu-

ally impossible to make. Besides, you couldn't call or email anyone if you didn't know their ID number."

"They double as email addresses and phone numbers?" Doug asked.

"Yeah. It replaces mailing addresses too. If you want to send Lyla a card you just stick her ID number on the envelope and the correct destination will be looked up and added at the post office."

"So this means that this implant also doubles as a cell phone?" Doug was catching on to this idea fairly quickly. Thomas was too, unfortunately, and suddenly realized why all those people on the street seemed to be talking into thin air. He groaned.

"Yup, you've got it!"

"Ugh!" Thomas put his head in his hands. "You're crazy," he said to Vera and Doug. "I'm not letting the government stick something into my head that does who knows what! You do what you want, but I'm certainly not going to let myself get sucked in to this madness." Thomas stood up and stormed out of the lab, leaving the others behind, bewildered and confused. He tramped up the stairs to his room and shut the door behind him.

"I can't believe it," he muttered aloud to himself. He couldn't understand how Doug and Vera were so willing to be inducted into this mess. He sat on the bed and kicked off his shoes, letting them to fall to the floor. This was group-think at its finest: Doug and Vera were just blindly accepting whatever they were told. He scoffed.

I'm certainly not going to be taken in, not by any means, no sir! He thought to himself. Just then someone knocked on the door. Oh they've come to convince me, well we'll just see about that! He stood and walked over, opened the door, and saw Lyla standing there alone. He stared at her silently for a while, attempting to put on a mean face but failing to do so. It would've been much easier if the guys were there. He could've focused his rage on them, but it was hard for him to treat a woman badly.

"Hi Thomas," Lyla said quietly. "Can I come in?" Thomas wanted to stand, firm and determined, look her straight in the eyes and tell her that no, in fact, she could not come in because she was not going to change his mind. He straightened up, made his best determined face, looked straight into her deep, brown, pleading eyes, and melted.

"Sure, I guess," he stammered, relinquishing his post at the door and allowing her to enter.

"Thanks," she said. She looked around to figure out where to sit, and finally decided to sit on the end of the bed. Thomas placed himself in a lounge chair adjacent to where Lyla had settled in. They sat in an awkward

silence for a while. Finally, Lyla decided to speak.

“Look Thomas, I know you’re probably a little put off by everything, and it’s understandable, things have changed a lot in two-hundred years.”

“Yeah...” Thomas said.

“To expect you to adapt and change so fast is a lot to ask.”

“Yeah.”

“And it’s rather unfair in a way too.”

“Yeah!”

“But... Didn’t you go into this knowing it would be this way?”

“Well ... yes, but...”

“Your friends need you to be there for them too. It’s not as easy for them as you might think. Darin is down there still explaining things about the implant to them, and they still feel like they don’t want to get it.”

“But Doug was acting like it was the greatest thing since sliced bread!”

“No, he was just impressed by the technology. After you stormed out he expressed his concern about privacy, among other things. You can’t jump to conclusions so quickly. This is a learning process for all of us, and we need to cooperate and work together so that we can fully understand each other.”

“So... what are we going to do?”

“I don’t know. You’ll have to make that decision yourself. I suspect that if you wait a while and then go talk to Doug and Vera, the three of you will be able to agree on something. I don’t know if it helps or not but I’ve had the implant since I started school, and I’ve never had a problem with it.” Thomas sat in silence, thinking things over.

“Anyhow, I’d better go. You’re going to need time to figure things out.” She got up and walked towards the door.

“Hey Lyla?” Thomas said.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“No problem,” she said, smiling sweetly as she left. Thomas wasn’t sure what had just happened, but Lyla seemed to put everything at ease in his mind. He still felt nervous about the whole thing, but her perspective seemed so fair, so balanced. Making assumptions about Doug and Vera wasn’t right. They needed to stick together. It was almost embarrassing how quickly he had forgotten Frank’s advice. He had to go find Doug and Vera and figure out what they were going to do. Thomas got up and walked over to the door, flung it open, and discovered a surprised looking Doug and Vera standing on the other side.

“Oh. Hi!” Thomas said.

“Umm, hey,” Doug said. “So Vera and I were discussing this implant thing...”

“Yeah?”

“We’re not entirely sure what we want to do though. What do you think?”

“Well, I really hated the idea at first, but Lyla gave me some more information and some things to think about. It seems like a terrible idea from a privacy standpoint, but everyone has one now. If we don’t get one, we’d stand out more than those who do have one. Not to mention, we wouldn’t be able to travel anywhere together.”

“Yeah, that’s basically what we figured too,” Vera said. “Doug thinks we should go ahead and do it but I’m still not sure.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not completely convinced either,” Thomas insisted, “but it’s one of those all or nothing things. Either we all do it or none of us do it.”

“I agree,” Doug said. “If we don’t all get it, that’s just going to break us apart. What’d we come here for anyhow? To see the future. To have an opportunity for a better life. We should have known that there would be issues like this that would come up. If we’re going to do what we came here to do, we’re just going to have to accept it and go with the flow.” Thomas stood silent. It all made sense to him and he was prepared to agree, but Vera still seemed to be waffling.

“Well...” she said, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. “I guess so, yeah. I’ll do it.”

“Good,” Doug said. He turned and looked at Thomas questioningly, waiting for his response.

“Oh, I’ll do it too,” Thomas said.

“Cool,” Doug said, happy to have a resolution. “We’re supposed to tell Darin and Lyla what we decide. I’ll go let them know.” He walked off.

“I’m going to bed,” Vera said, “I’m exhausted. See you tomorrow,” she said as she walked down the hall to her room.

“Well that was easy,” Thomas said to himself as he closed his door.

18

“OK,” Darin said the next morning, “just stick with us and we’ll walk together to the ID Office. It’s about fifteen blocks, but since you still don’t want to take the PODS, we’ll just have to walk the whole way.”

“Yes, yes, we know, it’s just like yesterday,” Doug muttered. He didn’t like the way Darin seemed to be acting as their baby sitter. He felt that he could certainly fend for himself, even in these new, somewhat unfamiliar surroundings. Darin glanced over at Lyla, who simply shrugged. They left the lab and started walking in the direction of the ID Office.

Though they were not gawking and looking around as much as the day before, the three were still amazed by their surroundings. They walked past the PODS station and ventured outside of the historic district, into an area they had not yet seen. The number of people milling about the streets increased exponentially. The sidewalks were even wider in this area. Hover taxis would land in the narrow tarmac center to deposit their passengers, get new ones, and whisk away just as quickly as they had arrived.

This area was apparently a strong commercial district. Storefronts showed off their wares in windows next to large signs proclaiming sales. As they passed these shops, Thomas glanced in the windows—not able to take a lot of time of course as they were walking at a fairly decent clip—but what he did see was completely unlike what would be seen in the typical shops of his day. Most of the stores seemed to center around some new technology that he had no frame of reference for. There were, however, a few stores here and there that sold clothing, shoes or some other form of apparel. This was about the only type of store that Thomas could understand. As they walked, the people around them window shopped, buzzed in and out of enormous apartment buildings, and loitered outside of bars, cafes, and restaurants. Human habits had changed very little in the past two-hundred years.

Finally they reached the ID Office. It was a squat, brown brick building. Compared to most of the other buildings in the area, it stuck out like a sore thumb. This, of course, was highly appropriate for a government office. Bureaucracy, they were about to discover, had changed very little as well. As they entered the building, they quickly came upon a long queuing line that snaked through an enormous waiting area. The back wall was

lined with a long counter top, and government employees were lined up, waiting to help the masses through what they guessed to be bullet proof glass.

“Gee, the way these queues are, you’d think the British were in charge of this agency or something,” Thomas joked.

“Actually, they are, how did you know?” Darin asked, amazed.

“Oh, err, it was just ... a joke, heh ... heh...” Thomas flushed. Darin made no connection to what would be so funny about queues and British people, but figured it was yet another reference to the past that he didn’t understand. Thomas resolved to just remain quiet and queue like any other responsible adult. After waiting for hours, they finally arrived to the head of the line.

“NEXT!” shouted an older looking woman behind the counter.

“Let me handle this,” Darin said, and gestured to indicate that the rest were to remain quiet. The five of them approached the counter.

“Wot’s this then? We’ve an old fashioned party ‘ere!” Well dearies, ‘ow are we today? What can I do fer ya?”

“We’re fine, we need some new ID numbers for these three,” he indicated who with a gesture. “They were cloned recently.”

“Alright, may I ‘ave the ID numbers of the individuals that they were cloned from then?”

“What?”

“You know, I ‘ave to ‘ave the ID numbers of the people these three ‘ere were cloned from so I can process it properly. We’ve got to ‘ave that information on file.”

“I ... well,” Darin stammered, his brilliant plan falling apart. “I don’t have the ID numbers of the people they were cloned from!”

“Oh that’s a shame that is, cause without those ID numbers these ‘ere are invalid clones and we’ll ‘ave to eliminate them!” The lady pushed a button, a loud alarm was sounded, and the bullet proof glass slid upwards. Other employees and customers quickly took cover. The lady reached down under her desk and pulled out a very bizarre looking weapon. She looked through the scope and began to aim with a twisted smile on her face. She seemed to be very happy to have her day made more lively. Thomas, Doug, and Vera yelped and ducked down.

“No wait!” Lyla yelled, “they aren’t clones!”

“Wot’s this?” the old woman asked. She pushed the button again and the alarm stopped sounding. “You say they aren’t clones? You aren’t just trying to change your story now are you? Defrauding the government is a

very serious crime!”

“No, no ma’am, it’s just that we didn’t think anyone would believe our real story.”

“Well go on then!” Other employees came out from where they had taken shelter. It was deathly quiet. Everyone seemed interested in what the explanation would be.

“It’s just that,” Lyla said as calmly as she could, given the circumstances, “these three have been frozen for the past two-hundred years, and so they weren’t able to get their ID numbers when the system was created, that’s all!”

The woman stared at them for a time in silence. “Is that all then? Well why didn’t you just say so! I’ll be right back!” She placed the weapon back under the desk, jumped down from her chair, and waddled off to a back office.

“Great plan there Darin!” Doug hissed from the floor, not at all keen on getting up yet.

“Shut up,” Darin spat back from his hiding spot behind a counter several feet away. “We didn’t know what else to do! We didn’t think there was any way they were going to believe our real story!”

“Guys, chill, it’s OK now, we’re good,” Lyla said in a calm tone. She had been the only one to not duck for cover when the woman pulled the weapon, and Thomas was in complete awe of this. He stared, wondering idly if she was always this brave. In his mind, boldness was an extremely important quality. As such, he greatly admired anyone who possessed it, because he did not. Lyla herself was amazed that she didn’t hide, and so was her brain. It was currently screaming horrible, obscene things at her that she worked hard to ignore.

“‘Ere we are!” the woman reappeared carrying several forms. “This ‘ere is a special form they had to make back when that caveman was thawed round about twenty years ago! First time anyone in this ‘ere office ‘as even ‘ad to use it! You’ll ‘ave to fill all that out and then bring it back. NEXT!” she shouted.

“You mean we have to wait in the line again?” Thomas mumbled as he got up off the floor, noting that the line had grown even longer.

“Oh suck it up will you? We’ll be fine,” Darin said as he got up from behind the counter island he was hiding behind. Lyla handed him a copy of the form, and the two of them began filling them out. The three stood there uselessly, only answering the occasional question about one thing or another. Finally they were finished and they got back in line. Several hours

later, they once again stood at the head of the line. The woman who helped them initially saw them at the ready and shooed away the person she was currently working with.

“But we’re not through!” protested the person.

“I’m sorry but you’ll ‘ave to fill out that form again! NEXT!”

“This is ridiculous! I’ll speak with your supervisor about this!”

“E’s at lunch! NEXT!”

“It’s three in the afternoon!”

“E takes a long lunch! NEXT!”

The person finally gave up and walked away. The five walked back up to the woman.

“I wanted to process your form,” she laughed with delight. “Let’s see what we ‘ave ‘ere, shall we? Uh huh. OK. Right then, everything looks to be in order!” She pecked away at a keyboard and printed out some additional forms, which she then stamped and handed them. “Right, you’ll take these down to the address on the paper there and give it to the receptionist. She’ll ‘elp you get implants for your friends ‘ere. They’ve already been sent your information and are getting things prepared for your arrival. This is so exciting!” She beamed, clearly enjoying the change in pace.

“Well, uh, thank you very much, we’ll go take care of this right away,” Lyla said.

“OK then, you three ‘ave a good day, ‘ope you get to that next address before they close!” She turned away from them and shouted at another worker. “Oy! Miriam! I got to use Form 1356-B!” The woman and her friend chattered excitedly about it. The other employees stopped and looked over to see the group of people who brought this rare form into use.

“Let’s get out of here before they want an autograph and a picture!” Thomas said, and they hurried out the door. Darin looked at the forms he was carrying.

“Guys, this building is way uptown, there’s no way we’ll make it today unless we use the PODS.”

“No way!” Thomas quickly said, “I’m not using that until I get that DNA and memory backup thing you were talking about!”

“Thomas, come on, the chances of it happening are next to nothing!” Doug said.

“That’s still not nothing!”

“Well, I’m not going to waste another day. I want to get on with it and start seeing what else this world has to offer, with or without you!” Everyone else was clearly on Doug’s side, leaving Thomas outnumbered. This

always happened to him.

“Come on Thomas, what could possibly go wrong?” Darin asked.

Thomas shifted his weight. It was a rather uncomfortable situation. As the others stared at him, Thomas thought about that phrase. What could possibly go wrong? The last time someone had asked him that question was on a class field trip to an amusement park. The class had been separated into small groups, and everyone in Thomas’ group wanted to go on the newest roller coaster: The Banshee. Everyone, that is, except for Thomas. As the group discussed the rides they wanted to go on, the kids urged Thomas to ride the Banshee with them. First they mocked him, and then they pleaded with him to go.

“Come on Thomas, we can’t go without you!” Jimmy had said.

“Yeah Thomas, what could possibly go wrong?” Keith begged.

Against Thomas’ better judgment, he gave in and rode the Banshee. Unfortunately for his classmates, he threw up right at the top of the loop-de-loop splattering everyone as the train came back down. Thomas didn’t remember anything after that except for the horrible smell and angry looks on the bus ride home. Ever since then, he made sure that he thought at least twice about doing anything that provoked the use of that phrase. Thomas then realized that everyone was still staring. He sighed.

“Yeah, OK, I guess I don’t have any choice, and I might as well get used to it since it’s apparently the new method of transportation.”

They entered the PODS Station and bought tickets, same as the last time, only this time they actually got in line at the boarding platform.

“Remember, just get in there and say ‘116th Street’ and it’ll take you there. I’ll go first and Lyla will go last so she can help you if need be. I’ll be there to meet you when you arrive,” Darin said as he walked into the POD. The doors closed but you could clearly see “116th Street” on his lips. *BAMF!* And he was gone. The light turned green and Doug entered. *BAMF!* Then Vera. *BAMF!* Thomas looked at Lyla nervously. She simply smiled and waved him on.

Thomas entered through the large doors of the chamber and looked around. It was extremely similar to the original cryogenic chamber they were frozen in, only no wires were visible at the top. The ceiling was simply smooth with a single light shining down. Thomas noted that the chamber was also much larger. He estimated it to be about four feet wide and ten feet tall, guessing that it was probably to do with the fact that people could come in such unusual shapes and sizes thanks to the genetically modified children of the future. The doors closed, and Thomas stood there, unsure

of what to do or say. Finally a computerized voice prompted him in a tone that almost seemed to convey annoyance.

“Please state your destination.”

“Oh, uh...” It beeped.

“Unrecognized destination. Please state your destination.”

“Uh, 116th Street?”

“Did you say 116th Street?”

“Yes?”

BAMF!

19

Thomas was torn apart, limb from limb, cell from cell, molecule from molecule, atom from atom. Everything that was a part of him was encoded as a batch of electronic data and sent along a high speed fiber link a distance of 1.5 miles in less than a second. The next thing he knew, he was looking through the glass doors of a chamber in the 116th Street station at Darin, Doug and Vera. Vera waved but Darin seemed too busy getting talked at by Doug to notice that he had arrived. Thomas moved his hands around tentatively as if they might fall off at any second, but upon finding nothing wrong with them, he slowly opened the door of the POD unit.

“I just can’t believe it!” Doug was saying, “that was incredible, you don’t feel a thing and don’t even know it’s happening except for that noise that it makes! How on Earth does it work?”

“Actually...” Darin said sheepishly, “I’m not sure. I keep up on how most technology works, but I’ve not seen much published information on how the PODS work.”

“But how can there not be information about an awesome breakthrough like this published somewhere? That’s impossible! Someone somewhere must know how it works!”

“Well those who do are doing a good job of keeping their mouths shut about it. I occasionally search to see if there’s anything new about it, but there hasn’t been much of anything released that I’ve found.”

“That’s annoying,” Doug said, defeated. “Oh, hey Thomas and Lyla.” Thomas whirled around to discover that Lyla had indeed shown up without him noticing.

“OK, where do we go from here?” she asked Darin.

“We exit on Broadway and go left, and it’s about another block south.” The group exited the station and continued walking, and it wasn’t long before they found the building they were looking for. “OK, here it is, 2929. Let’s go!” Darin held open the door and handed the three their papers as they passed. They had entered a relatively large waiting area, and, they happily noted, this office was very empty. “Just take your papers up to that woman there in the booth and she’ll direct you. Lyla and I are going to wait here.” The three went off, and Darin sat down next to Lyla. “They’re exhausting!”

“I know,” she responded, “they’re just not used to the way things are now. They’ll get accustomed to it eventually, just give them some time.”

“I hope so. Vera is OK, but Thomas does nothing but whine and Doug always wants to know how everything works...” Darin stopped for a second, a thought triggered in his mind. “Hey... Why do you think they’ve never published anything on how the PODS work?”

“I don’t know... They never really published much on how the hover-cars worked either.”

“Hey, you’re right... I wonder why that is?”

Meanwhile, over at the receptionist, Thomas was discovering all over again why he always hated dealing with these people.

“Oh it’s YOU! I heard about you! My good friend Miriam at the ID Office phoned over to let me know you’d be coming, you’re the Form 1356-B people! Oh this is just so exciting, I can’t even begin to tell you, we’ve never had any 1356-B people come through here before! I mean we thought it was big stuff when we got the occasional 1337, but 1356-B! Wow! Well, anyhow, we’ve got your implants prepared, and the doctor is ready to install them. We’ll take you first,” she said, pointing at Doug, “and then the girl, and then you.”

“Doug?” A nurse opened a door off to the left and shouted. “DOUG?”

“Coming! Hold your horses!”

“My what?” the nurse said.

“Oh never mind.” Doug disappeared through the door with the nurse. Thomas and Vera walked over to the benches that lined the wall and sat down. Thomas flipped through the magazines and saw nothing of interest on the covers, just Pangaea politics and a news magazine featuring some new technology that had been released. Thomas had had quite enough of politics and science for one day.

“So,” he said to Vera, who was looking at some brochure, “are you nervous at all?”

“Well I was but I found this brochure. Apparently it’s meant for the children that normally get these implants. It’s written in an extremely simple way and has all these pictures of perfect looking little kids and their parents. This implant thing is pretty complex though... It’s not only a phone, but it allows you to get directions, listen to music, send and receive email, and—perhaps neatest of all—it’s a translation device!”

“Really?” Thomas was suddenly interested. “Translation?”

“Yeah, apparently it contains ninety percent of today’s used languages, and they’re working on the remaining ten percent. The implant uses mo-

tion detectors and accelerometers to guess when you're making eye contact with an individual. It then communicates wirelessly with their implant to find out what language they are speaking. If it doesn't match your language, the implant begins listening and translating their speech."

"So will you hear their language and then hear a translation when they stop speaking?"

"No, apparently the projector thingy Darin was talking about shows a text translation like closed captioning."

"Well what if you're watching a recording of someone speaking in another language? It won't be able to communicate with their implant to know to start translating."

"You can apparently use a voice command to tell it to start translating from one language to another if it doesn't start automatically. It looks like there are voice commands for everything the implant does..."

"VERA?!" the same nurse from before shouted.

"Oh, better go, here, you can read the rest of it." She threw the brochure at Thomas and ran off towards the nurse who was bellowing her name once more. Thomas picked it up and looked at it. Pictures of happy children engaged in phone conversations and emails showed everything included in Thomas' worst nightmares. One child was saying "Did you hear about Charlie?!" and the other replied, "Yes! ROFL!" The other child was emailing his friend using a little keyboard (sold separately) and the contents of the email were apparently being displayed by the eye projector. Thomas dreaded the thought of meeting children of the future who were likely spoiled to an excessive degree. Then again, Darin and Lyla seemed pretty normal and well balanced... Maybe this wouldn't be such a bad thing after all...

"THOMAS!!!" the nurse shouted as if she had been screaming it for hours with no response. Thomas jumped up and ran over to prevent the horrid woman from screaming in that tone again. "Right this way!" she said sternly. Thomas followed her through a corridor and into a room on the right. It was a small room, but it seemed somewhat welcoming. Sunlight poured through a window high up on the wall through which Thomas tried to look out, but couldn't see anything. Thomas was about to turn around and ask the nurse a question when he felt a sharp pinch on his butt.

"Hey now!" He whirled around. "That's ..." he quickly felt dizzy and fumbled for the chair, which he promptly fell into. "Inappropriate..." he muttered. He swung his head around and caught a final glimpse of the nurse—grinning in quite an evil way—before he lost consciousness.

20

“Thomas? How are you doing there, guy?” Thomas groaned. “Oh good, we’re alright. Now, can you tell me what day it is?”

“What?” He muttered.

“OK, close enough! I think we’re all done here! We just need you to get up, stretch, and try out your new implant so we can make sure it’s not defective.”

Thomas moaned and tried to get used to the light in the room. He made out the figures of the nurse from before and a new person that Thomas assumed was the doctor. Thomas slowly stood, his head swimming and throbbing.

“That’s good, real good! OK, now we want you to try some things out here. Look over towards Inge, the nurse.” Thomas looked towards her and noticed that she was still grinning. She clearly got too much pleasure out of this job. “Now Inge is going to speak some German to you, and your implant should automatically start translating. Let me know if it doesn’t.”

Inge opened her mouth and began spewing forth words in her native tongue. Thomas didn’t recognize any of it at all. He looked at her in confusion, when suddenly a string of green characters appeared as if out of thin air, scrolling across his field of vision.

“Thus if your implant functions, sir, you should be able to read a raw translation of what I say. Does the implant function?”

Thomas took a minute to register that he was supposed to respond. “Oh, yes, yes it works fine, I guess. Slightly funny translation, but it seems to work.”

“Yes, well that’s normal, machine translation still is far from perfect but it gets the job done most of the time. There are few things it routinely gets wrong, but you’ll begin to pick up on what it really means eventually. It’ll keep getting better though, the firmware for the implant is usually updated about once a month, and they include updates to the translation software with that. OK, now lets see, incoming calls on your implant are blocked at the moment while we verify that it works, but let’s try an outgoing call. Use the voice command to call this number.” The doctor handed Thomas a slip of paper with instructions and a number. Thomas quickly read it.

“Call 516947612654” he blurted out, and the green text was back

again.

“*Calling 516947612654...*” he read and waited. Moments later the line was picked up and Thomas heard a voice speaking clearly.

“Good afternoon! Today is Tuesday, August 16th, 2208. The current temperature is 27 degrees. Today’s forecast calls for a 37% chance of rain towards the evening, cool and breezy with winds to the south at 15 to 25 kilometers per hour and a temperature of 13 degrees. Are you feeling down and ugly? Well worry no more! Simply trust the products from Beauty Inc.! We’ll make you better than natural! Our current specials include pink hair modifier for—”

“ACK! HANG UP!” Thomas yelled and, surprisingly, the call ended with no hassles.

“Excellent!” said the doctor enthusiastically. The doctor had a secret hobby of cataloging the reactions to the Time and Temperature computer, a hobby that brought a small amount of amusement to his otherwise dull and drab day. This was a new reaction he would enjoy writing about later. “Well let’s see... Your projector, speaker, and microphone all seem to be working just fine. I think we can safely activate it now.” The doctor got out what looked like a tablet computer and began entering in information. “OK! We’re all set! Here are some brochures containing some information you might find helpful. Have a great day!” No sooner than the doctor exited, the green text appeared again.

Incoming call from 845315316456...

Thomas had no idea who this could be, and he certainly didn’t want to talk to them right now.

“Ignore?” he said doubtfully. It was a good guess, the green text quickly disappeared. Suddenly it popped back up again.

Incoming call from 864749167421...

Exasperated, Thomas decided to just ignore it without audibly saying so. He looked down at the pile of brochures he was holding and then back to the nurse who had opened the door and was waiting for him to follow her out. As he walked along the corridor, he thumbed through the stack and found one that he would definitely have to read as soon as possible: “Signing Up For the International Do-Not-Call Registry.” Upon rejoining the others, he discovered that Doug and Vera were apparently having the same problems.

“Ugh, why do you still have telemarketers in the future?” Vera whined.

“Heh, this is pretty funny,” Darin laughed. “Don’t worry, we’ll get you set up with the Do-Not-Call registry soon. Come on, let’s get something to

eat and go home.” The group made their way out of the implant office and used the POD system again to get home. All the while, Doug, Thomas, and Vera were being called by someone, somewhere, who no doubt had something very important to tell them about a special deal that they just had to act upon in the next fifteen minutes!

They finally got home and Darin immediately went to sign them up for the registry. Doug, Vera, and Thomas sat and looked over the brochures that explained the features of their new implants, added each other to their phone books, and played around with the translation feature using what little bits of foreign languages they knew. Lyla sat and watched them for a little bit, slightly amused for a time, but she quickly grew bored. She summoned Toby, called her mother, and reviewed her schedule with her to see if there was any point at which she could come for a visit. It was rather quickly determined that no, she could not, she was just simply too busy. She ended that call and then called her brother to talk about how much mom always wanted them to come over.

“Hey!” Doug suddenly shouted. “The calls stopped!” Thomas and Vera suddenly realized that this was, in fact, the case. They had grown very effective at ignoring the calls by that point and hadn’t noticed. Suddenly the green text notified them of the voice mails they now had to wade through. About an hour later, that was taken care of, and Darin reappeared out of nowhere.

“You should be all set!” He said.

“Thanks!” Doug said relieved. “How did you even register for that anyhow?”

“Got onto the Governet on my computer upstairs and registered there.”

“The Governet?”

“Yeah, it’s the portal for all of the government’s organizations. You can do nearly anything on it without having to go to the actual office in person.”

“So is it separated from the rest of the Internet for added security?”

“Internet?” Darin was puzzled by this term, but fortunately Lyla remembered reading about it in one of her history classes in college.

“Oh, no, the Internet was destroyed during World War Three,” Lyla explained. “The governments decided that it was a threat to global instability and dismantled it.”

“Don’t you mean global stability?” Vera asked.

“No?”

“Never mind...” Vera sighed.

“Anyhow, the Internet as you guys know it was destroyed but they began the Portal System in the 2050s after the personal computer made a comeback. There are quite a few different portals available, and most of them are fine tuned to work well on the implants since that’s where nearly all of the traffic on the Portals comes from.”

“Wait, so we can get on the Inter—Portal System with our implants?” Doug asked, suddenly intrigued by yet another technological advancement.

“Some of them, yeah, it depends if they specifically work with implants or not. The most common Portal that people use on their implants is the World Wide Wiki.”

“OK, so how do I do that?”

“Just say ‘Access Portal’ and then the name of the portal you want. So you could say ‘Access Portal: World Wide Wiki’ and you’d be there.” Doug decided to try this out immediately.

“Access Portal: World Wide Wiki,” he said, and was instantly greeted with the front page displayed in green text.

Welcome to the World Wide Wiki! Please choose your language!

“English?” The display flickered and changed.

World Wide Wiki, Tuesday, August 16th, 2208.

Today’s Featured Article: Beauty, Inc.

Did You Know... Melvin Frey was the first man to walk on Mars in the year 2061?

In The News: Government declares month of September to be International Government Appreciation Month

On This Day: 2083 – Earth’s climate declared stable thanks to the Great Green Movement of 2055

Say “Lookup [Article Name]” to learn more about any subject!

“That’s so awesome...” Doug said quietly.

“Yeah,” Darin said, “so you guys can get answers to all your questions on there instead of asking us!” Lyla looked at him and the two of them smirked.

“Yeah, yeah, very funny. Well anyhow, we can finally travel and see the world now right? We got our implants and ID numbers and everything, so let’s go!”

“Well, yeah, sure I guess, but we should probably try to get things straightened out at the bank first before we go so that you can actually, you know, pay for it.”

“Oh yeah!” said Thomas. “But how are we going to do that?”

“We got all the information in a file from Frank, so it should be pretty

straightforward...” Darin said. “We’ll go to the bank tomorrow and take care of it then. In the meantime, you all can play with your implants. Lyla and I will meet you down here tomorrow at 9 AM.” They parted and went up to their rooms. Thomas, Doug, and Vera stayed up for several hours, experimenting with the other features listed in the brochures they had received at the clinic. Finally, after some time, Thomas decided that he’d better get some rest. He felt unusually tired, but attributed it to the drugs that awful nurse had given him. He said good night to the others, and made his way to his room, eagerly anticipating a good night’s sleep.

21

“Thomas? You awake?” Darin asked, knocking on the door. “We wanna leave soon!”

“Ugh, overslept, sorry!” Thomas yelled back. “I’ll be down in fifteen minutes.” He stumbled to the bathroom, hopped in the shower, and hopped back out all within ten minutes. He threw on his clothes, dashed out into the hallway, and rushed down the stairs. “Ready!” he announced when he saw the gang standing in the landing waiting.

“Let’s tell him before he asks,” Doug said, smiling.

“So basically, we’re going to the bank to add you guys to the account that Frank started when you were first frozen. That way you’ll have access to the money when we travel. The account has been transferred from person to person over the years here at the lab,” Darin explained.

“It’s a miracle someone didn’t run off with the money...” Vera muttered.

“Well, Frank was extremely careful about who he hired to take the reins from him, and impressed upon that person the importance of doing the same,” Lyla said. “We were lucky to get the job ourselves, but the lab manager seemed to think having two younger people would be the best guides for you three when you were revived.”

“Lab manager? We have a lab manager?” Thomas asked.

“Not anymore, he died just over a year ago. He was so sad that he’d never get to meet you too...” Darin nodded in quiet agreement. “Anyhow, Darin and I have access to the account, we just need to go down to the bank, add you to the account, and we’re set.”

“That sounds easy enough...it’ll probably go horribly, horribly wrong,” Thomas mumbled. The others looked at him. His seemingly prophetic utterances were growing quite annoying.

The group exited the POD station, made their way up the street, into the bank, and into yet another queuing line. Fortunately this one didn’t take nearly as long as the line at the ID Office, and they were comforted by the fact that the bank seemed to be devoid of strange old women with British accents.

“Next!” said the man behind the counter. The group approached. “Oh? And which person here is the account holder?” Darin and Lyla looked

at each other, gestured with their eyes, and finally Lyla approached and stepped into a circular area on the floor marked off by a change of color in the carpet. A light flashed, and a scanner beeped. “OK, Lyla, you have two accounts with us today, which will we be managing?”

“Umm, we’ll be managing the account with more money in it,” Lyla said sheepishly. The man behind the counter laughed as if it was the funniest thing he had heard all day, then abruptly stopped, put on his serious face, and continued.

“OK, and what do you want to do with the account?”

“I’d like to give access to additional people.”

“Ah, and that explains your friends,” He winked cryptically as if his statement was supposed to have some sort of additional meaning. “Alright, well, have each one who needs access step forward into the scanner ring and we’ll get them on!” Lyla stepped aside and motioned Vera into her spot. The implant scanner lit up and beeped again. “Good, good, do you wish to impose a withdraw limit onto Vera here?” The teller asked Lyla.

“Oh, no, no, don’t put a limit on any of them,” Lyla responded. The teller nodded and pecked away at his keyboard, then motioned for the next person to step in. Moments later, Doug was added, then Thomas.

“OK Lyla, you’re all set! Anything else we can do for you today?”

“Oh wonderful, thanks, no I think that’s it.”

“Wait, can we get some cash out?” Doug asked.

“Cash?” The teller asked with a confused look on his face.

“Oh don’t mind him,” Lyla laughed and waved dismissively, “he’s been frozen for the past two-hundred years, and he just doesn’t know any better.” The teller laughed uproariously and banged his fists on the counter.

“BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!! AAAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!” he screamed, causing everyone to look over and wonder what on Earth could be so funny. Suddenly he stopped, put his serious face back on, and looked towards the queue line. “Next!” he said and waved goodbye to the group.

“Why wouldn’t you let me get any cash?” Doug asked. “You already have a nice wad handy or something?”

“No, physical currency hasn’t existed for decades,” Lyla said. “An international debit system was created around the middle of the last century once the implants were required by law. Everything is handled by the implant now; you just confirm the transaction and the money is removed from your account. After a while, it became obvious that currency was no longer needed, so it was phased out.”

“You don’t write checks anymore either,” Darin chimed in. “Just use a voice command to transfer money and you’re set.”

“What’s with all these voice commands anyhow?” Thomas asked. “How are we supposed to remember them?”

“Didn’t you read all of the brochures they gave you? They explained everything,” Vera said.

“Well...no.”

“Then don’t complain,” Vera folded her arms to rest her case. Lyla, Darin, and Doug stood smiling and very amused. Thomas just stood quietly. “Let’s go,” Vera said and walked out. The rest slowly followed with Thomas taking up the rear. Doug turned around and looked at Thomas occasionally, grinning like a maniac. They finally caught back up with Vera and paused to figure out what the next thing on the day’s agenda was.

“Well I don’t know, we’ve got the implants, you have access to the bank account, and we’ve basically done everything we needed to do for you to fit into society... What we do now is basically up to you guys,” Darin smiled.

“Wow, I think that’s the first time you’ve actually smiled. It’s very nice. You should do it more often,” Vera said and patted his arm. Darin blushed, Thomas gaped, and Doug coughed.

“Actually,” Doug said, “I’d like to spend some time researching travel destinations, you know?”

“I agree,” said Thomas, “I want to find out where we could possibly go, given that most of the things from our time are probably gone by now anyhow.”

“Well,” Vera said, “I wouldn’t mind having some time to check out some of the local scenery...” She stared at Darin, who blushed even more than before.

“OK...” said Lyla who was annoyed at this display, “let’s just go then.” They began on their journey back to the lab, a very uneventful trek that took them about fifteen minutes of walking and one POD trip. Finally they got back and separated to their rooms. Thomas looked around his room and realized how utterly boring it would be to just sit there. He wondered why they were back in their rooms again at mid-day, but then remembered that they were supposed to be investigating travel destinations. Thomas decided to make a list and looked around for a pen and paper, but didn’t see any.

“They give us a room with no TV, no windows, and no paper? Good grief,” Thomas muttered. He decided to go down to the lab. Surely there would be some paper there. He slipped out into the hallway and walked

towards the staircase. Just as he was about to descend he heard a door crack behind him. He turned around and saw Doug's head dart out to the left in the direction of his room and then towards the stairs where he was standing. He caught sight of Thomas and started flailing his arms wildly, indicating he wanted him to come that way.

"What's up?" Thomas shouted.

"SHHH!!" Doug hissed and put his finger to his lips to indicate the need to, quite bluntly, shut up. Thomas obeyed and walked briskly in that direction.

"What's up?" he whispered when he was close.

"I wanted to talk to you about something but I don't want Vera to know," Doug twisted his face in an unusual way. "She's been annoying me lately, and I'm not sure what's going with her and Darin, but it bugs me. Anyhow, come on," Thomas entered Doug's room and abruptly stopped, staring at the large image on the wall across from Doug's bed.

"How?" he asked, amazed.

"I know, right? I just figured it out myself a few hours ago. It's another one of those voice commands you love so much. I guessed that there had to be some sort of TV somewhere, and figured that it might be on the implant, so I was guessing at commands when the wall there turned on instead."

"Awesome!"

"Well, not really, no. TV hasn't gotten any better since our day and since I've had it on, I've seen nothing good. But the local news starts in about twenty minutes so I figured I'd watch that."

"Oh. That's not a big surprise though really, I didn't expect the media to change all that much..."

"I was hoping it would, but...oh well. Anyhow, I wanted to see if we could try to get a list together of potential travel destinations so we could split the list, research it individually, and save some time."

"That's what all the flailing and secrecy was for?" Doug shrugged. "Yeah, OK, let's do it."

"Good! I've got some paper right here," Doug reached down and produced a notebook from the backpack that had been stored in the closet all the years they were frozen. "I never go anywhere without a notebook on me, doodling is the perfect cure for boredom on any trip. Plus, if I'm suddenly hit with inspiration for some idea, I can write it down before I forget."

"Good thing, because I couldn't find paper anywhere in my room, and

I was on my way to see if there was some in the lab when you caught me.”

“OK, so let’s try and figure this out,” Doug sat on the bed and cracked the notebook, turning till he found a blank page. Thomas sat in the arm-chair across from the bed and pondered quietly about all the places he dreamed of going as a kid. The list was rather brief. Thomas never really cared for traveling and, until the few years before he met Frank’s team, he was content with where he lived.

“What about London?” Doug thought out loud. “I’ve always wanted to see England, and some parts of Europe for that matter.”

“How about Paris?” Thomas added.

“Eh...” Doug twisted his face. “See, from everything I’ve heard about Paris, it’s always struck me as a tourist trap. I mean, there’s France, and then there’s Paris. I wouldn’t mind seeing France, but not Paris.” Thomas shrugged.

“Might want to look into it anyhow, it could’ve changed a lot in two-hundred years,” Doug considered this, and finally wrote it down below London. They both paused momentarily while a loud, flashy advertisement for something on TV distracted them.

“China?” Doug suggested when the ad was done.

“What city?”

“Beijing? Shanghai? Hong Kong? Anything really.”

“We could go to more than one, couldn’t we?”

“Yeah, I guess, but we should at least pick one to really look into.”

“Let’s just try Beijing, that is—or was I guess—the capital.” Doug nodded in agreement and wrote it down on the list.

“WILL IT POO ON YOU?” The TV blared. Doug and Thomas stopped dead in their tracks, their jaws on the floor. Flashy three-dimensional word art accompanied the message. “The creators of ‘Survivor 1134, Enclosed Room Rapidly Filling With Water’, bring you their latest hit reality show, ‘Will It Poo On You?’” The advertisement cut to show a strange, bearded, malnourished looking man who was apparently the host. “Join us this week as we subject our contestants to the whims of a group of giraffes, all but one of which have been fed laxatives!” Another cut scene occurred, this time showing five people sitting behind five giraffes. “Join us for the fun Sunday at 9 PM!”

“You’re right...” Thomas finally said once the shock had passed. “It hasn’t changed a bit.” Doug shook his head sadly.

“Hey! Speaking of giraffes,” Doug perked up, “what if we go on an African safari?”

“Hey, yeah! I’ve always wanted to do that, but I knew there was no way I would’ve been able to afford it our time period, so I killed that dream early on.” Doug wrote it on the list. They sat quietly for a bit more, deep in thought.

“I really don’t know. I mean there are all the big cities of our day—provided they still exist anyhow—like Tokyo, Mexico City, Los Angeles, Delhi, Moscow, and so on... But none of them particularly appeal to me.” Thomas said. “I always dreamed of seeing the more scenic things like mountains, lakes, waterfalls, you know? I still wouldn’t mind doing that now but you’re not going to learn much about the future by staring at a mountain, no matter how majestic it is.” Doug smirked.

“This is true... I suspect that regardless of the ‘main’ destinations we choose, we’ll likely end up stopping over in various places along the way and get to do at least a little bit of sightseeing. So how about we just research different large Chinese cities, London, Paris, the safari, and...” he hesitated, mentally flipping coins and eliminating options. “Los Angeles. At least we’ll get an American city in there to see too.”

“That sounds good,” Thomas said.

“Cool. How about you take China and London, and I’ll take L.A. and the safari?”

“Sure, I’ll probably just go to my room and use the implant thing to look up stuff on the wiki.” Just then the local evening news came on.

“This is the WBC5 evening news with anchors Stan Stanley and Rita Viona, Sports with Emma Carme, and Weather with Rex Irving!” The announcer blared as images of strange looking people flashed by. The screen faded to black and a darkened studio lit up to reveal Stan and Rita at the anchor desk.

“Nevermind, I want to watch this first...” Thomas said.

“SHHH!!” Doug hissed.

“Good evening and welcome!” Rita said in an excessively perky voice. “We’ve got a lot of ground to cover tonight so we’re going to get started right away.”

“That’s right Rita,” said Stan in a sickeningly happy voice. Looking at these two, Thomas initially began to feel overwhelmed about how different these people were compared to the TV personalities of his time. Stan, though sitting down, appeared to be fairly tall, and his hair looked to be an unnatural shade of jet black. Rita was a blonde woman who seemed to have an extremely high center of gravity that would make it difficult to walk, let alone sit up. Both of them looked to only be in their twenties.

Thomas reflected for an additional few minutes and realized that they weren't, in fact, all that different after all. These two were just much younger than the typical anchors of his day. Perhaps this was a good thing, though. After all, the old system was designed around the idea that people would only take those who had been in the journalism business for years seriously, and so the older, more experienced individuals usually became anchors. Maybe people were more open minded now than in times past, and didn't look down on age so much. That, or these two were just picked for their looks. Either scenario seemed equally likely. Thomas realized he had missed the large majority of what had been going on, so he decided to shut off his mind and went back to listening.

"And that's why the students at Bill Gates Junior High will be sure to look both ways before crossing the street," Stan finished.

"Hahaha, oh those children, learning things. In sadder news 15 homicides were committed today," Rita said. Suddenly a list appeared on the screen showing the name, ID number, and picture of the victims. The list quickly scrolled by and disappeared. "Only two of those homicides remain unsolved." The camera panned back over to Stan who was staring at Rita.

"Oh, yes, well it was certainly a ... hot ... one outside today, wasn't it Rex? Can you tell us what to expect over the next few days?" An enormous, rotund looking man stood in front of a weather map with a pointer.

"Well Stan, it was quite hot indeed, and we'll see that trend continue through about the middle of this week, but at that point it's going to take a dive towards temperatures that are more typical of this time of year. Morning lows will be in the lower teens, so you may need to start stockpiling up on hot chocolate now!" Rex paused and looked extremely pleased. "I do love the hot chocolate... Beyond that, however, we should see a chance for some showers later this week. We may be dealing with some fog tonight and into tomorrow morning that looks like it could be as thick as pea soup..." Saliva began to drip down Rex's chin, but he quickly wiped it away and carried on. "As for today, however, it did get very hot out, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky! Temperatures reached the lower thirties and boy, you could feel it, it was hot enough to cook an egg on a sidewalk!" Drool began pouring down now without restraint. "As we look at our current conditions, however, we're sitting comfortably at about twenty degrees with clear skies... I like donuts. Back to you Stan."

"OK, thanks very much Rex, we always look forward to hearing your delicious weather reports. Now we're going to go to Emma for sports."

"OH GOODY!" Rita suddenly exclaimed. She began clapping and

bouncing in her chair, hitting Stan in the head. The screen cut to Emma who appeared to be in the middle of a stadium.

“Thanks Stan! Rita, I love your enthusiasm!” Emma flashed a wicked looking smile, obviously aware of what had happened. “I’m here in the Knick’s stadium,” she said, the camera pulling back from the close up to reveal her standing on a step ladder next to one of the team’s players. “We’re here with Marius Henning, the team’s 8’6” center. Now Marius, you guys had a rough game tonight against the Wildcats, can you tell me what your toughest issue was?” Marius began muttering incoherently, but eventually real words started to come out.

“Well Emma, I dunno what to tell ya, I mean that there team is simply amazing, they got one a them new centers from the most recent change in the Minimum Requirements, and going against someone that tall is just crazy.” Marius turned to talk directly to the camera now. “I mean I got mad respect for you Joey, but I gotta say that I don’t know what kinda ball you were playin’ out there!”

“Yes, that has to be tough for you since you’ve been playing for so long to see the latest generation of players start to enter the court, do you think that you will be forced to retire soon?” Marius looked away from the camera and began to tear up.

“Well Emma, I don’t know what...” he paused to sniffle and wipe away some tears. “I mean, the game is my life, if they replace me I just don’t know what I’m gonna do...” He walked off abruptly. Emma clearly wasn’t prepared for this.

“Changing times here on the court, Stan and Rita, it’s clearly difficult for some of the players, but I do want to relieve any fears Marius’ fans may have, the team’s manager indicated to me that they weren’t planning on replacing him anytime soon. Live from Knick’s stadium, I’m Emma Carme.”

“Thanks Emma,” Rita said. Stan was conspicuously absent. “Well that seems to be it for our broadcast this evening, we’ll leave you now with some footage from the marathon that happened earlier today. Stay tuned for the regional news.” Rita smiled and the studio faded out to show a mass of people running along the Queensboro Bridge. Doug turned towards Thomas, but said nothing. Thomas said nothing in return. Their silence said enough.

“This is the WBC regional news with Katie Couric’s clone,” the announcer said as dramatic music played in the background. Katie Couric—her clone that is—appeared on screen. Doug laughed in an amused tone that also seemed slightly nervous.

“Good evening, I’m Katie Couric’s clone, and welcome to the WBC regional news. Recently our region has been all abuzz about the upcoming election for this region’s members of the International House, and I had a chance to sit down today for an exclusive interview with Paula Antonie, one of the most controversial candidates in our region.” The recording of the interview began to play.

“Good evening Katie, thanks for havin’ me!” Paula said and shook hands with Katie.

“Well thank you for this interview, Paula, it’s an honor. Now I’d like to just get started and address one of the main things your opponents are attacking you for: your lack of experience. You, however, say that you have been studying the methods of a few of our region’s most distinguished members of the International House. Now I’m curious, which particular members of the International House from this region have you studied to understand how they get the job done?”

“I’ve really studied most of them, again, with great appreciation for them, for all that they do, they really are the ones that make our world great.”

“But which ones specifically? I’m curious.”

“Um, well, all of them, any of them that have really stood out to me over the years.”

“Can you name any of them?”

“I have a vast variety of individuals that I have studied.”

“Ugh!” Doug shouted in disgust. “Politicians are worse than they were in our day! Mute TV!” He barked and it was suddenly silent. “Hey, it worked! I was just guessing. Well anyhow, I’m going to start looking into things now. You can stay if you want, it’s up to you.”

“Nah,” said Thomas, “though I will need some paper if I’m going to be able to write things down. Can I borrow some?”

“Sure,” Doug said, reaching into his bag and producing a second notebook with a pen already stuck in the metallic spiral.

“Thanks!” Thomas said and hastily exited. He quietly made his way back down the hall to his room as if he were about to be eaten by a grue. Each step was strategically made and placed as if the next could be his last in a text-based adventure game that was seemingly impossible to beat. He cracked the door to his room, flipped the light switch and entered, swiftly closing the door behind him. He stood there and realized how silly he must’ve looked, had anyone seen him. “That was pointless,” he said to no one in particular.

22

Thomas sat on his bed trying to remember how he was supposed to connect to the wiki. It was a minute, yet critically important detail that would determine whether or not he would actually get any research done at all.

“Oh!” Thomas said as he suddenly remembered the brochures that oafish nurse Inge had given him the day before. He flipped through the stack and finally came to one that looked like it would help in the current situation. “Getting Connected to the Portal System,” he read aloud. He flipped the cover over and saw some diagrams. The next flap was opened and revealed a picture of a child with a speech balloon over his head that simply said “Access Portal World Wide Wiki!” Thomas thought that it appeared to be pretty straightforward, so he decided to just try it.

“Access Portal World Wide Wiki.” The front page appeared in the ever more familiar green text.

Welcome to the World Wide Wiki! Please choose your language!

“English.” The display changed to show the current front page.

World Wide Wiki, Wednesday, August 17th, 2208.

Today’s Featured Article: HELPR

Did You Know... The first POD system was operational for public use in 2179?

In The News: Regional House candidate debates to occur this Thursday.

On This Day: 2150 – Reliable Human Cloning first demonstrated.

Say “Lookup [Article Name]” to learn more about any subject!

Thomas stared at the text momentarily, taking it all in. Finally he decided to get it over with.

“Lookup London”

London:

London is the capital and largest urban area in the region of England. It has existed as an important settlement for more than two millennia, as its history extends back to its founding by the Romans. The city of London is widely renowned for its historic architecture, efficient POD system, and its strong influence on the global financial markets. The local economy thrives on tourism.

Government:

London's current mayor is Roxie Katrine. Roxie narrowly beat out her opponent, Brianna Abha, in the extremely close election of 2206, winning by only twenty-three votes. London is also home to the International House of Representatives in accordance with the Pangea Rotating House Treaty. The house will be moved to Moscow in 2220.

Geography and Climate:

London is located in the southern portion of the island of Great Britain, bordering the Thames river. The climate is best described as "piss-poor" with frequent fog and rain.

Culture:

Given the age of London, the city has quite a bit of historic architecture to explore. The backgrounds of people living there are also varied and numerous. With people faring from nearly every region present in the city, it is a melting pot unlike any other.

Transport:

London is home to one of the largest hovertrain hubs in the world with over two billion passengers passing through Heathrow Hoverport last year. The POD system is also widely known for its efficiency, unlike my ungrateful ex-boyfriend Joe who can't even fix a creaky door hinge, providing over one thousand different stations throughout the city. Hovercar jams are frequent in the skies of London, leading the local government to continue to work to expand the POD system in hopes of relieving the heavy traffic.

"Wow," Thomas said, "inaccurate and full of personal opinions. Figures." He got out the paper to write down the important points, but then realized there weren't any. Thomas was ready to look up articles about China when there was a knock on the door. He opened it to see Doug standing there looking annoyed.

"Hey, you want to get something to eat?"

"Oh? Yeah, sure."

"Cool. Let's go." Doug abruptly turned and Thomas hurriedly followed behind. They walked outside and made their way to the POD station.

"Uh, where are we going?" Thomas asked.

"Oh, sorry, Little Italy, the Mulberry Street station."

"Ah, OK."

BAMF!

They exited the station and walked up the stairs onto the street to find things much the same as they were two-hundred years ago. The restaurants

were still there, albeit under different names. They chose one and walked in to find the atmosphere just as they had remembered. They were seated and looked over the menu.

“So what’s wrong? You seem pretty annoyed,” Thomas asked Doug.

“I don’t know. I made the mistake of continuing to watch the Regional News, you know, with Katie Couric’s clone. Right after that the Global News came on and it was just as bad. I just imagined that the future would be so much better than our time but it doesn’t seem to have changed at all.”

“Well you can’t say that it hasn’t changed at all! I mean look at all the technology and how it’s transformed everything. Things definitely seem better in that respect.”

“On the surface maybe, but I can’t make heads or tails of how anything works! The Wiki is mostly useless. Most of the technologies I’ve tried to research using it have nothing in there about how it actually WORKS, just commentary about how ‘cool’ it is. Throw in the Copybots and the designer babies and it doesn’t look so great now does it?”

“I can understand that, yeah... I found the Wiki pretty useless too, but it’s not all that surprising is it? It’s user edited, just like Wikipedia was, so you have to kind of expect there to be consistency and accuracy issues.”

“I don’t know... I would just think that scientific progress would result in a more open, educated society where knowledge is freely exchanged. Instead, it’s turned into a society centered on appearances, full of amazing technology. Yet no one—except for some elite few apparently—knows anything about it.”

“Maybe you’re just looking in the wrong place. Remember how Darin said that the portals weren’t interconnected? Maybe all the information you’re looking for is on a different portal.”

“Hey, yeah... Maybe there’s some sort of scientific portal or educational portal! But how you’d get access, I haven’t a clue.”

“Well if it’s not publicly available, surely it’s available for students? I mean, hey, after we get done with all this traveling and exploring, you could go back to school if you wanted and learn all you want to know.”

“Now there’s an idea!” Doug’s face lit up, but then promptly dropped again. “Still, I feel like the information shouldn’t be as restricted as it seems to be... But then again, even when technical documents and such were more available in the past, most people didn’t care about any of it. Only those who were motivated enough actually looked anything up, so if they’re motivated now, they’ll get the information if they really want it. I just have to find out how...”

“There you go! See, no worries. So what else is up?”

“That was the main thing. The only other thing that’s bugging me is how Vera has been acting lately. The flirting with Darin, the shortness with both of us—”

“Wait, she got mad at you too?”

“Yeah, I was complaining about something, I don’t even remember what now... Anyhow, in the middle of our conversation, she called me a ‘pompous jerk’ and ran off.”

“Nice...”

“Yeah...so... I don’t know what’s up with her, but it’s not too big of a surprise. I mean, after all, we’ve really only known each other for a few weeks. But still, you’d think the common bond of being from the 21st century would keep us pretty tightly knit.”

“Frank thought so too, but I guess you can’t expect a bond like that to keep us together no matter what. To be honest, in the back of my mind, I half expected you all to leave me when we got to this point anyhow.”

“Heh, well, I guess if I really am truly honest about it, I never really expected us to stay together forever either... I figured we’d stay together for a few weeks, see the world, then part ways. I’m surprised that Darin and Lyla are hanging around too, but it seems Frank thought ahead for us.”

“Yeah, Frank did an amazing job, and the fact that this has worked out so far is incredible.” They continued chatting over their supper, discussing the past, present, and their perceived view of the future.

“OK, is that all guys?” The waitress walked up and asked.

“Oh, yeah, I think we’re set.” Doug responded.

“Great! How do you want the checks divided up then?”

“We’re together,” Doug said.

“OK, I’ll be right back.”

“It comes out of the same account anyhow so it doesn’t really matter,” Doug said, shrugging.

“Alright, here we are,” the waitress said, laying the check on the table. “You can pay that up front when you’re ready.”

“Thanks!” Doug said, but the waitress didn’t leave. She stood there, shifting her weight. She coughed politely. Thomas couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

“I can’t believe two young guys like you wouldn’t leave a tip!” She finally said, frowning.

“Oh I’m sorry, I forgot,” Doug said. He thought momentarily of trying to explain that he only got the implant yesterday, but decided that would

be a very bad idea. He racked his brain, trying to think. “Ah!” he said as he remembered the command. He then realized that it was no longer 2008, and the typical fifteen to twenty percent tip might have changed. On top of that, having to tip the server in person made it much more awkward. Doug looked at her and muttered, “Umm, make transaction send twenty dollars.”

“Wow!” the server said. “Accept! Thanks guys!” she ran off.

“That’s going to take a long time to get used to,” Doug mumbled.

“Ugh,” Thomas said simply. They walked to the register and handed the ticket to the man standing there.

“And how was everything tonight?” He asked.

“Good, good,” Doug replied.

“Excellent,” the man continued pecking away at the register. “OK,” he finally said, “that’ll be forty-two fifty.”

Il Stallone wishes to withdraw \$42.50 from your account. Accept or deny?

“Accept.”

“Thanks very much, you guys have a good night.” The two of them walked out and Doug looked over the receipt.

“Not bad, prices haven’t changed much since our day it seems.” They walked past a trashcan and Doug tossed the receipt in.

VOIP!

“What was that?” Thomas asked, looking around wildly.

“Huh? That? I dunno, probably a Copybot beating someone or something. Who knows? I wouldn’t worry about it.” They walked down to the POD station and one *BAMF* later, they were back in the area of the lab.

Incoming Call from “Vera”. Accept or deny?

“Accept.” Thomas said.

“Hey, where are you guys?” Vera asked. “We’ve been looking for you!”

“Oh, we just went to go get some food down in Little Italy. What’s up?”

“Well we’re trying to figure out where we’re going for this trip. Hurry up and get back here so we can talk about it.”

“We’re on 68th now, we’ll be back soon.”

“Fine, bye. End call.”

“Who was that?” Doug said, though he could already guess by the face Thomas was now making.

“Vera. Who else? She says they want to talk about where we’re going to go on our trip.”

“I guess we’ll just tell them what we found out on the Wiki,” Doug said, shrugging.

“There you are!” Vera said as they walked through the door. “Come on, let’s go down to the lab.” They followed her down the stairs and into the lab where Lyla was talking with Toby and clearing her schedule for the next few weeks. Darin was standing off to the side, attempting to look nonchalant, and failing miserably. Thomas remembered that face, as he himself had made it many times as a kid. It was what his mother referred to as a “guilty look.” Whatever it was that Darin had done wrong, Thomas didn’t want to know.

“So, what are we discussing?” Thomas asked.

“We’re just trying to figure out where to go.” Lyla said as she played with her hair. “Did you guys even get to research anything?”

“Yeah, we did,” Doug said, “and we found out a few things.”

“Oh?”

“Yup. We picked four destinations that we wanted to look into,” he said, motioning towards Thomas. “You wanna go first or should I?”

“You can,” Thomas replied, suddenly remembering he never looked into China at all.

“OK, well, we talked about four destinations that we thought would give us some good insight into how the world is now: London, China, Los Angeles, and an African safari.”

“Wait, what? Why an African safari?” Vera said.

“Well I figured that it’d be cool to see the state of the environment for one, given that it’s supposed to be fixed,” Doug said, glancing at Lyla. “Plus, it’s not like we can’t afford it! We might as well enjoy ourselves as we explore the future.”

“I can go with that. So what did you find out?”

“The African safari is definitely a possibility. There’s a lot of really nice packages based out of the area we used to know as Kenya. I figure we can go there last so we can enjoy it after being in a lot of the big cities. You know, reconnect with the natural world, and all that jazz.”

“That actually sounds great!” Lyla said, suddenly more interested in the conversation. “I always thought a safari would be a fun thing to do, but never dreamed of actually being able to do it.”

“That’s basically what I thought too!” Thomas chimed in.

“OK, so seems like we’re in agreement on that point,” Darin said. “What was that other one on your list? Los Angeles?”

“Oh, yeah, that... Well that’s not an option after all. In our day, that was a huge city, where most of the TV shows and movies were filmed, and all kinds of celebrities lived there. Apparently there was a huge earthquake

in 2019, and part of the state of California basically fell into the ocean.”

“Whoa! You mean the crazy people who said that was going to happen were right after all?” Thomas boggled.

“Yeah, I know! Who would’ve guessed?”

“That would explain why I’d never heard of it,” Darin said. “It does sound vaguely familiar though. Most of the movies and TV shows either come out of Bollywood or the city here now.”

“OK, so Los Angeles is out,” Vera said, hurrying them along. “What else is left?”

“London and Beijing, but I didn’t research those. Thomas will have to tell us about them.”

Thomas flushed. “Yeah, well London basically is the same as it was in our day, lots of public transportation available and a huge airport—err, hoverport rather. Apparently it’s also where the International House of Representatives is located, so that might be nice to see.”

“Huh, well at least it’ll be easy to get there. We can just go right into Heathrow Hoverport and then take the POD to our hotel, wherever it is,” Darin said. “What about China?”

“Ummm, actually,” Thomas stammered, “I didn’t get the chance to look up China before we left for dinner.”

“Why do we have to do all this research anyhow?” Vera said to no one in particular. “Can’t we just go and have an adventure? What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Well we could’ve tried to go to Los Angeles without doing any research, but where would that have left us?” Doug put on his best “bite me” face, and smiled. Vera was taken aback, and got angry.

“Fine!” She stood. “Fine! Just be that way! I see how it is. You guys just sit around here and waste your time talking. I’m going back to my room. You can call and let me know when we’re leaving.” She stormed out of the lab and up the stairs.

“Well she’s a delight.” Lyla said, frowning.

“Access portal World Wide Wiki,” Darin said. “Lookup Beijing.” Everyone sat quietly waiting to see what he would say. “Hmm, looks fine to me. The only thing this emphasizes is that sometimes the queues for the POD system can grow rather long due to the large amount of people there, so it says you need to have a lot of patience. Otherwise, there seems to be nothing particularly deadly, dangerous, or fun.”

“Not dangerous, deadly or fun? My favorite kind of destination!” Thomas said, grinning madly.

“I could go with more fun personally, but it otherwise sounds fine,” Doug said.

“OK, so basically we have three destinations we can go to,” Lyla perked up. “China, London, and an African safari, and we want to do the African safari last so we can get ‘back in touch with nature’. So where do we want to head first then?”

“Either way, we’re going to back track if we do Africa last. Why don’t we just go to London first, then head to China, and hit Africa? We can make some other pit stops along the way if we’d like too,” Doug offered.

“Sounds good to me,” Thomas said, nodding to indicate full his approval in case the sentence wasn’t enough. Darin and Lyla nodded nonchalantly.

“So when do you guys wanna leave?” Lyla asked.

“Why don’t we wait a day?” Darin suggested. “That way you can get whatever you need packed and go to the store to buy whatever you want to take with you. Lyla and I will work on getting the travel arrangements made, and then we’ll take off the following morning.”

“Perfect,” Doug said, “I’ll let Vera know.” He called her up and relayed the information as he walked up the stairs.

“Looks like we’re set,” Darin said. “See you guys around, I’m going to hit the gym for a while.” He walked out, leaving Lyla and Thomas sitting there alone.

“Well, I guess I’ll go to my room or something...” Thomas said quietly.

“You don’t have to, you know. You could hang out here with me,” Lyla said, smiling.

“So...” Thomas said awkwardly.

“So...” Lyla responded.

“Umm, this may seem strange, but I’ve been meaning to find out more about you. I know you were a teacher before you came to work here from what you told us before, but did you grow up here in the city?”

“You don’t have to feel awkward about it,” she giggled, “I want to know more about you too—all of you really,” Lyla quickly recovered and moved to answer the question. “Yeah, I was born and raised here in the city. As far as family goes, my parents are still around. You probably heard me talking to my mom on the phone the other day,” Thomas nodded. “Anyhow, I have two brothers, one’s in the city still, but I never see the other one anymore... He’s younger than me, but my parents won the WBA lottery with him, so he’s off playing basketball somewhere...”

“Oh, I see...” Thomas responded quietly, thinking about the fact that

in all actuality, he didn't have a clue. "Actually, I really don't see... It's just so hard to relate. I was never very good at communicating my thoughts and feelings accurately anyhow. Now with everything that has changed since I've been frozen, I don't even know where to begin."

"Aww, look, Thomas," Lyla stood up and walked over to sit on the couch next to him. "I know it's tough for you guys, and maybe Darin and I are sometimes too short with you three, but it's hard for us too. We don't know a whole lot about your time period, so it's hard for us to figure out what you are and aren't familiar with already. We've just got to stick together, stay positive, and most of all, we've got to be patient and understanding with each other." Thomas thought for a minute and then smiled.

"That sounds great and all, but I don't think we can do it."

"What? Why not?"

"We're only human," Thomas said, sporting a goofy grin. Lyla gaped, then laughed out loud.

"You are too much! So tell me about you then, what's your story?"

"Well..." Thomas began.

They talked late into the night.

23

Thomas awoke the next day around eleven. He had stayed up way too long the previous night. It was worth it though. The long conversation he had didn't make him feel all that different about the future itself. However, it left him feeling much better about their guides, especially Lyla. Thomas couldn't help but feel the same way about her as he did about Vera when they first met. Sadly, though, Thomas was sure it would never go anywhere. What could a guy from the twenty-first century possibly have in common with a woman from the twenty-third?

He slid out of bed and got ready for the day ahead of him. They had planned on going shopping to get some new clothes and other assorted items for the trip. Thomas, however, opted out of going as one big group. He wanted to experience the future for himself. Mostly, though, it was his disdain for shopping that fueled the desire to go alone. If he went with a big group, who knows how long it would take? Going alone allowed him to get in, get what he wanted, and get out.

Thomas laid out the clothes that he planned on wearing and got cleaned up. As he walked back into his bedroom from the bathroom, he turned on the TV so he could watch the news as he got dressed. It was a fairly pointless effort. It only took him a few minutes to get dressed, but it made him feel better to hear another human's voice. Thomas finished throwing his clothes on and sat on the bed, staring idly at the TV for a time.

"Well," he finally announced to the room, "here goes." Thomas turned off the TV, grabbed his backpack, and stepped out into the hallway. "Hey Lyla," he said as he passed her on the stairs.

"Hi Thomas," she said in response.

"Wait," Thomas said, whirling around, "you guys are back already?"

"Back? Oh, I didn't go. I didn't want to get up early today so I just told them to go without me. I thought you had already left?"

"No, I slept in too," Thomas replied.

"So you're just now leaving?"

"Yeah."

"Mind if I come along?"

"Oh... Yeah, sure, I guess so."

"Great! I'll be right back. Don't leave without me!" Lyla dashed up the

stairs and slammed the door as she entered her room. Thomas shrugged and entered the foyer below. As he stood there waiting, he thought about the fact that his shopping trip was probably going to take much longer now. But as he saw Lyla running down the stairs, he suddenly realized that he didn't care.

"Ready?" Thomas asked with a smile.

"Always. Let's go!" They exited the lab and Lyla locked the door behind them. "So," she said as they strolled down the sidewalk, "where were you planning on going anyhow?"

"Oh," Thomas said, "nowhere in particular. I was just going to go up to the area with all the stores we saw the first day."

"Perfect," Lyla said, "there are tons of stores there. We should be able to get you something good."

"Something good? What do you mean by that?"

"No offense Thomas, but that style you're wearing is severely outdated."

"Well it IS a little over two-hundred years old," Thomas said with a smirk.

"You know what I mean," she laughed. "They still do sell clothes like that, but it's certainly not the most popular thing in the world."

"Button down shirts and jeans? Not popular? Really?!" Thomas pretended to be shocked.

"Shut up!" Lyla said, laughing as she jabbed Thomas in the side with her elbow. They walked along, joking and laughing, engaging each other in a battle of wits. "Here we are," Lyla finally announced. Thomas looked up at the sign: Sputnik's. He looked into the windows and breathed deep. He was about to enter the dangerous world of twenty-third century fashion. Thomas walked up, cracked the door, and was immediately met with blaring music. He stepped inside and Lyla followed behind.

"What do you think?" Lyla shouted.

"Let's see here," Thomas shouted back as he looked around, "photos of unrealistic models plastered everywhere, blaring music, and tons of clothes with holes manufactured in them. Things haven't changed much in two-hundred years."

"Oh I think you'll be surprised," Lyla screamed. "You obviously haven't noticed what's missing yet."

"Well most of the models seem to be missing their shirts, but I'm guessing that's not what I'm looking for."

"Nope, keep looking." Thomas looked around the relatively empty store. There was a counter at the front where one employee was making a

sale. Shirts in all sorts of styles and colors lined the walls, and plastic mannequins were scattered throughout, sporting the various fashions. In several locations, there were mirrors, presumably to see how you looked once you tried on the clothes. Wait... Thomas looked around quickly.

“Aha, so you found out what was missing then?” Lyla shouted.

“Where are the clothes?”

“You’ll find out!” Lyla said, grinning mischievously. “Come on, let’s just go and find something you like. Pick out a shirt off the wall that you want to try on.”

“OK,” Thomas said, wondering what the trick could possibly be. He walked along the wall, checking out some of the graphic tees. Thomas thought that about half of the slogans were incredibly stupid, and the other half made pop culture references that he didn’t understand. Most of the shirts fell into both categories. Finally he found a simple shirt that didn’t look too bad. It was a simple, dark red t-shirt with the Sputnik’s logo placed unobtrusively on it. Normally Thomas hated any t-shirt with a logo, but he thought the Sputnik logo was kind of cool, so it was acceptable.

“Found one?” Lyla asked suddenly, reappearing out of nowhere.

“Geeze, you scared me,” Thomas replied. “Yeah, this one’s not bad.”

“OK,” Lyla said, grabbing the tag and looking at it quickly. “Let’s go.”

“What?” Thomas was confused.

“Come on! Just come over here to the mirror.”

“I don’t see what I’m going to be looking at. I haven’t even tried anything on yet.” Thomas stood in front of the mirror feeling stupid.

“Just stand there and wait. Keep looking,” Lyla grabbed something from a cubbyhole right next to the mirror and began fiddling with it. Thomas stole a look at the device before Lyla could tell him to keep looking in the mirror again. It appeared to be a touch screen remote control of some sort. Thomas could only guess what it was for. He decided just to follow orders and kept staring in the mirror in front of him. Suddenly, it did something he had never seen a mirror ever do before: it flickered. Thomas gasped and blinked. He was now wearing the very same shirt he was looking at just moments ago! He looked down quickly, but was still wearing what he came in with. Yet the mirror still showed him dressed in the dark red shirt.

“What gives?”

“Well,” Lyla said, smiling, “it’s not actually a mirror. It’s a special computer with a mirror-like display built in.”

“Of course it is,” Thomas sighed.

“Hey, it’s a good thing! You can try on anything you want without

actually having to put it on, and change sizes in an instant. Watch this,” Lyla fiddled with the remote again and Thomas turned his attention to the display. It flickered once more, and suddenly the shirt he was wearing looked to be about five sizes too small, showing off every fold and crevice in his body underneath.

“Hey!” Thomas shouted. Lyla giggled and pushed another button. Now the shirt was gone entirely. “Cut that out!” Thomas said, clutching himself before again realizing that he was still wearing the clothes he came in with. Lyla was in hysterics. She finally stopped laughing enough to push a few more buttons, bringing Thomas back to the first, normal fitting red shirt.

“Oh,” Lyla said, wiping away a tear, “I’m sorry, I just had to mess with you. So the computer scans your body, and then it shows you a representation of your body in that item of clothing on the display. You can change the size of the clothes to whatever you like, and—”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” Thomas cut Lyla off, “some fancy new technology has revolutionized another aspect of everyday life.” Lyla stared at him, unsure of what he was thinking. He was staring straight ahead, his face blank. “But,” he said as he turned to look at her, cracking a smile, “this is a change I think I can live with.” Lyla smiled back, glad that she wasn’t about to experience another episode of Technophobia Theatre.

“Well it does make things much easier,” Lyla said. “Now let’s pick some things out for you.” Lyla began pecking away at the remote control and finally seemed content with some combination. She pushed the button and Thomas found the model of himself wearing loose fitting board shorts and a snazzy looking t-shirt. “What do you think?”

“I dunno. I never really liked board shorts. Too many people in my day got them about four sizes too big, leaving them hanging off their hips and showing off their underwear. Say,” Thomas suddenly said, “did that style ever die? Please tell me it did.”

“Oh, the ‘I wear my pants so loose I have to hold them up when I walk’ thing? Yeah, mostly. There are some people who still wear that style, but most people realized how stupid it made them look and stopped.”

“Good thing,” Thomas said.

“Hey, that looks pretty good on you,” an employee said as he walked up behind them.

“You think so?” Thomas asked.

“Oh yeah,” the employee replied, “but I would swap out some normal shorts or a pair of jeans for the board shorts.” Thomas smiled slightly and glanced over in Lyla’s direction.

“That’s just what I was saying.”

“Glad I could help. If you need anymore backup, just shout. My name’s Rob.”

“Cool. Thanks Rob,” Thomas looked back to the mirror and found that Lyla had already changed to a nice looking pair of shorts.

“Yeah,” Lyla said, looking him over, “that guy was right. Normal shorts do look better.”

“Well he should be right, it’s his job!” Thomas and Lyla spent the next hour or so trying on different items of clothing, adding the items they liked to their virtual cart as they went. Ten new complete outfits, four new t-shirts, two pairs of pants, and a pair of pajamas later, they finally finished and went to checkout.

“All set then?” Rob asked.

“Yup, finally found everything.”

“Excellent,” Rob said. He punched up the transaction on the computer. *Sputnik’s wishes to withdraw \$645.78 from your account. Accept or deny?*

“Accept,” Thomas said.

“Great!” Rob said. “For this amount of clothing, though, we’re going to need some time to produce it. You can come back and pick it up in about an hour.”

“That’s fine,” Lyla replied. “Come on,” she turned to Thomas, “let’s go have lunch.”

“Oh...OK, sure,” Thomas said, slightly confused as to why they had to come back. “Why do we have to wait?” He asked once they got out of the store.

“They produce all the clothing that you buy on demand using a machine they keep in the back. Keeps costs down and they’re able to make everything in your perfect size.”

“Huh. Pretty nifty,” Thomas said. For some reason, despite everything else he had seen thus far, this was one of the most impressive innovations. He wasn’t about to let anyone on to this fact, however, because it seemed like such a silly thing to be so impressed by. “Where are we going?” Thomas said, suddenly realizing that he had no idea where they were heading.

“There’s a really nice cafe around the corner we can go to,” Lyla replied. “It’s good food, decently priced, and pretty fast, so we won’t waste a lot of time.”

“Cool,” Thomas said, “sounds good.” Lyla was right about it being around the corner. Not more than a minute had passed, and they were already standing in line at the cafe, looking over the menu. It was a fairly

simple selection of food—mostly soups and sandwiches—but the selection of drinks was impressive. Endless combinations of coffee and flavorings available in hot or cold and countless sizes. Thomas wasn't sure where to begin.

“Can I help you?” the teenager behind the counter asked.

“Yeah, I'll have a Caesar salad and a low-fat mocha shake with whipped cream,” Lyla said.

“Anything else?”

“Thomas, what do you want?”

“What?” Thomas asked, still undecided.

“It's on me, what do you want?”

“Oh, err, yes, well... Ummm, can I get a turkey club and ... actually, can I just get a medium black coffee?”

“What was that last thing?”

“A medium black coffee?”

“I don't understand...”

“You know,” Thomas said, “get a medium cup, pour coffee into it, and don't add anything.”

“Just plain coffee?”

“Yes.”

“Hot or cold?”

“Hot, of course!”

“OK then... That'll be \$11.26.”

“Accept,” Lyla said. “Come on,” she said to Thomas, “let's go sit down, they'll bring it to us.” They walked over and picked a table next to a window in the far corner of the restaurant. “So,” she said once they were seated, “how are you coping with the future? Better I hope?”

“Yeah, I'm finally coming to terms with it I think. I just couldn't get over how different things were. But as I thought about it more, I realized that's why I came to the future to begin with. I just need to grin and bear it. Eventually, it'll all make sense.”

“See, you're fine now!” Lyla said with a smile. When Thomas wasn't busy being neurotic, she found him to be quite likable. “And hey,” she said after a pause, “don't mind Darin and I if we get a bit snippy with each other. In case you haven't noticed, we're not exactly one-hundred percent compatible.”

“Really?” Thomas said, surprised. He had indeed overlooked this incompatibility, or at the least, hadn't noticed it.

“Don't get me wrong, he's a nice guy and everything. He just reminds

me so much of my brother at times. The whole mindset of anyone who won one of the sports lotteries seems to be the same. I grew up with it and found it intolerable at times back then—thanks” she said to the woman who set down their food. “So sometimes I get frustrated with Darin now.”

“What do you mean by mindset? What do lottery winners do that annoys you so much?”

“I don’t know exactly, it’s hard to explain...” Lyla stirred around her salad. “Come to think of it, it’s probably no fault of theirs. Everyone treats lottery winners like royalty. It’s no surprise that they’re narcissists.”

“Darin doesn’t seem self-centered to me though.”

“That’s only because he got rejected. It brought him down quite a few notches to a more normal level. Trust me, once in a while, that self-centered attitude crops up, and that’s when he annoys me.”

“It’s not like self-centeredness is anything new though. We had the same problem in my day, and I’m willing to bet that the same problem existed in nearly every point in human history. It’s just human nature.”

“That may be so, but it’s certainly controllable.”

“This is true.”

“Yeah. Darin and I almost dated for a little while, back when we both started working at the lab, but it didn’t work out. I just want someone like—well,” she said quickly, catching herself, “someone who’s down to Earth, you know what I mean?”

“I guess,” Thomas said.

“You guess? What does that mean?”

“Well... I’ve never really been in a serious relationship...”

“Really? But you’re in your mid-twenties aren’t you?”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean anything. It’s not like I was never interested in anyone. I just never had a relationship that went anywhere.”

“I see...” said Lyla. She sat in silence for a while, deep in thought. “Anyways, do you need to get anything else for the trip?”

“No, I think I’m pretty much set.”

“Awesome!” Lyla said. They resumed the small talk typical of lunchtime chatter. Before long, they were done, and were returning to the lab, hands full. “Hello?” Lyla called as they entered the heavy metal door. “Huh. They’re not back yet.”

“I knew they’d take forever to get back here,” Thomas said.

“That’s OK, you got the stuff you needed. We’d better get these up to your room so you can pack your things.” Lyla led the way up the stairs and opened the door to Thomas’ room, setting his bags down inside.

“Thanks,” Thomas said timidly.

“No problem,” Lyla said.

“Hello?” Darin called from downstairs.

“Oh, they’re back, I’d better go.” She turned to leave.

“Hey Lyla?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for coming with me,” Thomas said. “I really enjoyed it.”

“Yeah,” she said, smiling, “it was fun.”

“Anyone here?” Darin called again.

“I’m going to get down there, I’ll see you tomorrow, if not later tonight.”

“Bye,” Thomas said, smiling as he watched her walk down the hall. He closed the door once she turned out of sight and leaned against it for a time, contemplating the day’s events. A pleasant thought came to his mind, but once more, he quickly dismissed it as impossible. He sighed and began packing his bags for the long journey ahead of him.

24

“Dude, hurry up!” Lyla shouted up the stairs. This time, for once, it was not Thomas, Vera or Doug who was late, but Darin.

“Coming!” he shouted back.

“I don’t understand what his problem is. He had all day yesterday to get his stuff packed and he didn’t even have to buy clothes like you guys did.” Darin came running down the stairs with his bags in tow. “Finally! Let’s go, we’ve gotta get to the hoverport if we’re going to catch an early flight.”

“Cool it,” Darin said, “we’ve got plenty of time.” They walked down to the nearby POD station as they had done many times before, but this time they chose Hillary R. Clinton Memorial Hoverport as their destination. A *BAMF* later and they arrived at the main lobby.

“The white zone is for loading and unloading only!” a female voice declared over the loudspeaker. Thomas looked around him, taking in all the sights. The terminal would’ve been described as “modern” in his time, but he imagined that this was probably now a very standard design. Everything was wide and open with large windows letting in as much outside, natural light as possible. Outside these windows, Thomas observed hundreds of taxis, landing, dropping off their passengers, getting new passengers, and taking off as quickly as they came. That, he assumed, was the “white zone.”

“Attention all passengers,” a friendly male announcer began. “At Hillary R. Clinton Memorial Hoverport, your safety is our top priority. Therefore we ask that you please be considerate of your fellow travelers and keep the main areas of pedestrian traffic clear. This includes the area near the POD stations, the entryway from the Hovertaxi landing pads, and the areas around the ticket counter queuing lines. Thank you for your cooperation.”

Thomas suddenly realized he was still standing rather close to the PODs. Now that he was conscious of this, he noticed that there were quite a few people walking by that looked annoyed at his presence. It was also at this point that he noticed his companions were now far ahead of him, and he ran to catch up.

They walked over and got into the line for tickets. Thomas looked at the logo plastered on the wall behind the desk in front of them: Pangaean Hoverlines. Surprisingly, things were moving very quickly. They only had

to endure the announcer's explanation about the white zone three more times before they reached the front of the line.

"Hi, how can I help you today?" Asked a pleasant, plump woman behind the counter.

"Yes, we'd like five tickets to London please," Darin said.

"Oh, London, how fun! Let me check on that for you." Thomas wondered what the computer she was using looked like, but he couldn't see it from where he stood. In any event, he didn't hear her typing. He guessed it must have been a touch screen of some sort. "OK, we have a flight leaving here at 11:00 AM," she said, glancing at the clock, "and it's only a little after ten now, so you have plenty of time to get there. There's only two first class seats available, but plenty of seats left in coach."

"We'll just take five tickets for coach please."

"OK then, I'll just need to get a scan of each of you for the ticketing database." She pulled out what almost looked like a bar code reader and pointed it at Darin.

"Accept," he responded to the prompt to accept the charges.

"Thank you, and now you dear," she motioned for Lyla. Three more scans later and things were finalized. "Alright then, do you have any bags you need checked?"

"Yes, please," and they proceeded to hand over most of their bags. A robotic arm gently picked up each bag and attached an electronic tag to it. The bag was then slid by the arm into a POD where it vanished out of site, presumably to the area where the hovertrain would be loading.

"Thank you, you're all set! Enjoy your trip!" She said as she waved goodbye.

"Thank you," Darin said as they walked off.

"Don't we get tickets or something?" Vera asked.

"Nope, it's all done electronically, so when we walk through the security checkpoints in a minute, it'll check us against the ticketing database and allow us through."

"Cool," Doug whispered as he had done often before. They approached the security checkpoint and placed their carry-on bags into a POD. It disappeared momentarily and reappeared in a POD on the other side. The security guard standing just beyond what appeared to be a metal detector nodded them through, one by one. As they passed through, the red light above turned green to indicate approval, and they grabbed their bag.

"It's a really neat setup," Lyla said as they walked towards their gate. "As your bag passes through the POD system, it's analyzed, and anything po-

tentially dangerous is automatically removed before it's reassembled on the other side. The agent watching the monitor is notified about what items, if any, were removed from the bag. If it's anything particularly dangerous, of course, the person would be detained, but for little things like pocketknives or scissors they never bother to stop anyone."

"What do they do with the things they remove?" Doug asked.

"I saw something about that on TV once," Darin said. "They have a depot where there are literally piles and piles of scissors, knives, and other things. Some people tried to appeal to get their things back in the beginning when the system was first installed, but were denied. Everything is streamlined so that getting through security is as fast as possible, so they don't track who owns what. There are still some who complain, of course, but the vast majority of people are more concerned about short lines and pack items like scissors in the checked luggage where it belongs."

"If someone were actually trying to do something stupid like blow up the train with a bomb," Lyla added, "the item would get found and removed regardless of whether it was in the checked luggage or the carry on bag. In that case, the item is kept as evidence and the person is detained immediately."

"So what do they do with all the knives?" Thomas asked.

"They usually recycle the whole heap once a month for scrap metal," Darin said.

"Floaters Inc. Flight 1532 to Seattle is now boarding," a voice announced.

"Well how do they know that I'm not carrying a gun or something else on my person instead of in my bag?" Doug asked.

"That thing we walked under analyzes you as you pass through," Darin explained. "It basically lets the agent see if there's anything on your person that shouldn't be there. It also checks to verify that you are in the ticketing database. If there's anything wrong, the light won't turn green, and the agent will pull you to the side to find out what the exact problem is."

"You know, this really isn't all that different from the airports of our day," Thomas said. "The only difference is that everything is completely streamlined so it's a lot faster, and people aren't constantly looking at you like you're a criminal."

"So, in other words, it's completely different from the airports in our day?" Vera said with a smile. Had she not been smiling, Thomas would've been annoyed. The smile, however, seemed to indicate that Vera was back to her old self and had gotten over whatever it was that was making her so

snotty the past few days.

“Well yeah, I guess so. I mean, the basic premise is the same, they’ve just actually done it right this time.”

“I know, I was just messing with you. I can see why all the airports failed though, even if they did have this same technology, the negative stigma was definitely there, and they still probably executed it poorly.”

“Here we are!” Darin said, derailing the hovertrain of thought. They had arrived at their gate. Seats were scouted out and picked, and they were actually comfortable. Thomas glanced around the waiting area. Families and businessmen were relaxing, and the usual rotten kid was running around in circles, screaming his head off.

“Things really haven’t changed,” he muttered. Then he saw it: a hovertrain far in the distance was rapidly approaching the gate. He stood up and walked over to the window. It seemed fairly short for your typical train... Then again, your typical train didn’t hover either. From his point of view, it looked to be about ten cars long. It slowed as it approached the gate, but almost seemed like it wasn’t slowing down fast enough. Thomas began to take a few steps back. As expected, though, the train finally did come to a stop a few meters from the window, allowing Thomas to breathe a sigh of relief. Thomas watched as the hoverport workers scurried over and began unloading luggage. The walkway that connected to the gate began moving towards a door on the side of the train and was attached in a matter of minutes.

Passengers departed the train and walked past the seating area as they made their way to the exit. Outside, the workers continued unloading bags when another, smaller locomotive began approaching. It was pushing along two additional cars which were attached onto the end of the train. Finally the train was emptied and looked ready for boarding.

“Man, they really are efficient!” said Doug who had walked over to watch when the train arrived.

“Yup,” Darin said from behind them, “they have to be. Hovertrains are so widely used and depended on for a lot of long distance travel. Delays are virtually unheard of anymore.”

“Unbelievable...” Doug said. He was starting, once again, to have a bit of a positive outlook about future technology.

“Pangaean Hoverlines flight 1610 to London is now boarding,” a voice announced.

“OK, here we go,” Darin said as they grabbed their things and walked towards the gate. They passed under yet another archway with a light that

again turned green, granting them access to the train. They went down the extended walkway that connected to a car near the front of the train. To the right, in the first two cars behind the locomotive, was first class. Once again, archways with lights signaled who belonged where. The group went to the left and made their way down the aisle. On each side there were rows of three seats facing alternating directions. After passing through four cars, they reached their seats.

“Seating Group 124, yup, this is it,” Darin said, and they sat down.

“Pretty nice,” Vera said as she stuck her bag under her seat, “that we can sit facing and in a group like this. I’m surprised we have as much room as we do.”

“Well with people coming in more shapes and sizes than ever before, they were kind of forced to make more room. Plus that was always the perk over airplanes, hovertrains were much more comfortable,” Lyla said.

“Ah, here we are!” said a man standing in the aisle. “One two four, yes. Looks like I’ll be joining your little group,” he said, and took the last remaining aisle seat next to Vera, who smiled politely back. He was your average looking business man, slightly overweight, sporting a suit, brown bowler hat, and a brown leather briefcase. He placed the briefcase squarely on his lap, removed his bowler, and placed it neatly on top of the briefcase. He let out a long contented sigh and leaned his head back against the headrest. He seemed to have fallen asleep.

“So...anyhow, how long of a trip is it going to be?” Thomas asked after a time.

“About three and a half hours,” Darin responded.

“That’s all? Wow, pretty fast,” Thomas said.

“Not really,” Doug said. “The Concorde of our time could make the flight in just under three hours.”

“Oh,” Thomas said.

“But even though nearly all the planes before the last airline collapsed were slightly faster, the service was simply horrible,” Darin replied.

“That it was!” said the man, suddenly becoming alert. “Back when I first started out in the business, we used one of the last few airlines for all our travel, and it was a thoroughly miserable experience.”

“Oh? And just what is your business?” Vera asked out of curiosity.

“What? Business?” The man bolted up in his chair. “Oh, sorry,” he said, nervously fiddling with his hat, “I don’t like to talk about my business all that much.”

“What? You just did! Just now, you talked about how your business had

you traveling on the airlines,” Vera responded.

“I did? Well you just said I did, so I guess I did. Strange. My business is actually in sales mostly.”

“Selling what?”

“That’s for me to know my dear, that’s for me to know.” He closed his eyes again and leaned back against the headrest.

“Strange,” Vera turned and mouthed to Darin, who shrugged.

“So when we arrive at the airport, it’ll be pretty late,” Darin said. “We left the city at eleven, but London is five hours ahead of us, and the flight itself takes about three and a half hours, so it’ll be 7:30 in the evening when we get there. It’ll be past eight before we can even leave the hoverport. It’s going to be too late to do anything, but I figure we can find a nice restaurant and then find a hotel to stay at.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Doug responded, and everyone else nodded.

“You’re on a trip for pleasure I take it!” The strange gentleman sat up again. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy it, London is a great city, I visit it quite often myself.”

“For business, right?” Vera said smiling, knowing that this would likely provoke a reaction.

“Yes, yes indeed, but it’s one of many places I travel to, but of course I can’t discuss that, no no. I also, however, do enjoy the occasional vacation in London, or holiday as I rightly should call it. Yes. Yes.” Vera smirked. “I might actually recommend a restaurant to you, if you happen to enjoy a good curry,” he paused, looking for any sign of approval, but none came quickly. Rather than to let control of the conversation escape his grasp, he continued. “There is a very good Indian restaurant called ‘Talik’s’. An excellent curry, most exquisite. If you are at all in the mood for such a thing, that is the place to go.”

“Actually, I haven’t had a good curry in a very long time,” Thomas said, “and I wouldn’t mind having some if everyone else was agreeable. Thanks for the suggestion.”

“Quite welcome my boy, quite welcome.” The man suddenly looked quickly around him, popped open his briefcase, and stole a look inside before securely latching it again and politely coughing. He then resumed his previous position with his head against the headrest.

“Hey,” Thomas said suddenly, looking out the window. “Look at that!” Doug and Vera glanced over to see what he was referring to. They were whisking along at an intense rate of speed over the ocean, and yet, outside

the windows, advertisements could be seen.

“Oh yeah, those are hover billboards,” explained Darin. “See, many of the hovertrains that fly over the Atlantic travel along three main corridors, so advertising agencies deployed hovering billboards near these paths. They’re connected to a system that tracks where the trains are. It’s the same system that prevents the trains from colliding, except they have read-only access to the data, so they can’t change anything. Anyhow, the computer on the billboard calculates where the closest train will be compared to its current location, and then quickly flies as near as it can to the path of that train. It can’t move as fast as the train, but it places itself either to the left or right of the train and moves as fast as it can along the same path. That’s why we’re still able to read them even though we’re passing them, we’re not passing fast enough to make them illegible. They’re all solar powered and the ads displayed are in a full rotation and updated as needed remotely.”

Thomas stared out the window at the billboards as they passed. “Conquer Plaque!” declared one billboard featuring toothpaste. “Vote Rosalin for International House!” pleaded another. Conversation continued to focus around what to do once they got there, and they did, in fact, decide to go with the recommendation of Talik’s Indian Cuisine. The man continued to make vague hints as to what he really did for a living, but would never confirm or deny anything he said. After roughly three hours and several more suspicious peeks inside the briefcase, they finally arrived at Heathrow Hoverport. Trains could be seen coming fast and furious, in and out from all directions.

“Good grief, they weren’t exaggerating when they said that this was the busiest hoverport in the world,” Thomas said.

“Oh no, not at all,” said the man, “I’ve seen it far worse than it is now. We’re actually getting in very quickly. Sometimes the trains would have to circle above the hoverport waiting till it’s clear to approach. That was several years ago, of course, they continue to expand and make great strides in turnover speed.”

“How old are you anyhow?” Vera asked bluntly.

“Oh, I’m only sixty dear, but a lot has changed in the time that I’ve been living.”

“Huh. What was your name again?”

“Ah, but I never gave it to you, Vera!”

“I never gave you mine either...”

“Yes, but I learned a lot about you five from your conversation on the trip. I always listen intently. You can learn a lot about people that way, and

that's the mark of a good salesman. Here," he said, digging in his pockets, "here is a copy of my business card. Keep in touch, it was lovely to meet you." The man walked off and disappeared.

"What a strange person," Thomas said.

"What does his card say?" Doug asked. Vera just laughed. "What? What's it say?"

"I can see why he was so secretive about his work," Vera said, still chuckling.

"Just read it!" Doug said, growing impatient.

"Carlton J. Corning, Used Furniture Salesman," Vera read aloud, "Caring for all your low-end needs! Call 529401520709 for a free quote!"

"What a strange person!" Thomas said again.

"Yeah, we got it," Darin said, laughing, "let's go!" They grabbed their bags from under their seats and made their way down the aisle with relative ease. "The secret is," Darin said as they walked, "to wait until everyone else is through with standing in the aisles not moving. It's much less stressful, and once the traffic jam is gone, you can just breeze through."

"You know, you seem to think very deeply about mundane things," Vera said.

"There's the Vera we know!" Doug hissed to Thomas.

"What?" She asked, turning around. "I heard my name!" Doug blushed, Vera smiled, and turned forward again to see where she was going. They exited the train into the terminal of the sprawling mass that is Heathrow Hoverport.

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“Whoa...” Thomas said. The terminal they were in was immense: no matter what direction he looked, there were gates as far as the eye could see. He followed the group over to a map that looked like it belonged in a mall instead. “You are here!” Proclaimed a dot in the middle of a huge maze of colored-coded sections.

“So we need to get to the Terminal E baggage claim,” Darin said as he traced his finger along the map, trying to locate it. “Ah! There it is! We’ll just take the PODs, there’s a section of them about twenty gates down.”

“They have their own POD system?!” Doug asked, amazed.

“Hey, it’s a huge hoverport, it’s practically impossible to walk it. They have a contest every year to see if anyone can walk around the entire thing. The last guy crazy enough to try ended up getting lost for two days and finally made it back to the starting point a week and a half later. Come on!” Like snails out for a morning jog, they made their way through the masses of people and towards the PODs. Finally they arrived at a row on their right and crossed the stream of people to get to them.

“Terminal E Baggage Claim,” Thomas said as he stepped inside.

BAMF!

Thomas stepped outside the POD and awaited the arrival of the rest of the group. It didn’t take long before they appeared and joined him. They walked over to the machine that was spitting out and circulating luggage. The technology for luggage return had changed little over the past two-hundred years, although the bags were now added to the conveyor belt by a POD-like system. Thomas noted that this technology was nearly as prevalent as the hover technology. Every time he turned around he saw it again. They stood around and waited, grabbing their bags as they passed by. It was a thoroughly mundane experience.

“Well, that’s over. You guys ready to get a bite to eat?” Darin asked.

“Yes!” Vera shouted, “I’m starving.”

“I told you to eat breakfast...” Lyla muttered.

“Don’t you think we should at least check into a hotel first? I don’t want to carry my bags into some restaurant,” Thomas said.

“Oh, yeah, good point,” Darin said.

“Let’s stay somewhere nice,” Vera said dreamily, “with a big pool, and

a sauna, and a spa!”

“Sounds expensive,” Thomas said.

“Well it’s not like we can’t afford it,” Darin said, “the account has quite a bit of money in it. We’re not going to exhaust it anytime soon.”

“Oh. Right...” Thomas said, still unsure. His upbringing had taught him to never spend excessive amounts of money where there was a cheaper alternative available. Then again, that policy had come back to bite him the time he stayed at the “Interstate Budget Inn” during a road trip he and his friends took the summer before his senior year. He shuddered at the memories.

“So we’ll just take the PODS to the Hovertaxi Plaza, and we’ll go from there.” A few minutes later, and they were standing on a platform teeming with people searching for a ride. Taxis in all shapes and sizes continuously landed and took off. There were limo taxis, four door taxis, minivan style taxis, even convertible taxis. The group made their way down the crosswalk till they found a row of the minivan style taxis that were big enough for the five of them and their luggage. They opened the rear hatch and loaded in their luggage before piling in.

“Hey, where’s the driver?” Thomas asked.

“Hello,” a computerized voice said, “thank you for choosing Taxico to fill your transportation needs! Where can I take you today?”

“Can you recommend a good hotel?” Darin asked.

“I certainly can,” the voice responded, “but I’ll need a bit more information first. Do you have a spending limit?”

“N—” Darin began, but was interrupted by a frantic Thomas.

“There’s no driver?!” Thomas hissed.

“Be quiet!” Darin snapped.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that,” the voice said. “Try to speak up, or if you prefer, you can just use the touchscreen in the dashboard. Do you have a spending limit?”

“No.”

“Excellent, that leaves us with many fantastic options. Do you have any required amenities?”

“There’s no person in this car behind the wheel!” Thomas blurted out. “Wait! There’s not even a wheel!”

“Will you just relax? All hovercars are completely automated now!”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand. Please use the touchscreen to select the options you need.”

“Great,” Darin muttered and began poking at the screen. Thomas de-

cided it would be best to just remain quiet and demand an explanation once they were en route so he didn't screw anything else up. "So we want a pool, sauna, spa, anything else?"

"Breakfast!" Vera said, her mind still on food.

"An exercise room of some sort would be nice," Doug said.

"As long as the rooms are clean..." Thomas said quietly. Darin nodded and punched a few more buttons. Finally a result came up.

"Based on your selections, I recommend the Blackfayre Inn, a hotel designed for the distinguished traveler located in one of the most desirable locations in the city. Elegance, comfort, and beauty, the Blackfayre Inn. Is this acceptable?"

"Yes," Darin said.

"Great! The total cost for the trip will be \$63.20."

"Accept."

"Wonderful! We're on our way, please buckle up!" Thomas quickly obeyed. The taxi began to rapidly rise above the plaza, then paused once it reached the desired altitude. It then turned to face the correct heading. Thomas grabbed onto the handle on the back of the seat in front of him and held on tight. The taxi shot off in the direction of the destination.

"Sit back and relax," the voice said, "our trip will take about seven minutes. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask!"

"We're using an autopilot system?" Doug asked.

"Well yeah, all hovercars are completely automated. You either tell it where to go or manually punch in the destination and it picks the fastest, most direct route."

"How do you know we're not going to collide with some other car?!" Thomas yelled as the taxi suddenly dropped in altitude.

"All the vehicles are in constant communication with each other. They know where every car within several miles is located and adjust speed and altitude accordingly." As if to demonstrate this fact, the taxi sped up and rose in altitude. "The only time there's ever a crash is if the car fails completely, but that hardly ever happens. Even if it does, the most recent safety measures ensure you're not going to crash and burn like in times past."

"Oh that's very reassuring! The blind leading the blind at it's finest!" Thomas shouted as he held on for dear life.

"Well it's certainly an improvement over how things used to be," Darin said. "When hovercars first came out, no one knew how to fly, but the government hailed the technology as a great advancement. Legislators said that to over regulate it would kill it in its infancy, so they placed virtually

no restrictions on it. There were so many accidents that the government quickly backpedaled and made piloting them without a pilot's license illegal. This, of course, would have killed the technology altogether, but lobbyists were able to get the government to add a clause later that allowed for auto-piloted vehicles to be owned by the public at large. Things were still shaky with the early models, but the technology has made great strides in safety and accuracy of navigation."

"Well I'm reassured! All of the future technology is so great and safe, but oh, by the way, there's a possibility that you're going to die in some horrible fiery crash when your autopilot collides with another vehicle or by having the digital representation of your body deleted when a hard drive somewhere crashes! Yes, very reassured!" Thomas ranted and raved.

"OK, don't you think that's just a little bit of an exaggeration?" Darin shouted back.

"Hey! Guys! Chill!" Lyla, the voice of reason said. "It's strange. You're not used to it. We get it, but we've been using the same technology ourselves for years, and we're still alive, so just relax a little. We only mention the chance of an accident because there is one and you should be aware. I'm sure you knew when you used to fly in your time there was always a chance of the plane crashing, but did you stop flying? No. So there's a chance this taxi could crash, but we're not going to walk just because of that. OK?"

"Sorry, you're right... It's just so weird," Thomas said.

"I'm sure we'd think your time was weird if we could go back ourselves," Lyla said.

"Probably so," Thomas said and reflected on this. He stared out the window as the taxi zoomed along. Many other cars were visible flying around above and below them, and several times one whisked by on nearly the same plane and altitude as they were flying on. It was, admittedly, a fairly smooth ride for all the dipping and dodging the vehicle was making, and the view from above was much nicer than the view from the ground.

"Hey, here we are," Doug said, looking out the window on the other side of the van at the building they were approaching. The building had the pretentious sounding name plastered along the top of it in pretentious looking letters. This was unusual, as Thomas was not even aware that letters could look pretentious. But, if anyone knew how to do pretentious things, it was the British. It was a very tall building for a hotel, but it certainly wasn't the tallest building in the city itself. Several other skyscrapers towered over it. Still, it was impressive nonetheless.

"Looks posh," Lyla said. The taxi made its descent to the street below,

passing several windows looking into rooms as they went.

“Remind me to shut the blinds as soon as we get into our room.” Vera muttered. The taxi finally reached the street and settled down into a low hover about six inches off the ground. The group exited the taxi and grabbed their bags out of the trunk. They entered through the revolving doors into a marble filled lobby with an enormous fireplace and some of the most comfortable looking chairs any of them had ever seen.

“Beautiful...” Vera exhaled.

“Expensive...” Thomas moaned.

“Neat.” Doug said. They walked up to the front desk where a pointy nosed, beady eyed gentleman awaited them. He had a rigid, proper posture and seemed incapable of changing facial expressions.

“Welcome to the Blackfayre Inn, the local center of elegance, comfort, and beauty,” the man recited, “How may I help you sir?”

“Yes, we’d like two suites please.”

“Excellent sir, how long will sir be staying?”

“Well, actually, we’re not sure. Can we say three days for now and add more days if the rooms are still available?”

“Let me check the system first sir, before I give sir an answer. I would not want to mislead sir.” He poked away at the computer’s touchscreen with incredible speed while still managing to keep his perfect posture. It was quite a feat. “Ah, excellent, it seems we have two suites located on the 68th floor that are not booked for the next week. If sir would like, I can arrange for sir to have both rooms for the full week, and should sir check out early, sir will not be penalized. Does this meet sir’s approval?”

“Yes, that would be spectacular, thank you.” The man pulled out the same device that was used at the ticketing counter of the Clinton Hoverport back home.

“Will sir be paying for both rooms?”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

“Very good sir.” He aimed the device at Darin and pushed the button. The device beeped and the man put it away to resume his pecking at the computer screen. He then aimed it at everyone else in the group and scanned them as well. “Sir’s arrangements are finalized...”

“Accept,” Darin responded.

The man nodded cordially and rang a bell twice. Two bellhops appeared and scooped up the group’s bags. “These two,” the man said, elevating his nose a bit further, “will help gentlemen and ladies to their rooms.” The group moved down the hallway, the bellhops leading the way. They

reached a bay of elevators, which surprised Doug.

“No PODS?”

“They use them in some buildings, but most still use elevators—err, lifts,” Darin quickly corrected after the sharp look from the bellhop, “in most buildings. It’s much cheaper, and a lot of these buildings were constructed before PODS became so widely used.”

“Ah, I see.” The lift arrived and they entered.

“68th floor?” A computerized voice queried.

“Yes,” answered one of the bellhops. The lift shot up quickly and reached the 68th floor in no time. The bellhop carrying Vera and Lyla’s bags paused in front of a door and the latch clicked, granting them entrance.

“See you guys in a little bit!” Lyla yelled as she disappeared into the room. The bellhop now leading Darin, Doug and Thomas paused in front of the next door over and, once the latch clicked, led the way in. The three followed behind and watched as the bellhop deposited the bags on the couch in the front room. Their suite contained two separate bedrooms, each with king beds and large en suite bathrooms. The front room contained a small kitchenette complete with a bar and the aforementioned couch that was, presumably, a pullout.

“You’re all set,” the bellhop said to Darin. He coughed politely.

“Uh... make transaction send ten dollars.” The bellhop’s eyes widened.

“Accept. A pittance,” he said, glaring at Darin as he left the room.

“Good grief,” Darin muttered once he was gone, “I have no idea what you should even tip a bellhop...”

“Eh, don’t worry about it, he’s British,” Doug said. “When the British aren’t off making something pretentious looking, they’re off getting offended about something.” The three guys walked out into the hallway and bumped into Vera and Lyla.

“You ready to go eat now? I’m starving!” Vera said.

“Sure, let’s get outside and I’ll call a cab.” Darin said.

“Where to gang?” Asked the lift.

“Lobby,” Lyla responded. The lift plummeted to the ground level and the doors slid open.

“Have a great night!” the lift shouted as they left.

“It was a lot more talkative than before...” Thomas pondered idly.

“Maybe it just didn’t like the bellhops,” Doug laughed, “no one else seems to.” The group continued jesting and laughing as they made their way out to the street in front of the hotel, provoking many grunts of disapproval from the hotel’s staff.

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“Call Taxico,” Darin said.

“I’m so hungry,” Vera said, drawing out the “o” on “so” to emphasize her point.

“Five,” Darin said, walking away from the conversation.

“I’m pretty excited about this,” Thomas said, “I’ve never been outside of North America to begin with, and I always heard London had some of the best Indian food you could get short of India itself.”

“Van,” Darin was heard to say from a distance.

“I heard that too,” Lyla said. “I guess we get to see if it’s true or not.”

“OK, the cab is on the way,” Darin told the group as he walked back. “What’s up?”

“We’re just discussing the—hopefully—delicious food we’re about to eat,” Vera replied.

“I see,” Darin said, “well the taxi should be here soon.” Just then, like clockwork, the taxi swooped out of the sky and landed on the street in front of them.

“Greetings!” the voice said as they entered the cab, “and where can I take you marvelous people on this wonderful evening?”

“Talik’s restaurant!” shouted Vera.

“Thank you so much! Please wait while I search for that!”

“Why is this one so happy?” Thomas asked.

“They have a lot of different voices and phrases they use for the cabs so that it makes it seem like all of them have a unique personality,” Darin said.

“A happy taxi driver,” Thomas muttered, “only in the future...”

“Talik’s Restaurant,” continued the computer, “featuring Indian cuisine. Is that what you meant?”

“Yes,” Vera responded.

“Thank you! The cost for your trip will be 36.50.”

“Oh, uh, accept,” Vera said, seeing the payment confirmation notice for the first time.

“Great! Thank you so much! I’ll phone ahead to let them know a party of five will be arriving soon!” The taxi skimmed up through the air and they dashed between other cars and cabs in what appeared to be a haphazard manner. In reality, it was a beautifully choreographed scene. Vehicles

dipped and weaved together, all in harmony despite their differences in destinations. The computerized navigation systems and removal of the barrier of height allowed medium distance travel to be done in a safer and more efficient way than ever before.

“Hey, we’re nearly there!” Darin said, pointing to the map displayed on the dash. The yellow dot that was, presumably, their cab was approaching a green star on the map. Sure enough, the taxi began to drop in altitude and finally came to rest above the street outside of a small, quaint looking restaurant. The sign on the awning simply said “Talik’s”, and nothing else. The street they were on was quiet, but not entirely desolate. A few people could be seen milling about near dark alleyways, and the street lights were just beginning to come on. The other businesses on the street that were starting to open did not appear to be the kind you would typically walk blindly into without intimately knowing the bouncer, owner, or both.

“You sure about this Darin?” Lyla asked, nervously looking behind her as the taxi took off.

“Oh come on, it can’t be too bad, there’s places that are worse back home that we’ve been to.”

“But that’s back home! We’re thousands of miles from home now!”

“Just relax. We’ll just check it out and call a taxi if we need to get out of here.” They approached the door, pulled it, and walked in as it gave way. A man addressed them in a strange language, and the implant’s translation function kicked in.

“Hello and welcome with Talik’s! Please, do you sit, you?”

“Yes, thank you!” Darin said.

“Please to follow me!” The man grabbed a stack of menus and beckoned them to follow. They didn’t have to go far, however, as the restaurant did not have an abundance of tables. They were seated in a rear corner near the door to the kitchen. Only a few other people were present and looked like regulars. The atmosphere leaved much to be desired. This was very much due to the fact that the atmosphere was, frankly, nonexistent. The tables and chairs didn’t match, half the chairs were wobbly, and the décor was incredibly sparse. The menu, however, peaked their appetites nearly immediately. The list of dishes was vast and the descriptions were equally tantalizing.

“Your waiter will here come soon!” The man left the group drooling over their menus. Moments later, a waiter approached and poured out water for each of them.

“Can I begin you with something to drink?” he asked.

“Can I get some chai tea?” Vera replied. Doug and Thomas asked for water.

“I’d like some lassi,” Darin said.

“Can I get mango lassi?” Lyla asked.

“*Excellent! Do we ready to order food then?*”

“YES!” Vera said, ravenous with hunger. “I want the curry sampler!”

“Oh, um,” Thomas stammered, still undecided, “I guess I’ll take the Rogan Josh.”

“I’ll have the butter chicken.”

“I just want the traditional chicken curry.”

“I’d like karai gosht,” Lyla said, “and can we get an order of naan for the table?”

“*Yes, yes, good choice, I will be well behind with naan.*” The waiter returned briefly with their drinks, a large plate filled with naan, and a container of makhani palak saag. The group eagerly ate the first plate of naan and ordered a second. The waiter brought it out and, moments later, brought out their food as well. The way the group devoured their food made it appear to the waiter that they had been stranded on a desert island for several weeks with a healthy stock of canned goods, but no can opener. In reality they were all just enjoying some of the best Indian food any of them had ever had. Moments later, the waiter had a very healthy tip, the bill was paid and the group was back on the street, waiting on the taxi.

“We have GOT to go back there again before we leave,” Vera said, bloated and happy. Before long, the group arrived back at the hotel and made their plans for sightseeing the next day.

“So,” Lyla said as they looked at the brochures spread in front of them. “We can go to the International House any time between nine and five, but sessions are in progress only between ten and three, with a three hour break for lunch that begins at eleven. So, if you want to see the government in action, we’ll have to get there before eleven or just after three.”

“Glad to know politicians are productive as ever,” Thomas quipped.

“We can go in while it’s in session?” Doug asked.

“Hmmm, no,” Lyla said, “but we can watch from an observation room overlooking the chambers.”

“I really want to see them in action,” Vera said, “so can we just try to arrive there around ten and hopefully get up to the room before it’s full?”

“Yeah, definitely!” Lyla said. “I’m really excited about this, actually, I’ve never been to any government function, so this will be a first for me too!”

“Anything else we want to see?” Darin asked.

“How about Big Ben?” Thomas suggested.

“Oh, yes, that’s an excellent idea Thomas!” Vera said happily. Thomas couldn’t figure out why she was being so prim and proper, but decided that he liked it and resolved to suggest Indian food more often.

“Why do we need a strict plan? We haven’t had one yet, and it’s been working for us pretty well so far,” Doug said.

“I agree,” Darin said quickly, “let’s just go and see what happens.”

“OK,” conceded Lyla, “I’m up for that. Just as long as we can get to the International House early to make sure we see the government in action.”

“So let’s say we wake up and meet in the lobby for breakfast around 8:30?” Darin suggested.

“Sounds good to me,” said Vera. “Now if you’ll excuse me,” she said, standing, “I believe there is a spa that is calling my name.”

“Oh yeah, me too!” Lyla said, jumping up and following her out.

“I guess I’m going to the workout room then,” Doug said.

“Hey, I’ll join you!” Darin shouted as Doug left, chasing after him. Thomas sat in the room alone.

“Hey, I think I’ll just stay right here!” Thomas muttered begrudgingly. “That sounds great! I’ll join you,” he mocked. He sat looking around the room, trying to see if there was anything of interest. He spotted the brochures on the bed and picked a few up to leaf through. There is a strange thing about travel brochures. Somehow, they always manage to feature pictures that highlight the attraction in question from the best possible angle with the best possible lighting on a day where the weather is perfect. It causes the reader to see it and think, “wow, what a wonderful picture! I want to visit this and get the same picture so I can go home and show my friends what a great photographer I am and what wonderful sights I saw!”

Upon arriving home and reviewing the pictures, however, they will inevitably discover one of two things, depending on the type of camera they used. If they used a film camera, all of the pictures will be either underexposed, overexposed, or have a random person that walked into the frame at the perfect moment to ruin the picture. If they used a digital camera, however, all of the pictures will be blurry, out of focus, poorly lit, or any combination of the three.

Thomas threw the brochures aside, thought about turning the television on, but immediately thought better of it and decided to take a walk instead. He walked down the corridor towards the elevators, thought about how creepy it was to have an elevator talk to you, and opted to take the stairs instead. He pushed open the rarely used door and started to descend

the stairs. As he went he wondered why so many things were controlled by voice commands. His thoughts were interrupted by the sudden realization that he was only on the sixty-fifth floor, and there was no way he was going to walk down sixty-four more flights of stairs. He exited the stairwell and made his way to the elevator.

“Hi!” said the elevator as he entered. “Where are your friends?”

“What? Oh, I don’t know, I think they’re all in the lobby.”

“Is that where you’re going?”

“Yes, please ... thanks.”

“No problem!” The elevator whisked him down to the lobby and said a pleasant goodbye as he left. He passed by the front desk where a new woman was now behind the counter. She looked at him quizzically, but he just kept walking. Finally he tasted fresh air as he walked out onto the streets. The hotel was, fortunately, in a very nice area of town, so Thomas was able to have an enjoyable walk without worrying about axe murderers coming out of the shadows. He really had no cause to worry about that to begin with. Two-hundred years had basically made axes completely obsolete, but of course, Thomas didn’t know this.

He walked down the street, passing statues and historic buildings. People waited in queues in an attempt to gain access to some of the most exclusive clubs in town. Couples who had apparently just left these clubs cuddled on benches while waiting for their taxis to arrive. As he walked, Thomas observed these couples. So incredibly different from a physical standpoint, and yet, they seemed so happy together. The impossibly tall man with the petite woman by his side, the average looking Joe sitting with the woman with extremely loud clothing and equally loud pink hair. Pink hair...

Thomas kept walking, coming to a bridge over the Thames. He looked out over the river, watching the timed, colorfully lit water jets that had apparently been installed sometime in the last two-hundred years. Happy couples continued to walk by behind him, laughing and talking, having the time of their life. Thomas felt utterly, dismally alone. He sighed, turned around, and made his way back to the hotel.

“68th floor,” he told the elevator, cutting off the question that was bound to be asked. Sensing his mood by his demeanor and tone of voice, the elevator remained silent. Thomas walked back down the corridor to his room, passing the girl’s room along the way. He stopped and turned around, staring, thinking. He knew it would never happen, and yet, he felt like he had to at least try. He walked up and stood in front of the door. The

latch clicked upon recognizing him, but he knocked quietly anyhow, not knowing who was present, whether they were awake or not, and perhaps most importantly, whether they were clothed or not.

“Come in!” Lyla shouted from inside. Thomas entered, slowly. Lyla was standing in front of the mirror, towel still wrapped around her from the spa, futzing with her perfectly pink hair... “Oh, it’s you,” she said, turning slightly but unabashed. “What’s up?” she asked.

“Where’s Vera?” Thomas asked.

“Oh,” Lyla said, rolling her eyes, “she’s still down there. We got to the spa and there were only two people left on duty, some big, German looking chick and this other guy. She claimed the guy immediately, and when I left, she was still getting massaged and they were discussing the weather. Ha!” she laughed scornfully.

“Oh, I see,” Thomas said. He walked over to the bed and sat down. Lyla stood there, still staring in the mirror and messing with her hair, but observing Thomas all the while from the corner of her eye.

“Something wrong?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing in particular, I just got back from taking a rather long walk.”

“Ah. See anything interesting?”

“Well, there were quite a few interesting sights, but I couldn’t help but notice all the couples sitting on the benches along the way. It just makes you feel ... alone, you know?”

“Oh,” Lyla said, turning away from the mirror, facing him.

“Yeah,” Thomas said, rising from the bed and moving towards her. “I kept seeing these people, you know, having the time of their lives with a significant other. And here I am, with no one... Then I saw this couple that was rather interesting... The man was just your average Joe, kinda like me, you know? But the woman... she had the most fantastically pink hair...”

“Oh?” said Lyla, drawing closer to him.

“And all I could think about was you...”

“Is that so?” Lyla said quietly, grabbing his hand and holding it in hers.

“And after that, the whole walk back, the one thing I kept asking myself...”

“Yes?”

“Was...”

“Yes?”

“Why pink?” Lyla seemed taken aback for a second, then smiled.

“Come here!” she breathed, pulling him close. They embraced.

“Good morning everyone!” Lyla said as she approached the group’s table at breakfast. She took the last remaining seat across from Thomas and winked at him as she sat down. Thomas looked to see how the others would react, but they had apparently not noticed. This was a good thing in his mind. It wasn’t that he was ashamed of the fact that he and Lyla were sort of in a relationship. He was just nervous that it might not go anywhere, and in the event that it didn’t pan out, it wouldn’t be nearly as awkward afterwards if no one else knew. He wouldn’t be upset if the others did find out of course, but he wasn’t going to any trouble to let them know now.

The waiter came over and took Lyla’s order. The rest of the group had already eaten, but they still had plenty of time, so the sharp, annoyed commentary was kept to a minimum. Once they finished eating, the group made their way out the door, opting to take the POD system instead of a taxi. It was much cheaper, and the morning rush hour traffic was not something they wanted to get stuck in. Fortunately for them, the closest POD station was just a few blocks away. Moments later, they were emerging on the street outside the International House.

“That’s Buckingham Palace!” Vera said, pointing and waving her arm wildly.

“Hey, yeah, it is!” Thomas said.

“What?” Darin and Lyla said in unison.

“Buckingham Palace,” Thomas explained, “used to be where the British royal family lived. I’m surprised it survived this long, but they probably kept it as a historic landmark after the world united as Pangaea, then reused it for the International House.”

“What are we waiting for? Let’s go in!” Vera ran ahead of the group and led the way into the building. They passed through security gates very similar to those that were used in the airport, although these were unmanned. Surprisingly there were no lines. In fact, there was hardly anyone around at all. A lonely security guard who appeared very near retirement snoozed in a chair behind a large, round counter in the main lobby. He was heavyset, balding, and had a white beard. As they approached, he woke up, startled by the presence of people.

“Oh, hello there!” He said quickly, attempting—but failing—to cover

up for the fact he was sleeping. “What can I do for you?”

“Well we were hoping to take a tour of the house,” Vera said.

“What? Really? Wow.” The man pulled out a radio. “Hey, Joe! We have a group of young people here who want a tour.”

“A tour?!” replied a voice.

“Yes, that’s right, a tour. Who’s here from that department today?”

“Bob, that department was dissolved more than a year ago after the OP found out that they were getting paid good money to come here and do nothing every day.” The group exchanged confused looks.

“What?” Asked Bob, clearly shocked by this news. “Well I know they weren’t as busy as in times past, but the entire tour department getting dissolved?”

“Yeah, don’t you remember? The OP claimed it as a great victory in the war against excessive government spending.”

“Well the OP always talks about cutting something or other, but as long as it isn’t my job, I don’t pay attention.”

“I don’t know what to tell you...” The voice replied. Bob thought for a second.

“I could take them on a tour I guess if you’ll send someone down here to sit at the front desk.”

“I’ll try to find someone. Don’t wait up, just go ahead and take them on the tour.” Bob developed a quizzical look and returned the radio to his pocket. He grunted and got up out of his chair, walked out of the door at the back of the counter, and came around to the front where the group was standing.

“Sorry about that,” he said as he approached, “we just hardly ever have visitors anymore. People aren’t as excited about politics as they used to be,” he said with a wistful look in his eye. “Anyhow, I’m Bob Farley, and I guess I get to be your tour guide today.” He exchanged handshakes and pleasantries with each of them in turn, getting their names along the way.

“Let’s say I show you around, eh?” he asked and began walking. The group followed eagerly behind. “So is there anything in particular you want to see?”

“Yeah,” said Lyla glancing at a clock they were passing, “we really want to see things in action in the chambers, so we’d like to go up to the observation room early enough to make sure there’s still room left.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that Lyla,” Bob said, “the observation room is rarely used. There are usually only a few regulars in there. ‘Government Watchdogs’ or some such nonsense.”

“Oh, OK I guess,” she said, not convinced. “It’s around 9:15 now, so can we make sure we get up there right before ten?”

“Yeah, I can do that. Until then you have no preference on what you see?”

“I have no idea what else is here so I guess we can just see whatever you show us.”

“Well, let’s just do the complete circuit then.” They walked down a large corridor and admired the paintings hanging on the walls as they passed. “This is the west wing. After this place was taken over when Pangaea was founded, they basically gutted the internal walls and started over from scratch. They made the layout much simpler and divided it into an east and west side. The west side is mostly dominated by the chambers where the house meets. The east side consists of offices on the first floor, and the second floor has galleries of historic artwork, documents, and so on.”

“Beyond here,” he said, pausing behind a line of velvet ropes “is the main chamber.” Down the corridor, they could see politicians entering via a set of PODS lining the left side of the wall.

“Where do those PODS go?” Doug asked.

“Oh, those are special PODS that are used exclusively by the house members. They connect directly to their living quarters so that they can get to work here as quickly as possible without taking public transit. Before the POD system was installed, they actually had a small subway that ran back and forth between the living quarters and here. The train is still there, but is never used anymore. They keep it as a backup.”

“Those doors down there on the right side of the hall lead to the chambers?” Lyla asked.

“Right.”

“So where do the doors straight down lead to?”

“Those lead to an enclosed courtyard. It’s for house members only, of course. Many of them enjoy eating their lunches outside when the weather is nice. Anyhow, let’s go on, there’s nothing else to really see in the west side, not on this floor at least.” The group walked over to the east side where they passed by offices that were dark and seemed unused.

“These aren’t the offices given to the house members of course, these are reserved for the different organizations that service the house members.”

“Why are they all empty?” Darin asked.

“Most of the organizations were disbanded or dissolved by the house. They just weren’t really needed anymore... At least that’s what the house said in the bill when they passed it.” The group kept walking, passing one

dark, empty office after another. Finally they came to a staircase and went up to the area where the galleries were.

“What?!” Bob said as they entered a vast, empty room. “Where did the gallery go?”

“Did the house dissolve it while you were asleep?” Vera asked. The others turned and looked to her, shocked that she would say something so biting to someone she just met. Fortunately for them, Bob didn’t seem to hear it and was already on his radio trying to figure out what had happened. While he yelled at this mysterious Joe character, the group walked around the room. The walls were bare, but the silhouettes where artwork had previously hung were glaringly obvious. Pedestals that likely once contained statues and busts of people long dead were also scattered around the room, barren. It was all rather depressing.

“What do you mean they passed an act to get rid of the gallery years ago?” Bob was shouting behind them. The group was too far away to hear the answers but didn’t need to. Government had once again passed an act and then taken years to fulfill it. “It took them that long to do it? Well yes I know the collection would’ve gotten more exposure in the other museums, but... You know what Joe, I’m so glad I can retire soon and get out. Hopefully this ludicrous ‘war on spending’ doesn’t get me before then.” Bob returned the radio to his pocket and walked over towards them, cursing and muttering under his breath.

“I’m sorry guys. I don’t know what’s going on with our government... I’ve been working this job for sixty years and I’ve seen a lot of changes in my lifetime, but lately it’s just been accelerating. I can see why they’d cut programs that aren’t being used... And people’s interest in our government and what it does really has waned, which is a shame. That’s why I was so glad to see you all here, but, well, apparently you’re too late. Nearly everything to do with letting people see how their government works has been taken away...”

“I hope the observation room is still there!” Lyla blurted out.

“Oh dear,” Bob said, seeming unsure. “I’ll bet it is, the press still comes in occasionally whenever they get ready to pass something big. Let’s just go and see.” The group walked through the rest of the empty gallery rooms in silence, finally coming to a walkway that passed over the lobby area. No one had come to man Bob’s post at the front desk. Bob didn’t say a word about it, which indicated that he either hadn’t noticed or had given up caring.

As they came to the end of the walkway, they turned left and soon

found themselves directly above where they had been observing the house members arriving just minutes before. Ahead and to the right was a set of doors. They now stood in front of them.

“Ready?” Bob asked.

“As we’ll ever be,” Lyla replied.

The group entered the observation room above the chambers. It was only about half past ten, so many house members were still arriving. The variety in the members was impressive. It was as if they were looking down upon a meeting at the United Nations in the 21st century. There were people from every culture and ethnic group arriving. The idea that so many people from so many different backgrounds could work together in one united government was so strange to Doug, Thomas, and Vera, but seeing it really happen was almost inspiring.

“The Regional Houses,” Bob began, “can create and approve various proposals for each region on the Earth. There are twelve regions altogether. However, the different laws and regulations that each region passes must be in compliance with anything that comes down from the International House. In the end, the International House has the final say-so on nearly everything.”

“What about taxation?” Vera asked.

“Well there are two taxes. There is the global tax that is applied each year by the International House. It funds most of the government programs and institutions that everyone around the globe uses. Then there is a regional tax that is created by the Regional Houses. That tax is used to fund things specific to each region. I’ll give you an example: the maintenance and creation of the global positioning systems used to guide hovercars and hovertrains is funded by the global tax. The creation of a POD system in a specific city, however, is funded by the regional tax for that area.”

“Sounds like it could get to be expensive.” Doug said.

“Oh but it is! That’s why they’ve been on this ‘war on spending’ kick for a while. The International House is striving to eliminate every unnecessary program it can so that the global tax will be as small as possible.” Bob continued to provide occasional commentary, but the group sat in silence, not asking anymore questions, waiting to see what would happen next. Finally, it appeared that most of the members were there and it was time to begin.

“Alright, it is now eleven and time for this session of the International House to begin,” said a woman who had taken her place at a podium in the front of the hall. The house members were sitting in stadium style seating, ascending nearly to the room where the group was overlooking the

chambers. In front of each seat was a console that contained a computer, a voting apparatus, and a few other buttons that had no obvious purpose. Thomas did a quick head count and estimated that there must've been at least six-hundred people present.

"That's Lydia Shults, she's the International House Organizational Person, or IHOP," Bob said, referring to the woman who had begun talking. "She basically leads the sessions and brings up the bills that are to be dis—"

"Wait wait wait, did you just say IHOP?" Doug asked, grinning madly.

"Yes, she's the IHOP." Bob didn't have a clue why this was funny. Doug, Thomas, and Vera just snickered. Lyla and Darin shared looks of confusion. The IHOP banged the gavel and started the session.

"First up," she said, "we continue the war on spending with this set of bills that will eliminate two rarely used government offices, remove two-thousand unneeded government jobs, and grants the tax division the authority to auction off excess equipment that is estimated to be worth more than one-hundred million dollars. As a result, the global tax rate will drop by 0.2%." Charts and figures were projected on a screen behind her. "The floor is open for discussion."

Suddenly in a frenzy of what almost seemed to be panic, the house members began consulting their computers, looking up each bill to read the full text. Some dialed aides on their implants to find out what their position should be in order to have the best chances of being reelected. Others simply turned and began arguing with the person seated next to them.

"It's a circus!" Vera said, disgusted by it all.

"This is how they pass laws?" Lyla asked, genuinely shocked. Darin's facial expression matched hers. Neither of them had ever bothered to investigate how their government actually conducted its business. Instead, they had blindly trusted that the government knew best and that the system worked. It was a dangerous mistake to make, and further elevated their shock at discovering that the leaders of the world are bumbling idiots. Suddenly, like clock work, the IHOP banged her gavel and everyone fell silent.

"We will now take a vote on the issue." The information projected behind her disappeared and was replaced by a bar graph. She picked up her voting device, and everyone else followed suit. Soon the votes began coming in and the bar graph updated in real time to show the results. It passed by a fairly large margin: 421 yeas, 221 nays, and 8 abstaining. The next bill came up for discussion, and the house once again degenerated into fighting and screaming.

"I've seen enough," Lyla said, "let's get out of here."

“Amen to that,” Vera replied. The guys just nodded. They started to leave.

“I’m sorry you guys,” Bob said as they were leaving the room. The group just kept walking, but Vera felt slightly guilty, and turned back. No one noticed as she left them and reentered the room. Bob sat there in a chair, head in hands, looking out at the circus below.

“It’s not your fault,” she said.

“What?”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Well I know that. I know you guys are disappointed in how our government works, and to be quite honest, I am too. If I wasn’t so close to retirement, I would’ve quit a long time ago and found another job somewhere else. Our government was founded on some pretty rock solid principles, but even those with the best intentions can’t see what the future will hold... Now those principles have been so watered down that it’s not the same government anymore.”

“That’s just the way every government in history has been. Maybe someday we’ll figure it out and get it right,” she said, smiling. He thought for a moment and finally smiled back. Vera quietly left and made her way outside to rejoin the others. She found them on the steps out front where they had come in. Darin and Lyla were consulting a map and Doug and Thomas were staring off into the distance. “Hey guys, what’s up?” Neither Doug nor Thomas responded. “What’s wrong with you?” She looked at the direction and angle they were gazing in, and finally saw it. She gasped. It was Big Ben with a digital face.

“Let’s just go to China,” Lyla said, “you guys obviously hate it here and, honestly, I’m not too impressed either.”

“I don’t care where we go, as long as we get out of here,” Vera grunted as she packed her bags.

“Well let’s see what the guys say first. We have to at least get their opinion...”

“I can’t believe they defaced a historic monument,” Doug was ranting. “I love technology as much as the next guy, but that... that was just...”

“Wrong?” Thomas suggested.

“Yes! Thank you! If they did that to Big Ben, I don’t want to see what they did to Mount Rushmore.”

“Actually...” Darin began.

“Shut it! I don’t want to know! Let’s just get out of here and go to China.”

“We can’t just get up and leave. We have to consult with the girls first.”

“Fine, go consult!” Darin sighed and decided it was best to do just that. He walked into the hallway and bumped into Lyla.

“Let me guess...”

“They want to go to China too?” Lyla asked.

“Yes. I should have guessed that Vera would want to do the same.”

“Well who can blame them? I’m not too thrilled either. I had no idea our government actually functioned that way, and I can’t say I’m at all impressed.” Darin just shrugged. “What? You can’t tell me that it didn’t at least make you reconsider why things are the way they are. At the very least, you should be questioning the government’s competence.”

“I just don’t think it’s that big of a deal Lyla! I mean yes, it was a freak show, but they said themselves that the government of their time wasn’t much different.”

“But don’t you see? They came to the future in search of change for the better. Instead they find that it’s only gotten worse! I can completely understand their frustration.”

“I guess... I don’t know, I’ve always just been the type of person to not worry about what others around me are doing. I just worry about myself and go with the flow.”

“Well when the government, controlled by those clowns back there, directs the flow, you’re in for a pretty wild ride. I’ll bet that you won’t like it at that point.”

“OK, OK, I see your point. I guess it really wasn’t what I was expecting, but I wasn’t expecting much to begin with so I wasn’t as disappointed. I guess I’ll call ahead to the hoverport and see if there are enough tickets available for a flight tonight. Maybe we can get out of here before it’s dark.”

“Good. We’re ready to go, so just knock when you’re ready.” She returned to her room. Darin made the needed phone calls. Vera decided to head to the spa again while she waited, hoping that the guy she met yesterday would still be there. Doug decided to check out the pool to kill time. Thomas was left sitting alone again, but at least this time he had something to do. He went down to the lobby and approached the front desk. The same man from the night they checked in was there.

“Excuse me,” said Thomas as he approached.

“Yes sir, how can I help sir?” the man asked without changing nose elevation.

“I was wondering if you could give me directions to the closest florist?”

“Florist, sir?”

“You know, a shop that sells flowers?”

“Yes sir, I know what a florist is sir, but sir needs not leave to obtain flowers.”

“I don’t?”

“No sir. There is a florist on the second floor with all the rest of the shops that are included for your convenience and comfort.”

“Oh. I see. Well, yes, I’ll go check that out then, thank you.” The man did not respond, he merely closed his eyes and maintained his pose. Thomas walked away wondering why people who worked in the retail and service industries all seemed to act the same. No matter where—or when—he went, the people acted as if the fact that he was there was a great inconvenience for them, and that it would be much easier on them if he were to cease to exist. Thomas stopped musing as he exited on the second floor and located a directory typical of what you’d see in your average mall. He looked the sign over and located a shop named Goodfellow Florists and plotted out the course. After a short walk, he found himself standing in front of it. This was to be a first for Thomas. He had never been inside a florist’s shop before, and wasn’t quite sure what to expect. Thomas reached for the door handle, held his breath, and entered.

“Oh, hello there!” said a short, pudgy woman with rosy cheeks. She put

down the bouquet she was assembling. “What can I get for you?”

“Actually, I’m not sure. I’m looking to get some flowers for a, uhh, special girl.”

“Ooohhh,” the woman said, her eyes lighting up, “I see!”

“Yeah, but the problem is that I have no idea what to get. I was thinking maybe just a dozen roses or something simple like that.”

“Roses?” the woman crinkled her nose. “No no no, she won’t want those. You really do need help. Here, I’ll show you one of our most popular bouquets.” She walked out from behind the counter towards a fridge where there were several bouquets on display. “This,” she said, grabbing and pulling out one from the middle rack, “is our most popular arrangement. Your special lady will absolutely love it, I guarantee it.” She handed the arrangement to Thomas who looked at it, slightly confused.

“Aren’t those dandelions?”

“Well of course! The most romantic flower in the world, everyone loves dandelions.”

“How is a weed I can pick in my backyard romantic?”

“Pick in your backyard? Come now, dandelions aren’t at all common, they almost went extinct a few decades ago, but fortunately they were saved and are now grown in greenhouses everywhere! Their persistence is symbolic of the enduring power of love,” she said, obviously well rehearsed on the subject. “You really did need help, you don’t seem to know anything about flowers!”

“Well, in my time,” Thomas said, not thinking that his time was two-hundred years ago, “roses were considered romantic.”

“In your time? You aren’t that old, quit pulling my leg.” Thomas sighed.

“OK, I’ll take them. What do I owe you?”

“Sixty dollars.”

Thomas walked out of the shop feeling like he had just been mugged. He looked at the bouquet he had purchased, full of regret. But it was too late now. He got back on the elevator and went up to the 68th floor. He peeked out of the elevator to make sure no one else was around. Darin was down the hall in the opposite direction, talking on the implant. Thomas dashed out of the elevator and went scurrying around the corner. He paused there and peeked back to make sure that Darin hadn’t seen him. Darin was still looking the other way, so Thomas felt safe for now. He walked down towards Lyla and Vera’s room and knocked.

“Come in!” Lyla said as the latch clicked. Thomas pushed the door open and slipped in, closing it behind him. He tiptoed down the hallway,

envisioning the look of surprise and joy on her face as she saw him approaching with the flowers. He entered her room and she looked up.

“Oh no!” she blurted, jumping up and backing away towards the window. “I’m allergic to dandelions! Take them out, please, I don’t want to start sneezing like crazy.” Thomas quickly backed out of the room and went back in the hall.

“OK, that’s great, thank you!” Thomas heard Darin saying as he walked back towards the room. From the sound of his voice, he wasn’t far off. Thomas ran down towards his room and held his hand on the handle. The latch clicked and he ran in, slamming the door behind him. He turned the deadbolt and dashed down towards the bathroom. Surely there would be a trashcan there! Wait, too obvious, they’d find it right away. Darin was outside the door now, fiddling with the handle. Unable to gain access, he knocked.

“Gimme a minute!” Thomas shouted. He dashed back towards the kitchenette and pulled open the cabinet doors, looking for a trashcan. Finally he found it, threw the flowers in, and closed the doors again. He did a quick survey, found everything satisfactory, and went to the room’s door. He unbolted it and pulled it open.

“What’s up?” Darin said. “Why did you lock the door?”

“Oh, no particular reason, just force of habit,” Thomas lied. “They didn’t have secure locks on the hotel back in our time like they do now.”

“Ah. Well, we’ve got a flight out of Heathrow to Beijing International Hoverport that leaves in about three hours, so we’d better start getting our things together. The traffic is pretty bad right now so it may take a while to get a cab and get there.”

“OK, I’ll go tell Lyla and find the others.”

“Good. I’m going to take a shower and pack my things.” Darin walked off towards his room. Thomas breathed a sigh of relief and went back into the hall. He knocked on Lyla’s door once again and walked in. She was in her room with a box of tissues, sneezing away.

“I’m sorry!” Thomas said. He was never very good at this romantic stuff anyhow, and this wasn’t the first time he had caused a woman discomfort with a romantic gesture gone awry. The other occasion involved a rather unfortunate accident with a girl he was going to prom with and the pin he was trying to use to attach the corsage...

“It’s not your fault, you didn’t know. Plus they market and sell those, those ... AHHHCHOO!” She grabbed another tissue and blew her nose. “They over market those evil things. Just because they nearly went extinct,

they're suddenly the symbol of love's endurance. I would've rather just had some roses or something."

"That's what I wanted to get, but the woman talked me out of it, said that dandelions are the hot new thing. I've half a mind to go down there and tell her she was wrong."

"No, don't bother, it's not important. Thank you for the thought though, that's what matters." She smiled warmly.

"Well, I thought we'd have more time before we left, but Darin said we have a flight that leaves in three hours, so we need to start getting ready to leave. I'm going to go find Doug and Vera and let them know."

"OK, no problem." Thomas started to go. "Hey, wait!" Lyla said, jumping up from the bed. She ran over and kissed him. "Thanks."

"Wow," Thomas said, "if that's the thanks I get for causing you allergy issues, what will I get for giving you something better?" Lyla just smiled and started packing. Thomas walked out of the room and into the hallway. He paused for a moment, smiling and reflecting on the events that had just unfolded. Despite the fact that he completely failed at being romantic, he still loved every minute of the experience. Finally, he decided to make his way downstairs.

"Howdy!" said the elevator.

"Hey, can you take me to the pool?"

"Sublevel one, I'm on it!" Thomas exited and looked around. Apparently the gym, spa, and pool were all on the same level. He decided to try to find Doug first. He walked to the left and passed by the gym. He peered in the glass, just in case, but didn't see Doug there. He kept walking and finally came to the pool area. He entered and saw Doug sitting on a pool chair, talking with some girl. They hadn't noticed him, so Thomas waited to avoid ruining the moment.

"So where are you from?" He was asking.

"I'm actually from Yorkshire, just down to visit my family," she said. "How about you?"

"Well, actually, I'm from America, but I've been frozen for the past two-hundred years, so I'm just going around with my friends now, seeing the world of the future." The girl just stared at him for a while, first confused, then annoyed.

"What kind of chat up line is that? You're good looking enough, you don't have to insult my intelligence! I'm sorry Doug, it was lovely to have met you, but I have better uses for my time." She got up and left. Thomas just stood there, amazed at discovering that Doug was nearly as bad at

romance as he was. Doug sat, looking dejected, his head hung low. Thomas finally decided to end his misery. He coughed politely. Doug whirled around.

“Hey,” Thomas said, “we have to get going, we have a flight that leaves in about three hours.”

“Oh. OK.” Doug got up and walked out with Thomas. Thomas noticed that Doug’s trunks were completely dry. He thought for a split second about making a snarky remark asking why he didn’t get to swim, but immediately thought better of it.

“Seen Vera?” he asked instead.

“Not since we shared the elevator ride down here. I assume she’s in the spa still.”

“Wanna come with me? I still need to find her and let her know we need to leave.”

“No thanks, I’m just going to head to the room, change, and pack.”

“OK, I’ll see you up there.” They parted ways at the elevators, and Thomas kept walking towards the spa. Finally he found it. It occurred to him, as he stood at the door reading the sign, that he had never been in an actual spa before. He had seen them on TV of course, but found it quite silly that people were willing to pay so much to go get beat up by some brute and sit in mud with vegetables on their eyes. He pushed open the door and walked in. The room was very wide open, and there were only short partitions dividing up the space between the massage tables and mud baths.

“Hi!” said a perky woman from behind a round desk. “Would you like to enjoy one of our fabulous massages today?”

“Actually, no, I’m looking for a friend of mine, Vera. She came down here for a massage a while ago.”

“Oh? Average height, black hair, ruby red lipstick?”

“I ... I guess, yeah, that sounds right.”

“Just a minute, let me check.” The receptionist walked out from behind the desk and went back to see if there was anyone on the tables behind the partitions, out of view. She disappeared into the changing rooms, but quickly returned. “I’m sorry sir, there’s no one here!”

“Hrm. I wonder where she went off to...” Thomas wondered aloud. “Well thanks, I’ll try calling her.”

“No problem, have a good day!” Thomas exited the spa and called Vera on the implant. It rang several times and finally she picked up.

“Hello?” She demanded. She was obviously annoyed at his calling.

Thomas realized that he was obviously ruining a special moment and decided to savor the experience.

“Hey Vera, how you doing?” He asked, grinning from ear to ear.

“What do you want Thomas?” Thomas was glad she couldn’t see him right now. He was drinking up every moment.

“Well I just wanted to let you know something very important...”

“Thomas, you better not be jerking my chain.”

“No, no, I’m completely serious, why would you think I’m messing with you?”

“You have five seconds before I’m hanging up.”

“OK, fine, well we’re leaving London tonight. Our flight leaves in about three hours—probably less now—and we need to get everything packed and ready.”

Silence. Finally, Vera sighed audibly. “Great,” she mumbled. “You guys really have some excellent timing, you know that? I’ll be up in a while.”

“Where are you anyhow?”

“Goodbye Thomas.” She hung up. Thomas smiled and walked off the elevator that he had boarded mid-conversation. It was truly a wonderful thing to have a conversation in an elevator without annoying everyone else while you shout “HUH? I CAN’T HEAR YOU, I’M IN AN ELEVATOR!” Thomas walked to his room and entered. Darin and Doug were having an argument about some nonsense. Thomas quickly bypassed the two of them and went to his room to pack up his things, closing the door behind him. He didn’t have much to pack, just the clothes he had gotten out in the meantime and various toiletries from the bathroom. Thomas finished putting everything back into its proper place and was satisfied. He cracked the door to listen, but the argument was over.

He walked back into the living room carrying his bag and set it down on the couch. Seeing nothing else to do, he decided to take a seat. He dreamed about Lyla, picturing her face...

29

“Hey! Thomas! Come on!”

“What?” Thomas said, sitting up with a start.

“Nap time is over,” Darin said, “we need to leave or we’re going to miss our flight!”

“Oh! Right!” Thomas said, “Sorry, I’m coming!” He hopped up, threw his bag over his shoulder and followed them out. Moments later they were in the taxi, making their way to Heathrow Hoverport. Their flight was leaving in less than an hour. Had the hoverport not had the POD system, they would’ve surely missed their flight.

“All I have to say,” Doug ranted, “is that I’m glad no airport from our time ever got this big. Can you imagine how annoying it would’ve been to wait for hours in security only to have to walk an hour and a half to get to your gate?”

“I dunno, maybe then the airlines would’ve been forced to get their act together,” Thomas said.

“I doubt it,” Doug muttered.

“OK, gate 1825, here we are,” Darin said. They took a seat in the terminal and passed the time by looking at the other people around them, dreaming up stories about who the person was, why they were there, and where they’re going. Finally, after about half an hour of people-watching, it was time for their flight. The incoming train from Beijing arrived and was incredibly long. Thomas was unable to count the number of cars past twenty. The people began piling off, making their way to wherever they were going. Meanwhile, the extra cars were being removed from the train, finally coming down to having just five cars left.

“I’ve never seen a train that long before,” marveled Lyla. Thomas had been surprised by the length himself, but had nothing from personal experience to tell him if it was unusual or not. He wondered for a moment if this was a premonition of something bad, but quickly concluded that he really had no idea what it could possibly mean. There was no point in getting bothered or worked up over any of it since it could very likely be of no importance.

Before long they boarded the train and, after a short time, were on their way. The trip this time had a much more pleasant view since it passed

mostly over land. They looked down upon cities, mountains, and open areas of farmland. It was reassuring to Vera to see so much landscape and farmland still intact despite the explosion in the human population and city size. She had always been a city girl but was very concerned with the environment. In her time, she had always tried to do her part by recycling, picking up litter when she saw it, using more energy efficient light bulbs, donating to environmental groups, and so on. It wasn't perfect, and certainly wouldn't make a huge difference, but in her mind, every little bit helped. For Vera, to see the Earth still in decent shape was very comforting, and made her efforts in the past seem worthwhile. She wasn't able to see much more, however, as the sun was rapidly setting. She turned her attention away from the window and back to the group.

Despite the fact that the flight to Beijing had been much longer than the flight to London, time seemed to pass just as quickly. It helped that they were actively involved in a conversation and didn't have the incessant Carlton to deal with. By the time they arrived, including the time zone difference and the flight time, the sun was beginning to rise, and rush hour would soon begin. The group exited the train and entered the terminal of Beijing International Hoverport. Size wise, fortunately, it was much like the Clinton hoverport back home, so the walk to the baggage claim was not nearly as long as it had been in Heathrow. However, it was just as congested as Heathrow, if not more so. They pushed through the crowds and made their way, slowly but surely, to the baggage claim.

"I already checked it out," Darin yelled over the heads of a few people to his group, "there's a really nice hotel about eight blocks from here. We can walk to the POD station down the block and take it the rest of the way. It'd be easier than waiting around for a taxi."

"Whatever, let's just get out of here!" Vera shouted. She was not a fan of crowds this large. They made their way through the hoverport towards the street, saying no to everyone proffering this or begging for that along the way. Finally, they found the exit and burst through the doors onto the busy street outside.

"Wow..." Darin said. The streets were incredibly wide and packed full of a mass of humanity bigger than anything he—or anyone else in the group for that matter—had ever seen. The narrow strip in the middle that was supposed to be for taxis and other vehicles to come and go was covered with people. A taxi hovered above, honking its horn and broadcasting an incomprehensible message in the local language. Slowly but surely the people made room and it landed successfully. As the passengers exited,

countless other people dashed towards the open door, trying to get in.

Meanwhile, Thomas was staring up into the skies above. Commercial and residential buildings towered over the landscape, reaching higher than any skyscrapers he had ever seen before. He imagined that it was the only possible way to accommodate so many people in such a small space. As the group stood there looking around, they were being pushed in the direction opposite from the POD station up the block.

“Darin!” shouted Lyla, “We need to get moving, I think the POD station is back the other way!” Darin looked around, disoriented. He wasn’t sure where it was now. He saw a man leaning against a wall and pushed through to ask him.

“Excuse me!” he shouted above the commotion to the man. The man looked over at him and his translator apparently kicked in. “Can you tell me how to get to the POD station?”

“Yes, here begins the line!”

“What?”

“Line begins here!” he shouted back.

“Line? To the POD station?”

“Yes, line begins here!” he shouted again, then he turned away. Darin looked and saw that the man was indeed standing in a line that extended far down the block. He looked back towards the man and noticed that the line was beginning to extend behind him. Vera, meanwhile, was not faring as well. The mass of people crowding around her was beginning to make her feel claustrophobic.

“I can’t take it!” she finally screamed. “This is ... INHUMAN!” She suddenly began pushing through the crowd and back towards the doors to the hoverport.

“Where are you going?” Thomas shouted after her.

“Anywhere but here!” she shouted. “Anywhere but here!” The group tried to catch up and finally got back into the hoverport. Vera was in line at the ticket counter, lashing out at anyone that came too close.

“Where are we going to go?” Darin asked as he approached.

“I don’t care, as long as it’s not here. Let’s just go to Africa and take the safari now. It’ll be nice and quiet and we’ll be away from all the people.” Vera’s eyes pleaded desperately. Darin looked back at the others. Thomas and Lyla nodded in agreement. Doug just shrugged.

“OK I guess,” he said. Though he didn’t particularly care what they did, he was a bit annoyed that they spent the time and money to travel to Beijing without having any inkling that it was this crowded. But there wasn’t

anything they could do about it; the Wiki pages were, once again, unhelpful. The next few hours dragged by slowly, but they finally got things where they needed to be. They spent the night in the hoverport in Beijing. By the next morning, they were exiting the Nairobi International Hoverport and getting into an open air taxi that was going to take them to their safari destination.

“Let’s just hope this doesn’t turn out to be a disaster too...” Darin said.

“It’s a tour of the local wildlife,” Doug scoffed. “I don’t think two-hundred years could’ve changed something like that all that much.”

He had no idea how wrong he was.

30

The taxi landed near the entrance of the resort. It was a large compound, surrounded in part by a high, wooden fence. A metal fence picked up where the wooden one left off. This apparently marked the boundary of the reserve. No animals were immediately visible, though in the distance, it looked like there was a herd of something moving across the Savannah. The group got out, grabbed their bags, and approached the gates. As they walked towards the entrance, a man stepped out from a booth at the gate and greeted them.

“Hello! Welcome to the Mahouqpabu Natural Reserve!” He leaned back inside the booth and pushed a button that opened the gate. They stepped into the compound and looked around. Straight in front of them was the biggest of the three buildings, apparently the main one where they would check in, eat, and relax. The other two buildings appeared to be exactly the same. Apparently the dormitory style rooms that were advertised.

They entered the main building and looked around the lobby. Everything appeared to be made from local materials and put together by hand. There was a large, steel fire pit in the middle of the dining room, a necessity for the atmosphere of the place. Thomas was fascinated by the furniture and went to see how it was constructed. Darin, meanwhile, was checking in and getting the keys to their rooms. Lyla and Vera noticed a shop off to the left of the lobby that was selling colorful clothes in the local style and fashion, and wandered off to look at them. Doug just stood there, looking around nonchalantly, bored out of his mind. It wasn't that he didn't want to be there. To the contrary, he was very interested in the environment and was looking forward to the safari. However, he found the whole setup ridiculous. It was obvious that they were in a modern resort, otherwise they wouldn't be checking in at all, they would be pitching a tent in the middle of the Savannah. Instead they were at a hotel that was pretending to be more in touch with nature than it actually was. The part that bothered him most about all of it was how his companions were eating it all up. Or so it seemed. Moments later, Thomas walked back after examining the furniture.

“It's fake,” he announced, “the whole lot of it, all made of synthetic fabrics. To top it off, the wood is oak! Oak! Why would they make furniture

that's supposed to be made of authentic, local materials out of oak?"

"How do you know it was oak?" Doug asked, amazed at this talent he didn't know Thomas possessed.

"I got stuck in shop class in high school, the year before they completely removed it from the curriculum. It was the only elective that was still open, so I took it. I actually learned quite a bit, and can tell several different kinds of woods apart. I could build some furniture, too, if I ever had to."

"Weird."

"It's not that weird," Thomas protested. Just then, Vera and Lyla came back from the shop looking very disappointed.

"The clothes were all fake!" Vera muttered.

"All of the tags said 'Made in China' on them." Lyla added.

"Looks like I was wrong about you guys," Doug said, smiling. "I knew that most of the stuff here wouldn't be authentic and thought you all were getting taken in, but you proved me wrong."

"Like that's hard to do," Vera said, smirking. Darin walked over, announced that they had successfully checked in, and led the way to their rooms. The rooms were much the same as the lobby: fake authentic furniture, fake authentic blankets, and fake authentic décor. These rooms, however, were much smaller than the ones at their previous hotel, containing only two double beds each. Darin had planned accordingly, and obtained three rooms. The girls went into their room and the guys were left in the hallway trying to decide who would get to stay alone.

"I think I should," Darin said, "I have to do all the planning, and I'm sure neither of you will want to listen to me making calls all the time."

"Oh bull," Doug said, "that's not a good enough reason for you to get your own room. I say we decide with a game of rock paper scissors."

"What?" Darin asked, confused.

"You don't know what rock paper scissors is?" Doug said, amazed.

"I've never heard of it. What is it, some sort of primitive game you guys played back before you had electronics?"

"You severely underestimate the time we came from," Doug replied coolly. "It was just a game that was common in our time as a quick way to decide who would do something, kind of like drawing straws."

"Drawing straws?"

Doug sighed. He debated mentally whether it would be worth it to try and teach Darin how to play the game. It seemed like a lot of work to go through just to figure out who would get to have their own room. He thought for a bit and decided to teach him anyway. They might need it

again in the future. Five minutes later, the game was done: Thomas had won, and would get the room alone. Darin was surprisingly amused by the game and didn't seem to mind at all that he had lost.

"I just need more practice," Thomas heard him saying as they entered their room, the door closing behind them. "You'll see, next time I am going to kick the scissor's—" Thomas laughed and went down the hall toward his room. Once he was inside, he threw his bags down, sat on the bed, and looked around. They weren't going on the safari till tomorrow, so they basically had the whole day to do whatever they wanted. The girls had already decided they wanted to rest after all the travel, and Thomas assumed Doug and Darin would go find something heavy to keep them occupied. He was once again left alone. His backpack suddenly caught his eye, and he dug through it, finding the notebook Doug had given him days before. He opened it to a fresh page, found a pen, and began doodling.

As he drew idly, he reflected on the events that had led up to this point. It had been an incredible ride, but the future was not as he had hoped. Sure, technology had progressed, but it seemed that people's attitudes and society as a whole had hardly changed at all. It left him with some of the same feelings of emptiness and unhappiness that made him take this journey to begin with. But at least he had found one very bright spot so far...

His train of thought was suddenly derailed by a knock at his door. He grumbled and got up, expecting to find someone annoying on the other side. As he opened it, however, he was pleasantly surprised to see Lyla standing there instead.

"I heard that you won the extra room for yourself," she said as she entered, "and I thought I'd just drop by to say, you know, hello." She smiled, and Thomas, awkward as ever, finally produced a response.

"Well, I'm very glad you did." He closed the door and turned to face her. She grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him towards her. After a long kiss, she looked in his eyes for a while.

"Hi," she said, grinning from ear to ear.

"That's quite a hello," Thomas said, smiling back. They stood, staring each other in the eye.

"I better get going," Lyla said at last, "I just told Vera I was going to look around and would be back in about five minutes, I don't want her to get suspicious."

"Do you have to go?" Thomas said, not wanting the moment to end there. "I mean, do we really have to keep this secret?"

"No, no, I don't want to keep it secret, I just don't think the time is

right to tell them now, you know? It's too soon. I think that Darin might have an inkling that something is going on but he doesn't seem sure of what he suspects yet."

"I guess you're right," Thomas said after a long pause, "we'd better just keep it under the radar for now." Lyla kissed him again.

"Don't worry," she said, "it won't be much longer." She turned and left. Thomas fell back on the bed and laid there for a while, staring up at the ceiling. He finally sat back up and got out his notebook to doodle some more. This time, however, he was thinking much happier thoughts. After what seemed like an eternity, he glanced at the clock. It was still early in the evening. He felt somewhat hungry and decided to go and search for food. Fortunately, this hotel did not have an elevator to contend with. He exited the dorm where the rooms were located and walked towards the main building.

The sun was setting and stars were beginning to appear in the sky above. As he looked off in the distance, he spotted what first appeared to be a shooting star. Thomas, however, wasn't sure that it really was a shooting star after all. Instead of moving on a straight trajectory, it seemed to be traveling erratically, moving back and forth across the sky. As he stared, trying to figure out what it was, it suddenly disappeared. Thomas was puzzled but not too worried. He resumed walking to the main building, dismissing the strange sight as merely a robot or some other future anomaly he didn't know about yet. He finally arrived, and, after a brief search, found a restaurant. He didn't see anyone from the group, but that was fine with him. He preferred to dine alone tonight.

The restaurant, unlike everything else in the hotel, didn't even make an attempt to appear authentic. It would've been excessively hard for them to even try, given that they specialized in Italian cuisine. Thomas ordered mostacholi al forno, a small salad, and thoroughly enjoyed every bite of it. If there was one thing that was right about this whole journey, Thomas thought, it was the food. As he left, he quickly passed by a rack brochures advertising the details of the safari that they were going to be taking tomorrow. Thomas stopped, backed up, and grabbed one. As he walked out the front door, he turned it open to the first page, and stopped dead in his tracks.

"No way," he said struggling to close his gaping jaw and failing. He looked up, and in the distance, the same object he had earlier mistaken for a shooting star was visible again.

"No way..." he breathed.

31

“Good morning!” Thomas said as he walked over to the group at breakfast.

“Hey,” they all replied in sync.

“I’m pretty excited about this safari thing,” Thomas said in a tone that was unusually cheery. “It should be incredible.”

“Oh definitely,” Vera said, “I’m glad we can do something more in touch with nature and can relax. Last night, I sat outside, closed my eyes, and just listened to the quiet. I even saw a shooting star!”

“Oh yeah, I did too,” Thomas said, stifling his laughter. “It was pretty astounding.”

“What’s so funny?” Lyla asked, sensing something was up.

“Oh nothing. Say, did you guys get to look at the brochure for the safari?”

“I didn’t know they had any, where are they?” Vera asked.

“Well I only asked because if you hadn’t seen it yet I was going to tell you not to bother. It was extremely boring and didn’t tell us anything we didn’t already know.”

“OK,” Vera said, content to accept this statement as fact. Lyla gave Thomas a funny look, to which he just shrugged in reply. The normal conversation resumed and Thomas played along, knowing what awaited them. They finished their breakfast right on time and ran outside to catch their ride. A hover bus transported them to a depot further out. There they would start the tour in a specially equipped hover vehicle piloted by an actual human tour guide. As they rode along, everyone in the bus was glued to the windows, hoping to catch an early glimpse of some sort of animal, but no sighting was made. An air of disappointment hung over most of the people as they arrived at the depot. The tours were arranged in groups of ten, so Lyla, Thomas, Darin, Doug, and Vera were joined by an older couple and a family of three.

The older couple, they soon discovered, had just retired and were using their newfound free time and savings to take the vacations they had always dreamed of. Before their trip to Kenya, they had also visited London and had found it “rather mediocre.” The other family consisted of a couple that appeared to be in their thirties along with their twelve year old son. Their

son seemed less excited than would be expected of a boy his age. He was preoccupied, tapping away at the keyboard accessory for his implant, no doubt chatting with his friends back home about how boring the trip was and about how his parents just didn't 'get him'.

There were only a few tour vehicles operating at a time. Two pulled in and the groups ahead of them boarded and left. Everyone passed the time, mingling, making small talk, and looking at the souvenirs. Vera bought an excessively overpriced digital camera and walked back to the group to show it off.

"Nice!" Lyla said, "that's almost as good as the model I have at home!"

"And three times the price!" Thomas mocked.

"Well it's not like we don't have the money," Vera said, "and I want to remember this."

"Oh, I'm sure you will..." Thomas said. Lyla caught that tone in his voice again and shot a look over in his direction. Thomas ignored her.

"It doesn't matter," Vera said, taking the camera out of the packaging. "I just want some pictures." She tossed the remains of the package into the trash can Thomas was standing next to.

VOIP!

"Hey!" Thomas said again, looking around, "What IS that sound?"

"What sound?" Lyla asked. Thomas struggled to find something to compare it too. He thought of several different sound effects from the sci-fi movies of his time, but was struggling to find something that Lyla would actually know about.

"I don't know how to describe it, it just sounds mechanical. That's the second time I've heard it."

"Well when did you hear it?" Thomas thought about what had happened and suddenly figured it out.

"The trash can!" he shouted, a little too loud. The older couple looked at him, wondering what the trash can had to do with anything. Thomas blushed and waited till they looked away. "That has to be it," he said in quieter tones. "I first heard it after we ate in Little Italy, Doug threw something in the trash can and we heard the noise. We figured it was just a robot flying overhead or something. But just now when Vera threw the box in there, it did it again!"

"Of course it did," Lyla said, failing to understand why this was significant.

"Well that's not normal! At least, it wasn't in our time. But I'm sure it's different now, some technology has made the trash can completely differ-

ent.”

“Actually, the way the trash can works now is the result of two technologies. First, there was the Great Green Movement that occurred shortly after the third world war. During that time laws were created that mandated recycling and, thanks to more efficient garbage processing, people could throw their recyclables and regular garbage all in the same bin and it was sorted out at the processing facilities. That was the first major difference.”

“Not that big of a change, people always threw out their recyclables and regular garbage together. Hardly anyone recycled in our time.” Vera grumbled.

“Well no, it wasn’t that big of a change in of itself, but at least it legally allowed people to throw everything into the same containers. The next big change came after the POD system was developed.”

“Wait, don’t tell me,” Thomas said, “anything that gets thrown into garbage cans gets sent by the POD system to the processing facilities.”

“Essentially, yes. It’s not really a POD but it’s the same underlying technology. Basically everything you throw in most public trashcans gets instantly transported to the proper facility. So if you throw in a glass bottle, it gets sent to the closest glass recycling plant, metal gets sent to the proper metal recycling plant, and so on.”

“That’s ... that’s actually a brilliant idea.” Vera said, the environmentalist inside her clearly impressed.

“It gets even better. Thanks to an advance in the same technology that powers the PODS, they can actually sort garbage as it’s transported. If you threw in a plastic bag full of different kinds of trash, it all gets sorted and sent to the proper place. There’s no need for the whole bag to get sent to a facility where it’s then hand sorted. Basically, you can throw absolutely anything you want out, it will all be automatically recycled, toxic chemicals are handled properly, and the trash can will never get full.”

“That’s incredible!” Vera and Doug said in unison, Doug having joined the conversation right before Lyla summed it up.

“Yeah, and it’s all powered by renewable energy,” Darin added, pointing out the solar panels, barely noticeable on the side of the can.

“So that’s what you meant when you said they had ‘fixed’ the environmental problems,” Vera said excitedly. “I mean I know that’s not all of it but that alone is just an incredible feat. The amount of garbage produced in our time was excessive, and one of our biggest problems! I bet you don’t really have to mine for new raw materials at all anymore, do you?”

“Not really, no.” Darin said.

“So cool...” Vera said. She found herself wanting to find some garbage, just so she could pick it up, throw it in the can, and feel like she helped the environment. Thomas was impressed as well, but what he had learned last night overshadowed this new bit of information. Just then, another tour vehicle pulled up. Their group was next in line, and they eagerly boarded. The vehicle could best be described as a cross between an SUV and a school bus. Solar panels on the side and hood of the vehicle provided the power. There were ten narrow, bench style seats, five on each side with an aisle that ran between them. Nearly the entire upper half of the vehicle appeared to be made of glass.

“Greetings!” the tour guide said over the loudspeaker. The group responded with several different versions of hello. “My name is Kofi Mudiwa, and I’ll be your tour guide today.”

“Hi Kofi!” the older couple shouted back. Kofi made eye contact in the mirror and waved.

“There are a few safety guidelines I need to review with you all,” he continued, “and then we can be on our way. First off, we do need to drive for about five minutes to our destination. While we’re driving, I ask that you remain seated and keep your safety belt on. If we do see anything before we arrive at the starting point, I must ask that you still remain seated and do not try to get up to take pictures. You will see more of the same sights with better vantage points when we’re actually on the tour route. We’ve done everything we can to ensure that the path we’ll be taking will give you the best bang for your buck!” Thomas smirked at this comment. “Once we get on the tour path, you can take off your seat belts and move about freely.”

“You may notice the glass dome above you all. This is to ensure that you have the best, unobstructed view at all times. You needn’t worry, the glass is very thick and is actually made of an extremely durable polymer. You’re very safe. You may also have noticed the emergency exit at the back of the vehicle. This is for, as the name implies, emergencies only. You may think it is an emergency, but unless I tell you that it is, do not exit via that door at any point. While we are on the tour you are free to ask questions at any time, just shout them out and I’ll answer.”

“Can we go now?” shouted the twelve year old kid.

“Almost,” the guide laughed. “Finally, last, but not least, please take note of the white line in the aisle. At no time are you to cross that line while the vehicle is in motion. Do you all understand?” They all nodded. “OK! We’re ready to go!” The bus lifted off the ground and began moving rapidly

towards the tour route, several miles away. Everyone was glued to the windows as they drove, but nothing particularly interesting was spotted. There were a few animals here and there, but none of the big herds seen in your typical nature show on TV. As they drove, the tour guide gave them a bit of background about the reserve.

“In the aftermath of the third world war,” he said, “all of the world’s ecosystems were severely impacted. The Savannah took the brunt of the damage, and the entire ecosystem nearly collapsed. Fortunately, when the Great Green Movement began gaining steam, many of the world’s corporations wanted to get in on the action. These companies provided funding to kick start some of the animal cloning research projects that were suspended when the war broke out. Thanks to the sponsorship of companies like Beauty, Inc., Corporate Conglomerates Conglomerated—CCC for short—the Shiny Technology Group, and many others, rapid progress was made in animal cloning. Thus, many of the animals that were threatened with extinction—along with some that had already gone extinct—were cloned and released, restoring balance to the Savannah’s ecosystem!”

“That’s just awesome,” Vera said across the aisle to Thomas.

“Yeah, but I wonder why corporations that have nothing to do with the environment would spend so much money to help it?” Thomas replied.

“Just because a corporation does something philanthropic doesn’t mean they have some sort of ulterior motive,” Vera said coolly. “Apparently the corporations of the future are more charitable than the ones of our day. You shouldn’t complain about it.” Thomas just smiled. The tour guide continued talking about the history of the reserve itself, but nothing particularly interesting was mentioned. Most of the people on the bus were too busy staring out the windows anyhow, hoping to catch a glimpse of some of the wildlife. Sure enough, just as the tour guide had said, there was very little to see. Suddenly, the vehicle began slowing down to a more reasonable pace. They had arrived.

“OK everyone,” the guide announced, “we’ve reached our normal tour route. We’re going to slow down now and let you take in the sights. I will continue to provide commentary and background information, and again, if you have any questions just ask.” Everyone took off their seat belts and crowded around the windows. The trail had clearly been picked well: wildlife abounded. A lake to the left was teeming with flamingos. A herd of wildebeest was seen along the north edge of the same lake, drinking and playing around. The vehicle came to a stop.

“Wow!” Vera said, snapping pictures rapidly.

“See that Billy?” the mother pointed vaguely towards the lake. Billy begrudgingly raised his head and looked out the window.

“What’s so special about a bunch of dumb animals drinking water?” Billy whined. Just then, a crocodile appeared, leaping out towards an unsuspecting wildebeest! The crocodile grabbed the wildebeest by the throat, severing several major blood vessels, quickly incapacitating it. The rest of the wildebeest in the herd began fleeing in horror as their injured companion collapsed into the water, blood spilling out, turning the water an unmistakable color of red. The flamingos squawked in confusion and reached for the skies in their attempt to escape the chaos. Several other crocs emerged, eager to participate in the feast. The people on the tour bus looked on in astonishment. Billy dropped his miniature keyboard on the floor and planted his hands and face against the window, eyes widening with what appeared to be horror. His jaw hung agape. His mother looked at him, anxious, wondering what such a sight would do to her precious snowflake.

“Come on Billy, let’s just look out this other window at the nice,” she paused to look and see what was actually there. “Rocks! Yes, look at those beautiful rocks!” She tugged at his arm urgently. Billy resisted, pushing her away.

“Cool...” he simply breathed.

“Well the timing on that, for Billy’s sake anyhow, was impeccable don’t you think?” Thomas said to no one in particular. Vera snapped out of her trance and took pictures of the carnage. No one seemed to notice what Thomas had said. Indeed, most members of the group had decided to ignore him at this point anyhow. The vehicle again began moving along the trail. Billy unglued himself from the side window and moved to the back to catch the fleeting glimpses of the crocodiles enjoying their meal. Once they were a sufficient distance away, he gave up, and finally moved back to the front. He found his keyboard on the floor and stuck it in his pocket, deciding instead to keep alert and focused, yearning to catch sight of more of mother nature’s carnage. He would not be disappointed...

As they proceeded along the trail, more and more foliage became noticeable. The plants were lush and green, and a large variety of animals were roaming around, grazing. Several giraffes were searching the boughs of an umbrella thorn for the nutritious seed pods contained within. A small band of elephants was also present and grazing off the numerous plants. Billy seemed disappointed by the lack of animals killing and eating each other, but stayed diligent and alert, assuming that such a sight might be seen

around every corner. Kofi continued to answer questions and explained what they were seeing. While much of what they saw truly was inspiring and beautiful, Thomas was still acting strange and making snarky remarks about everything. It was bothering Lyla enough that she finally pulled him aside.

“What’s wrong with you? You’ve been acting weird all morning.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” Thomas said, attempting to play it off, but failing.

“Yes there is. You’re not yourself. You’re being sarcastic and negative about everything.” Thomas shrugged. “See! There you go again!”

“Lyla, just trust me. I’m being negative because I know that this safari is going to have a negative ending.”

“Well I don’t see how you can say that. Everything we’ve seen so far has been amazing and really speaks for the good work the big corporations did in saving these animals.”

“Just trust me. You’ll see.” Before Lyla could protest more, Thomas quickly walked back to the front of the vehicle where everyone was still staring and pointing at the animals they were passing by. Lyla sighed and began to move to the front again herself. Suddenly the vehicle came to an abrupt stop. Everyone grabbed on to whatever they could around them and held on for dear life. Billy nearly fell flat on his face in the aisle, but Darin caught him at the last second. Just as people began to voice their complaints, Kofi began apologizing profusely and attempted to explain what had gone wrong, but didn’t need to. An enormous group of zebras was flooding across the road in front of them.

Lyla, who was still in the back, began moving slowly to the front. She stared at the zebras as she went. There was something strange about them, but she just couldn’t put her finger on it, and they were moving too quickly for her to see any details. She looked over the group of people in the front and saw her friends all still present. Doug and Vera were looking out the window in silence, jaws agape. Darin was handing the boy back over to his mother who was too busy babbling and checking over every inch of her perfect son, making sure he was still perfect. Thomas was looking back and forth between the window and the others, grinning wildly.

Wait. Thomas was grinning wildly. The way he was looking back and forth between them and the scene outside made it obvious: whatever it was that they were supposed to see, this was it. Lyla continued walking towards the front—faster now—keeping her eyes locked on the zebras in front of them. There was definitely something strange about the scene in front of

her, but Lyla still couldn't make it out. They were running by so quickly; a striped, black and white blur. Perhaps it was just the way they were acting. They were clearly running from something.

Lyla suddenly noticed a faint sound in the background. It almost sounded like an engine, but it wasn't the sound of the tour vehicle. Had it always been there, and she simply hadn't noticed? No. It was getting louder, and the zebras were becoming more frantic and agitated. Thomas wasn't looking back at them anymore. He was now instead transfixed on the scene outside, looking up towards the sky. The roaring continued growing louder. Suddenly, something from above came plummeting down into the middle of the stampede. Horrible whinnying sounds erupted, and a cloud of dust plumed upward. As the whinnying continued, everyone tried to get a view of what on Earth was going on, but the dust obscured their view.

Finally, the sounds ceased, and the stampede had passed. As the dust began to settle, the outline of what had come crashing down in front of them slowly appeared as a black, white, and brown blob. It reminded Thomas of the day they were thawed and had to try to make out the figures of Darin and Lyla in front of them. Of course, this time, Thomas had at least a pretty decent idea of what to expect. As the outline became less blurred, his expectations were confirmed. He stood quietly, waiting for the air to clear enough for the others to be able to make out what it was they were looking at. The youngest pair of eyes figured it out first.

"COOOOOLL!!!" Billy shouted, running forward to press his face against the windshield.

"Billy, what is it?" his mother asked, still unable to tell what it was she was looking at. "What is it Billy?" she shouted, the urgency and fear rising in her voice. "Will you just tell me what—" she started, but grew quiet as she finally figured out what it was. "Oh my," she exhaled. Vera and Doug stared silently, mouths hanging open. Darin and Lyla stood there, unsure of what to think of this scene themselves. All the illusions of grandeur, glory, and positive philanthropic motives put forth by the corporations was quickly fading away.

In front of them lay a zebra, dead and badly mauled. The lion that had caused this was perched over the carcass, furiously tearing away at the flesh. On the side of the zebra, one could still make out a pattern made with the stripes. This pattern clearly resembled the letters "ty, Inc." The lion that had come careening out of the sky to make the kill was equipped with what appeared to be—despite all logic and reason that said this was impossible—a jet-pack.

Just then, a platform carrying a cage came hovering out of the sky and came to rest a few yards away from the carnage. The cage door opened, and another zebra with the same pattern came out. Upon seeing the massacre nearby, the zebra whinnied in horror and began to run after the herd still visible in the distance. The lion, alerted to this presence, roared as the jet-pack engines engaged, hurtling it headlong into the middle of the words “Beauty, Inc.” mauling the second zebra.

A second platform descended and released yet another Beauty, Inc. branded zebra that took off running quietly enough that the lion either didn't notice or didn't care. It had its food. Several more roars were heard and the lion's family flew down and began partaking in the gruesome feast now at hand. Billy was enthralled. His mother and father looked at each other, beaming about their renewed family bonds granted by the successful trip. The older couple stood with their arms around each other, smiling. Darin and Lyla were growing more and more horrified. Vera and Doug appeared to be in shock. Thomas walked up behind the two and placed his arms around them. He leaned forward.

“Welcome to the philanthropy of the future,” he said quietly. Vera shed a tear.

A week had passed since the safari. The group had returned quickly to the city after what they experienced. They had spent most of the week apart from each other. They all needed time to think. For Thomas, Vera, and Doug, what they had hoped would be a brilliant escape into the far advanced and better off world of the future had been a huge disappointment. Their minds were all over the place, but one common question rang clear between them: What now?

For Darin and Lyla, it was a slightly different story. Until that time, they had been fine with their world, and hadn't noticed most of the deep, essential flaws. They had lived very much like the large majority of people two-hundred years prior. Now that their eyes had been opened, they felt much like Thomas had felt before meeting Frank. The world was a wreck, but what could they do about it? They wanted to escape, but where would they go? After nearly a week's worth of thinking, they still couldn't come up with a single plausible plan of action that would make any difference whatsoever. This left them feeling stranded and adrift, both of them wondering: What now?

Finally Thomas couldn't take it anymore. He was going crazy sitting around doing nothing all day. They had to get out of the lab and talk about this together. He knocked on everyone's door, asking them to come down to the lab. A few minutes later, the group was gathered, looking toward Thomas, waiting for him to say something.

"Well," he finally said, "given how we've all been alone this past week, I'm guessing we've all had a lot of time to think about what we're going to do." Everyone nodded solemnly. "Thing is, we haven't done any talking together. We're all trying to figure out what to do, but I'm guessing that so far, we've all come up empty, right?" Everyone nodded again. "So why don't we pool our resources and try to come up with something together?" No one responded. "Come on, let's go get a pizza or something and take it to the park. We can get some fresh air, relax, and try to make some plans." No one seemed willing to move. Finally Doug spoke up.

"We might as well. What else are we going to do but sit around and feel sorry for ourselves?"

"That's the spirit!" Thomas said, hoping the others would follow suit.

“Why not?” Darin said.

“Sure,” Lyla said.

“Whatever,” Vera mumbled, still bitter.

They walked out the door and into the sunshine. It was an exceptionally beautiful late-summer day. The temperature was perfect, a gentle breeze was blowing, and it was only partly cloudy. Were it not for their recent experiences, all would have seemed right with the world. The park was only about ten blocks off, and there was a pizza place along the way, so they decided to hoof it rather than use the PODS. The exercise, they reasoned, would do them some good too.

About twenty minutes later, they were one block from the park and were picking up their pizza. They ordered two because they couldn't agree on what to get, and it was easier to just get two rather than to endlessly debate over sausage or no sausage. They arrived at the park and tried to seek out a quiet spot where they wouldn't be disturbed. After a time, they found a secluded corner near a pond. There were only a few other people around feeding the ducks, but they were far enough away that they wouldn't bother them.

“So,” said Thomas between mouthfuls of pizza, “what are we going to do now?”

“I dunno,” Doug said, “the past sucked, the future sucks, and I don't really care anymore.”

“Doug,” Vera said snottily, “you express your thoughts so elegantly! Please, tell us more.”

“You guys, I'm not convinced things are as bad as we think,” Darin said quickly before a fight erupted. “I mean, yeah, even from my perspective things seem pretty bleak. I never realized how things truly were till you guys came. I always readily accepted anything that came my way and didn't question it at all. But maybe we just made some mistakes when we were picking travel destinations.”

“Three times in a row?” Lyla said. “That seems pretty unlikely.”

“Well the whole world can't be THAT bad,” Darin insisted, “there has to be some good out there we haven't found yet.”

“I'm pretty convinced there isn't,” Lyla said, “we've been blind till now but my eyes have been opened.”

“I think we're missing the important point here,” Thomas said. “Yes, we can easily agree that the world of the future—now, that is—isn't what we thought it was going to be. I mean it does have its perks. I got to ride in a flying car, the world is united under one government, genetic disease has

basically been eradicated, I mean there's a lot of really good stuff. But for every good thing we've seen it seems like there are a couple dozen negative things."

"I'll say," Vera mumbled.

"Right. So what we need to figure out is not WHY things are bad, but what we can do about it." They sat in silence for a time.

"Well where on Earth could we go?" Lyla asked out loud.

"Hey..." Thomas said, an idea occurring to him. "Maybe it's not where we go, but when..."

"What?" Lyla asked.

"The lab!" Thomas said, his idea taking shape.

"Oh come on," Doug said, catching on, "you can't be serious! You want us to freeze ourselves again? What's the point? Humanity has had two-hundred years to get their act together and failed. Miserably. You think that giving them more time is going to make a difference?"

"Yeah," Vera said, "we tried it once. It was a grand experiment, it had to be done by someone, but it failed. There's no reason to do it again."

"But how do we know what the future holds?" Thomas said excitedly.

"We don't!" Doug shouted. "We didn't know what it held the first time either! Fat lot of good that did us!"

"Whoa whoa, come on, calm down now." Thomas exhaled, gathering his thoughts. "Yes, there is no guarantee that it'll get any better, but there's no promise that it'll get any worse. We have nothing to lose by trying it. Even if it hasn't gotten any better we can just freeze ourselves again and stay frozen for another couple of years, waking up occasionally to see if anything has changed." Thomas paused to let them think and see if anyone would agree with him.

"You know," Vera said slowly, "we might as well try it..."

"Umm, I think you guys are forgetting something," Lyla said. "There are only three of those tubes in that lab and—I don't know about Darin—but I don't particularly want to be here anymore either. You can't expect us to just stay behind and let you guys go."

"Oh," Thomas said dejectedly, "I hadn't really thought about that." They sat in silence once again, Thomas not wanting to relinquish the idea just yet. He reflected for a minute about the sacrifice that Frank, Ervin, and Flo had made. It was the first time he had thought of them in quite a while. How had it been for them, he wondered, seeing us frozen in the chambers everyday, knowing that they couldn't accompany us? It was a sacrifice, he was sure, but at least they had each other for support. A support system...

“Why don’t we just play rock paper scissors to decide?” Darin was saying.

“Idiot!” Thomas said out loud and smacked himself on the forehead.

“What did you say?” Darin glared.

“Oh no, not you,” Thomas quickly backpedaled. “Sorry. I just had an idea,” he said, standing up. “Lyla, can I talk to you?” The others all looked over at her, then back to Thomas, then back to her.

“Sure, I guess,” she said as she got up. The two of them walked together away from the group.

“We’ll be back!” Thomas shouted over his shoulder. Darin, Doug and Vera watched them as they walked away around the pond.

“I wonder what they’re talking about...” Vera said aloud.

“I don’t know, but who cares?” Doug said.

“Hmm,” Darin muttered. He was beginning to piece things together.

“Lyla,” Thomas began once he was sure he was far enough away from the group, “I’ve been an idiot.”

“You were being a pretty big jerk on the safari, yeah.”

“No, I’m not even talking about that. Though I am sorry, I should have told you.” Lyla nodded. “Anyhow, I just had an epiphany. I came on this journey because after I lost my job, I realized that I had never been content. I began searching for answers, and found Frank’s team. I thought that coming to the future would make a difference, that things would be better and I would finally be at peace. For the past few weeks, I’d been thinking that I had made the biggest mistake of my life. I had flung myself into a future world where I can hardly relate to anything or anyone. This whole time, though, I’d been overlooking the most important change...”

“Which was?”

“Us. Me and you, together. That’s what I’ve just realized! It’s not where or when you go, but who you go with that matters! Think about it... Frank, Ervin, and Flo started this lab because they wanted to see change, but in the end they let us go instead. I think they realized that while they wanted the world around them to be better, if you have a good enough relationship with someone else, you can pull through it together, regardless of what’s going on around you. They were probably never entirely sure that the future would be better, but they hoped for the best for our sake. In the end, if it wasn’t better, we’d have each other,” Thomas said, reaching for Lyla’s hands. “Will you stay, with me?”

“Oh Thomas,” she said, a tear flowing down her cheek, “yes. Yes, I’ll stay.” She hugged him. Thomas had never been happier than he was in that

moment.

“Come on,” he said, “we’d better go tell the others. I’m sure they’re wondering what’s going on.”

“OK,” Lyla said, smiling, “let’s do it.” They walked over and rejoined the group. Everyone was looking at them quizzically, unable to comprehend what they had seen from a distance.

“We could still refreeze,” Thomas said.

“How?” Doug protested, frustration making him forget what he had just seen. “We can’t build more chambers, so we can’t all go.”

“I know.”

“So it doesn’t work, it’s not an option.” Doug said firmly.

“Maybe, maybe not,” He looked at Doug and Vera. “You know what a huge sacrifice it was for Frank, Ervin, and Flo to stay behind while we traveled to the future. Every day they would see us there, and they knew they couldn’t come. But they had each other for support. It still couldn’t have been easy on them, but when you have someone you love,” he said, looking back towards Lyla, “it’s easier to cope.” Thomas waited to let them mull it over, maintaining eye contact with Lyla. She nodded.

“So who would stay behind?” Doug asked, oblivious to what was going on right in front of him.

“We will,” Lyla answered quickly, reaching for and grasping Thomas’ hand. The others were shocked for a moment, then their brains finally began to connect the dots.

“Wait, you two?” Doug said, pointing back and forth between them in disbelief.

“We were trying to keep it quiet,” Lyla said, smiling. “We didn’t want to make a big deal over it in case it didn’t work out.” Thomas smiled back.

“So you two will stay behind and let me, Doug, and Darin go?” Vera asked.

“Yes, that’s the plan...possibly anyhow.” Thomas said.

“I still don’t like it,” Doug said, “I honestly think it’s a waste of time. So long as humans rule this planet, they’re just going to keep messing things up.”

“Well if you stay frozen long enough, maybe something else will have taken over the planet and things really will be better!” Thomas said jokingly. He was in an excessively good mood since his relationship had been made official.

“You’re not funny, Thomas.” Doug said bitterly.

“I still think it’s a good idea,” Vera said. “I mean even if things don’t get

excessively better, there has to be some point where we begin to colonize other parts of the galaxy, right?" She paused to get consensus. Everyone nodded, seeing where she was going with this. "We can always escape this planet and go somewhere else, right?"

"Yeah, but those planets will still be run by man," Doug said.

"Not necessarily," Thomas said. "We don't know what's out there. There might be intelligent life on other planets. They will probably be more advanced than us, and will likely run things better. You could always escape there if they let you."

"I doubt it," Doug said. "I mean, I'm sure there's intelligent life out there somewhere. There has to be, and the proof is in the fact that they haven't tried to contact us. They don't want us out there messing things up. So they hide from us, avoid us like the plague. I'm sure they're hoping that humans will blow themselves up before anyone ever makes contact with them, and that's probably what will happen."

Just then, as if Doug were some sort of prophet, the ground they were sitting on began to shake. A faint rumbling was heard and began growing louder with every passing second. Ripples began forming in the pond, breaking the surface tension and prompting the ducks to fly away. The group stumbled to their feet, trying to decide if they should run or just stay where they were. Vera somehow caught sight of the sky above them and stood, transfixed, mouth agape, pointing in horror. The others looked up and saw what it was. If any of them screamed, the loud roaring made it impossible to know.

The sky above them was an intense color of red and orange. The clouds that had gathered in the meantime were parting as if they were fleeing the city below them. As they did so, an immense, glowing object became visible. It looked simply like a giant ball of fire, roaring downward. What's worse, it appeared that the thing—whatever it was—was going to land on right on top of them. They took off running, constantly looking up as they went to check on the object's trajectory. Running seemed futile, however, and more than one of them shouted this at different points.

"It must be a comet or an asteroid!" Thomas yelled.

Of course, none of them could hear the shout to respond to it. As they neared the edge of the park, more and more people could be seen running away from the madness. Thomas looked back once again and suddenly realized that this thing, whatever it was, was slowing down.

"That's no comet..." he said in awe. It looked as if it was going to land right on top of the baseball fields near the middle of the park. He stopped

and stared, trying to comprehend what he was looking at. The others kept running, then slowed when they realized Thomas was behind them. They turned back to look for him and saw him standing there, staring. They assumed he had simply gone mad and were quite prepared to leave him. But as they looked back, they too noticed that the object was slowing down. They walked back to where he was standing, joining him in a group stare. The sense of terror was still there, but whatever this thing was, it was no longer going to come crashing down right on top of them.

The object kept slowing and finally came to a rest on the baseball fields. A burst of wind and hot air hit the group and they shielded their eyes. Once the wind stopped, they looked back to where the object had come to rest and waited till the dust and smoke cleared. Sitting in the middle of the baseball field was an immense, almost cigar shaped metallic object, pointing upwards, gleaming brightly in the sun's summer rays. There were slick, smooth curves and lines running across its body, adding shape to what would've otherwise been a dull design. The group stood staring in silence. Even the birds had stopped singing, and the majority of the screams had abated. Everything was eerily quiet.

Thomas looked over at Lyla, grabbed her hand, and finally broke the silence.

"Well... I guess we won't have to wait for space travel after all..." They all began walking together towards the spaceship.

Timeline:

- 2015 – Nuclear power plant buildup
- 2022 – Social Security System collapses
- 2024 – First worldwide treaty signed to institute Worldwide ID Program
- 2035 – OH NOES! Oil Gone!
- 2036 – World economy collapses
- 2037 – World War three started as “A jolly good way to rejuvenate the economy”
- 2042 – Internet declared a threat to global instability, destroyed.
- 2052 – World governments collapse, “Pangea” founded, war ends
- 2053 – Thomas’ condo demolished
- 2055 – Solar panel efficiency tremendously increased, “Great Green Movement”
- 2058 – The personal computer makes a comeback, Portal System launched
- 2061 – Melvin Frey walks on Mars
- 2063 – Genetically engineered “Giganto Foods”
- 2071 – First “smart” robots mass produced at an affordable price
- 2083 – Earth’s climate declared “stable”
- 2131 – Hover technology demonstrated
- 2135 – Personal robots begin utilizing hover technology
- 2144 – First hovercars begin selling
- 2145 – Hovercars switch to autopilot system only.
- 2149 – Implantation Law passed
- 2150 – Reliable human cloning demonstrated
- 2152 – Hovertrain lines opened
- 2155 – Personal DNA and memory backup hardware introduced
- 2158 – Robot Inequality Act passed
- 2161 – All Major Airlines Declare Bankruptcy, shut down
- 2164 – Designer Babies introduced
- 2166 – Responsible Human Procreation laws passed
- 2169 – Human Improvement Lottery introduced
- 2175 – PODS System First Demonstrated
- 2179 – First PODS Station Installed for commuter use
- 2185 – Subway system closed
- 2190 – Copybots first deployed

