

## **TREPANNING FOR GOLD**

By Justin Patrick Moore

### **I.**

Freedom waited on the other side of my last week at Chemco, the penal factory where I sweated off my debts to the corporate world. On Saturday nights they let me out with the City Pass I'd earned. I'd go to Club Eurydice to try and get out of my head. After being whipped like an unloved dog all week you need that. Plus I needed to talk to a contact I'd met there before going back north to Toronto, where I hoped to see my daughter Jena again.

I wrote her a letter every week. I don't know if she got them. My ex-wife had stopped sending me pictures of her five years ago.

I was looking forward to seeing the *Swine Gods of the Afterlife* play that night while knocking back cold beers with Erik. Their sordid brand of blistering electronic music was like a drug. When it tore out of the loudspeakers the noise of my internal chatter dispersed and I lifted into takeoff, the stress of my indentured servitude temporarily forgotten.

Outside the uncertain possibility of reuniting with my daughter I had no prospects. Sanmonto, the Corp where I had handled the encryption of genetic research data blacklisted me. I sold their codes to a rival upstart company in the clone biz, Raellaerian, trying to earn some extra cash for my family. I got caught, sacked, tried by the Corporate Judge and his jury of CEOs, sentenced with work-punishment at Chemco for ten years. Elizabeth promptly divorced me. I keep telling myself it could have been worse. I'd never touch a computer professionally again. On the bright side I had maintained my legal identification, so at least I wasn't one of the countless strays existing on the bare fringed wires of society.

I've made it further than most. Surviving the factories takes a lot of emotional willpower: it would be easy to let apathy override and step into a vat of hydrochloric acid. Earning my City Pass had taken six years of grim determination. Being able to leave for eight hours on the weekend kept my strength alive. The end was in sight. At Eurydice I'd finalize my plans with Erik: he had access to a car from the collective he belonged to in the Covington shantytown and said he'd drive me as far as Toledo, having a delivery to pick up there anyway.

Time is crucial on nights when they let you out with a City Pass. You're expected to report back to the barracks as soon as your eight hours are up, ASAP, or you lose any accrued privileges; if the Corporate

Judges ever catch word of a fuck up (something a Managing Officer had no bones about telling them) they slap another five years worth of debt on you without a flinch.

It's routine. It's policy.

I could have ridden the bus, getting off at a stop near the Club. I'd saved up a decent amount of money trading food and toiletries, but after the twelve-hour shift breathing in solvents and corrosive vapors I needed to walk, wind down, and clear out my lungs. Besides, it was part of my agreement with Erik that I'd pay for the water and home-brewed biofuel, plus the flat fee we'd negotiated. I needed every spare cent I could muster.

As I walked I noticed how the city continued to change. The Queen City has its own twisted geographical logic. Tracing its hidden paths, bivalves and arteries, was like attempting to merge disparate philosophies: it left you feeling unsettled. The streets were not prepared for the many revisions in their language that frequently swept over them.

On my weekly free night walks I'd begun to notice how things in the city moved without explanation. A decrepit fountain holding the scales of justice was one day located in the town's central square, cigarette butts and plastic bags in its empty shallow pool, the pipes rusted and frozen. A week later I spotted it at the foot of the Proctor Towers whose offices were now home to pigeons and rats, whose thousands of glass windows had been shattered by the mobs during the Energy Riots. Places changed, subtly sometimes, like the reconfiguration of the swing set and slide in the childless playground, to the more dramatic alteration of an old neighborhood bank whose doors had long since closed; strong and sturdy on one occasion the thorn-tipped branches of a blossoming locust tree jutted out from its broken masonry the next. Some locations disappeared altogether.

I assure you I'm not batty or flipping my lid. Everyone who's lived there knows that things and places move, even the truckers whose rigs barrel through on the pot-holed highways can tell you they always have trouble with directions in good old Cinci-nasty. Stuff gets shuffled around only you don't know how or when it's going to happen. Everybody who lives there knows about it and yet they're not willing to talk about it in more than a hurried or hushed whisper. They gloss over it, changing the topic of conversation.

One common thread linked all these places together in a hideous kaleidoscope scheme; one idolatrous symbol marked them in my memory. One bare-boned tag scrawled in black spray paint onto concrete slabs, wooden slats, or metal doorways. As graffiti it was illegible (strangled looking lines spurting from a paint can with schizophrenic precision); as a sigil it was numinous (scribbles angled out into unknown trajectories, imbued with terrifying magick).

Later that night I met the Map Maker. He practiced his art with dismal reluctance, being only partially responsible for the cities devolution. Now I owe him my life, and what passes for my liberty.

Certain places did remain stable, their presence ensured by memories built up in the local psyche. Legal citizens and indentured servants alike habituated them again and again, locking them in the haunted synapses of the collective brain. It was the railroad tracks and alleyways (cobblestone littered with newspaper, hamburger wrappers floating in a cold breeze, a wino's empty bottle smashed in a corner lingering with the scent of piss) that shifted and strayed, the boarded up homes abandoned even by squatters, whose solid form slipped from the city, leaving behind only ghostly outlines as they disappeared into the fading shadow of history.

It was my custom to slip into the cemetery, a shortcut not many other people braved. It's on the way as you pass through the rusted-out industrial sector of West Blighton where Chemco dumps its toxic byproducts into the murky effluvial drip of the Millers Creek. I didn't like the cemetery but I wasn't afraid of it. Cutting through helped me make good on my allotted tick tock of time.

Saint Mitrius Hospital crowns the hill the cemetery sits on, making the graves part of its yard. When a patient dies its easy to cart them off to the morgue in the basement, where it's rumored the attendants give them a quick send-off shag before being buried out back in the freshly dug soil.

A lot of stories circulate about Saint Mitrius, myths and urban legends. I didn't fear corpses buried underneath the sod and at the time I didn't believe in ghosts, but walking past the lichen-covered tombstones, through the low mist that swirled on the ground, I always wondered.

The Mitrius Hospital is where the chemical burn victims are taken. Accidents down at the plant happen frequently, especially to those who get on the bad side of a Managing Officer; that's how the victims get burned. The nurses patch them up, graft new skin onto their faces, inject strong painkillers, and send them back to the mixing vats. The worst that ever happened to me was when I caught a case of ragged lung from prolonged exposure to the fumes. Luckily they didn't send me to the hospital for that. If they had I would've believed the stories a lot sooner.

I figured all the tales I heard about Mitrius came from the drug-addled patients, nodding out and hallucinating. Things they saw happening in the mind's eye of their anaesthetized brains they mistook for reality, for truth. Back at Chemco all laced up on narcotics, raving and delusional, they rant about how they bury the sick alive at Mitrius, how the doctors engage in sacrosanct rituals making sacrifices to

heathen gods. At night in the barracks the burn victims dream, keeping you awake as they toss and turn restlessly, talking in their half sleep.

The strays are taken there as well. They are the old bag ladies spouting off mystical formulas of dementia, the veterans who lost their minds to the Gulf War syndrome, addicts whose memories were wiped out by *Bam!*, and anyone without legal identification. In the eyes of the corporations, if you've lost your identification, even if it's been stolen, you've lost the privilege of existence, (at least in the corporate-ruled world). Their police round up who ever they can, catching some at ID checkpoints. Others they catch garbage picking in sectors illegal for them to be in. They kidnap others still in their periodic raids on the shantytowns, and in this city, take them to Saint Mitrius.

I'm so glad I have my ID.

Eventually I reached the cast iron bars of the fence with its spear pointed tips without having been assaulted by a specter, without a cadaver rising from its premature grave. I was eager to scramble over them, to leave the graveyard and Mitrius far behind. I could almost taste the yeasty hops of a cold beer waiting for me inside Club Eurydice.

When I looked up, ready to climb, my stomach tightened with a lurch: a raccoon head was impaled, speared on the iron fence straight through its skull. I had almost put my hand in the gray goop of brain that leaked out of it. I gagged reflexively, shoved down the lump of disgust rising in my throat, moved away from what remained of the unfortunate creature, and climbed somewhere further down.

I hauled myself over and hit the cracked sidewalk with my steel-toed boots.

Despite the lack of spooks I felt jittery. The sight of the raccoon left a bad aftertaste in my mouth and it burned like a hot coal in the back of my mind. I shuddered and kept walking all the more desperate for an ice-cold brew.

## II.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I emerged from Bottleneck Alley onto Rodez Street.

Club Eurydice is stable. Its denizens are not. Underneath the empty marquee where the black lettered titles of cheap Hollywood flicks once hung, the nocturnal inhabitants who make it their home loitered, the flickering electric light of a street lamp only illuminating half of them. I knew what the ones in shadow were doing. I'd seen it a hundred times: drinking from tallboys of malt liquor wrapped in paper bags, lovers stealing secret kisses (smears of black lipstick traced across wrists in counterpoint to the needle tracks), money passed in quickly shaken hands (exchanged for the latest designer drugs).

My work boots crunched over the broken glass liberally scattered across the asphalt--someone's broken windshield-- they brushed past a

jettisoned bag from Meat and Tater Hut--French fries splashed with ketchup, the last bite of a microburger hanging out of its cardboard box--food for rats sneaking up from the storm drains.

I nodded to the bouncer, slipped the doorman folded paper cash, my passport to a thriving underworld. Its doors were open to everyone, corporate hipsters, indentured servants, or the strays using the place to make transactions with those outside their shantytowns, warrens, and ghettos. The glory of commerce keeps us all together, whether we officially exist or not.

A few hipsters were hanging out inside the lobby of the old movie theater, smoking clove cigarettes and strong weed, talking snobbishly amongst themselves, looking at canvases splattered by some jerk-off's paint. They can afford art, as well as the luxury to make it. Eurydice had become a very trendy place for the corporate lackeys to have showings, and like the rest of the activities going on there, the Club took a cut.

The rest of us struggled just to get by with whatever smidgeon was left from our paychecks. The one deduction I didn't begrudge was the child support going to Jena. Sanmonto took a cut, most going towards paying off the high interest rate on my debt, then some more went towards room and board at the barracks; I was left with pocket change and I saved nearly all of it, not wanting to fall into the same credit traps that keep so many locked behind the factory fences.

It's easy to spot an indentured man, if not by the stooped shoulders betraying his dismal outlook on life then by the shaved head and uniform that law requires him to wear. In my case it was a pair of blue coveralls with CHEMCO printed in bold capitals across the back. They knew whose property I was, who I belonged to.

The hipsters gave me a snide contemptuous look. Everyone has a place in life. Mine was in the dregs. People like them are only in the scene to be seen, who wear their fashions not as fetish, but as affectation. They didn't know themselves and only went there to try on a new mask. The rest of us tolerated them as they fed money into the economic bloodstream of a venue already suffering from atrophy off the mainline of official commerce.

Drugs helped the seedy place to thrive. The hipsters bought product from the dealers. The dealers paid a cut to Club Eurydice. Club Eurydice paid a cut to the police. Everyone was happy.

I didn't go there for any of that.

I started going to make contacts and plans for getting out of the city as soon as my bill to Sanmonto was paid in full. I liked the music too, always blasting at ear-crippling levels. It's hard to have a real conversation when the band is so loud, so people don't try to shovel up your past. At Eurydice I was just another fallen angel who had slipped from the rungs on the corporate ladder to heaven.

I left the lobby and walked into the movie hall proper. A screen still hung there, not silver, but yellowed by the copious amounts of nicotine smoke that drenched the room. In front of it sat a small stage where The Swine Gods of the Afterlife set up their circuit-bent electronic gear. Steve, the soundman, manipulated the controls of the mixing desk, the mounted speakers crackling with distorted hiss as they did a sound check.

All the seats had been removed except for three rows in the back. The bar sits on the flat part of the floor directly underneath the projection booth. Occasionally they showed experimental films during the music, but it was usually just the place where the band got high before taking to the stage.

My drug using days were over. Everyday I got tested for illicit chemicals at Chemco. I could drink, the legal solace of the indentured, and of course there were always the Monsanto sponsored uppers available from the vendomatics for a few bucks. *Try Dexanull, a special proprietary blend of uppers and antidepressants to Give Your Day a ZIP*, or so said the slogan, but I stayed away from it, cause it's just another part of their game to get people hooked, and then you end up spending all your money on meds while sinking further into debt. It's not worth it to take the illegal stuff. If they find it in your system you're taken straight to the penitentiary camps in Malaysia to work in the trash mines and no one who goes there ever reports back.

Thoughts of Jena kept me straight on my trips to Eurydice even as offers for designer temptations flitted all around.

I walked up to Hank the barman. "I'll have a *Hooligan Cross Beer* and a shot of whiskey." Hank is a fat bald man with cauliflower ears and thick pink scar running across his right cheek. His intimidating shark eyes are set like stone marbles in their sockets. He wipes off the stained wood in front of me with his dirty white rag, hangs it back over his shoulder, and sets down the drinks. The hot liquid fire of the liquor coursed through me. I cooled it down by swigging on the beer. After all, I needed to get myself oriented.

"Another whiskey please," I said, setting down my cash and coins as the grizzly memory of the raccoon flashed through my mind, and continued to eat away at it.

Erik walked up to the bar, his gangly arms hanging loose. We shook hands. Mine were flaky and dry, the skin over the knuckles cracked open; his were cold, clammy with methamphetamine sweat. A lopsided cigarette dangled out of his mouth, clenched between the stained edges of his crooked teeth. Strangles of greasy black hair shadowed his eyes.

"Chemco treating you alright Stan?" he asks with the shantytown drawl he couldn't leave behind him when he crossed the river from Kentucky.

“It’s better than the alternative,” I said. “They’ll be signing my release papers in seven days and I’ll be putting that place behind me. Are you still up for driving me to Toledo?”

“Yeah, I’ll be needing the money. It’s been rough. I can barely push enough Drix tabs to get clean water and keep food on the table. Momma’s been sick, and she needs medicine but I can’t find none nor pay for it even if I could. People ain’t interested in Drix no more. Most of my regulars seem to have moved on to new habits, and I can’t keep up with all the new drugs on the street. A new crop of dealers left me in the dust. Besides that, everybody’s been rushing out to get trepanned.”

“To get what?”

“Trepanned. You know. It’s the latest thing, even more popular than Bam! And it seems like it’s only hit the streets in the last week. It’s caught on, spreading like a government disease. People are going down to the black market clinics and having the resident quack drill a hole in their head. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of it Stan.” Erik stamped out his smoke in a glass ashtray, pulled out another one from the half-crushed pack inside his tattered jean jacket, and ordered a beer.

Trepanning. It did have a familiar ring to it, though I hadn’t heard about it the week before, but viral trends like this did have a way of infecting people.

“Even the hipsters are doing it,” Erik continued, exhaling smoke in my face. “Most strays get the hole drilled in the center of their forehead where they think some kind of third eye exists. The hipsters get it done on the side of their head, that way they can comb their hair back over their heads when they go back to work in the high rises. It’s a small hole, doesn’t penetrate the brain, just the bone of the skull.”

I downed a second whiskey, finished off the brew and bought another. Just cold beer the rest of the night for me, sipped slowly but surely. I knew my limits and it was no fun having a head-aching hangover when pulling a shift at the mixing vats.

It took me a moment and then I realized I’d heard the term before. “Shamans used to do trepanning, didn’t they?” I said. “Thought it opened them up to mystical vision. Sounds like it’s more likely to open the door to a psychotic episode. It’s been awhile, but I read about it in an anthropology text the year Sanmonto let me take a night class as a reward for good programming. Obviously, that’s before they found out I was selling their code to Raellaerian. Doctors were into it too, all the way up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century if I remember right. They thought it could help epileptics and people with migraines by relieving pressure on the brain. Mostly it just killed them.”

Erik nodded absently, as if his mind were elsewhere.

The liquor was doing its trick. Starting to relax, I let out a sigh. “Sounds crazy. So why are people doing it?”

Erik raised his eyebrows appreciatively, giving me a seedy smile as a lady with jet-black hair in a glittery dress walked up to the bar and ordered a cocktail. I noticed the small hole in her forehead worn with fashionable pride, a designation that she had joined the ranks of the underground elite.

“It’s the new buzz,” Erik said. “People who’ve had it done say it gives ‘em a feeling of constant euphoria, a high they don’t come down from. People say it causes them to see things that normally ain’t there, like being on a constant mind trip. Hell, I’m thinking about getting it done myself.”

“Getting a hole put in your skull? I’d stick with drinks and drugs if you want your mind altered. At least you come down from those. Most of the time.” Almost every time I tripped (and I’d taken many before I’d married) I thought normality would never return. It always did, even if reality had remained fuzzy around the edges. After awhile I’d stopped taking the trips, afraid of never coming down and being stuck in one permanently. I couldn’t imagine choosing to be on a permanent one.

“It’s just like a tattoo,” Erik said. “People get stupid shit all the time, Chinese letters, and all kinds of Norse rune bull crap all inked up on ‘em. Can’t even read ‘em let alone know what the hell they mean. Then they gotta deal with it their whole life. Why not a hole in the head? And those people who get a Prince Albert, that’s a hole in the head right there, one I definitely wouldn’t get. But a hole in the skull ain’t so bad.”

It wasn’t something I had would ever want.

Erik took a long drink from his beer and continued. “I’m thinking about getting into it heavy. Not just having it done to me, but doing it to others. I need money real bad, hell, we all do, but like I said, Momma’s sick, and a drill doesn’t cost that much and it’s not like it needs to be sterilized. I’ll just open up shop, and people will be lined up at the door waiting to shell out the dough to have a piece of their skull removed.”

He laughed and slapped me on the back, drunker than usual. I tried to laugh with him, but found myself uncomfortable. It was the most hare-brained scheme I had ever heard of, and in the penal factory you hear a lot.

A voice from the stage boomed out. It was Mathias, one of the Swine Gods. “Alright. We’re ready to get started and we’re going to shake Club Eurydice to the fucking foundations.” This was met by hoots and howls from a raucous audience whose inebriated state was continuously pushing towards complete obliteration as the night wore on.

“Not just music tonight, and not just tripped out flicks on the screen for ya to vidy. What I’m talking about is live entertainment.” He adjusted the microphone back onto its stand, went and sat down at a table of electronic gear laid out precisely like the tools of a surgeon preparing for an operation. He put on latex gloves. He pressed a button.

A sharp sine wave oscillation filled the room with its high-pitched warbling vibration.

One of the other band members rolled a red-haired lady strapped into a wheelchair up onto the stage. Her hands were bound with bondage belts to the armrests, her feet tightly clamped and padlocked to the footrests. A black bandanna had been tied on her head blindfolding her eyes.

The sine wave escalated in pitch, ascending like a wave of hot kundalini up the spine, into the brain. The other *Swine Gods* began overlapping tones of menace, a detuned crinkling arpeggio. The man who wheeled out the girl rocked back and forth, his eyelids fluttering as the video started (a repetitive loop of black and white lines flashing on the screen, tattered scribbles of discursive script, disassembled poetry). Samples of wispy voices emerged into the swampy murk of a mix, and panned back and forth across the stereo channels, slowing down to an inhuman wailing, an alien funeral dirge.

Mathias picked up the power drill from its table and gave its trigger button an experimental pull. Wired for sound, its deafening buzz whirled through the speakers. The smell of ozone and burnt-out circuit boards joined the other smells.

The crowd started to dance, and having set my beer down, I was dragged by Erik's clammy hand into the mosh pit.

On the stage, in her wheelchair, the red-headed girl didn't struggle. She was resigned to her fate like a psyche ward patient receiving an injection of thorazine.

I felt a hand shove me in the back. I felt a foot try and trip me.

On the microphone I heard Mathias say, "Now it is time for dear Melinda to be trepanned." Noise burst like a firework from the stage. Everybody cheered but someone was pulling me to the ground. The last thing I saw was Mathias, his hand keeping the girl's head steady as the twirling spiral drill bit grazed her skin and pierced her skull.

### III.

When I woke up from the blackness my head throbbed violently. I wasn't in my own bed. I didn't know where I was. Some wicked hangover, I thought, but it wasn't a hangover.

I inhaled the clean white smell of bleached hospital sheets. A scent of general sterility covered everything. My heart pounded a sped-up tempo, out of sync with the slow dull hammer beating in my brain. I realized I was in Saint Mitrius, the only fucking hospital in the city. I must've blacked out. I had no memory of how the hell I wound up there.

It took me awhile to figure out.

A terrible anxiety sprung its lid as my eyes scrunched to avoid the painful glare of menacing fluorescents. I looked to my wrist. My cheap digital watch was missing.

How much time had gone by?

I tried to sit up but couldn't. My whole body ached as if I had been thwacked by a baker's pin and rolled for my dough. Something must have happened to me in the mosh pit. Someone must have brought me down. Was it Erik? Probably, but I didn't know.

I peeled back the sheet that covered me and saw that I was wearing a white gown. I glanced around the room for any sign of my clothes. My wallet was in my pants pocket. My ID and City Pass were in my wallet along with a good portion of my cash. I couldn't spot them.

I needed to find my stuff quick. What chance I had of seeing Jena again all depended on if I made it back to the barracks on time. If I clocked in late I had another five years of debt to look forward to, another five years of my daughter's life passing by without me. After all, it's a routine policy.

It was painful to even think about, my freedom so close; a very real pain that centered in my forehead (a piece of gauze bandaged there, over the hole, over the wound). The dark thoughts filling me intensified.

I peeled the tape and bandage back, struggling not to scream. My finger traced the precision-drilled perfectly circular hole, the size of an orange dot on a Hindu's head.

I wondered if the hole was going to bring me enlightenment.

I'm still wondering.

A doctor walked into the room, white lab coat hanging off his gaunt frame, stethoscope dangling around his neck. The lines of his square jaw hid a bemused smirk. He was happy to see I was in so much pain.

"Really, you shouldn't be so alarmed," he said in a conciliatory tone. "Surely you knew the procedure for self-trepanation to be exceedingly delicate, not to say dangerous?" He looked at my face as if it were a psychiatric chart detailing all manner of emotional instabilities. "You can't really be surprised to find yourself in the humble halls of Saint Mitrius hospital can you? You're lucky to be alive considering the filthy tools you used. I'm surprised you didn't have it done at one of the black market clinics."

I wanted to gag on my own tongue. I didn't know what to say. My mouth was as dry as sandpaper, thick coagulates of pasty sputum gathered at the corners of my lips. Somehow I managed, "but I didn't do this myself. I don't know who the fuck did, but maybe you do?" Anger made my voice ragged. "Maybe you can tell me who dragged me into this place."

"The cops found you lying unconscious on the sidewalk with a drill in your hand. You had no ID on you, so they did what they always do

with your stray types.” He let out a little cough hiding a laugh. “How does it feel being nabbed by the dog catchers?”

“Hey, look. I’m not a stray. You’ve got to let me out of here. I’m an indentured servant down at Chemco. I was out with a city pass and somebody did this to me, against my will, and I guess they stole my fucking ID card while they were at it.” As I spoke I thought of how stupid and careless I had been. Someone had my information now, poised to steal my identity, the theft of which formed a vibrant trade in the underworld. “I’ve gotta report back to the barracks soon. I mean, I don’t even know what time it is, but I’ve got to get back. I’m due to be released in another week.”

The doctor stared at me coldly. “I have no way of knowing if you tell truth or lies. The hospital has its own protocol. We have to keep you here while we run some tests. Trepanning has become quite the fad for illicit thrill seekers and now I have the chance to observe its effects firsthand.” He made for the door cutting off the protests forming in my mouth. “A nurse will be with you shortly to collect urine and blood samples.”

The door clicked shut. The sound of jangling keys was followed by the snap of a bolt locking into place, locking me in.

I took a deep breath: my nerves were shattered like a brick through a window. I had to escape and to do that I needed to be calm. I breathed expansively through my nostrils hoping sanity would restore itself as I rode the wave of the aftershock to the shore.

I was still shaky with confusion, but a few minutes later I was able to turn my attention to the hospital prison cell I found myself captured in. A hexagonal microwave-oven sized machine sat to my left with the words REICH ORGONE ACCUMULATION MODULE 3.5 painted in black on the pale green metal of its face. A digital display showed numbers that gradually climbed as I watched. I was connected to the machine by an organic tentacle tube spiked into my veins with an IV. Other tentacles sprouted out from the machine and slithered down to the floor where they disappeared into the walls, like an oil pipeline transporting fuel across national boundaries.

Past the machine a window looked out onto a moonless night. I hobbled over to it after forcing myself up, the tentacle being quite long and flexible, allowing me to move about the room as it accumulated whatever the hell orgone I had in me. Even if I had been able to break the double paned glass I wouldn’t have been able to squeeze through the thick iron bars. I could see the shabby gravestones that I had walked among earlier many flights below, quite a long drop. The doctors didn’t want you to arrive in the cemetery by a quick jump, hence the bars. They wanted to put you in the ground themselves, by route of their own professional advice.

There were no cabinets in this room holding the usual medical supplies: petroleum jelly, alcohol pads, bandages; no marked can used to dispose biohazard waste. It was just the bed, the machine, and myself, all cast in fluorescents. The green linoleum floor tangibly fed on the soulless light.

I sat back on the bed in a huff to cradle my head, chin resting on my palm. A sinking feeling of defeat weighed with heaviness on my chest, a shroud of blackness cast over my thoughts.

The urge to get out of the building battled with another urge I had never felt before, the urge to poke and pick at the hole in my head. I wanted to stick my pinkie finger in it, but it was too thick and wouldn't fit unless I chipped off some more of the chitin of my skull to enlarge the hole. But I wouldn't do that. I couldn't. It's like having an itch you want to scratch knowing that scratching will only make it worse. It's like a bad memory that makes you cringe yet you can't stop playing it, rewinding it, and playing it again.

The desire to reach in and touch my brain was strong.

Will it wriggle and shudder? Will it squish like jello?

These are questions I've never answered. My sanity, stubborn to the end, defies me every time.

I heard a knock on the door then a click as the key unlatched the bolt. A nurse walked in. He wasn't what I expected. The sleeves of his pale blue scrubs were rolled up leaving the bulk of his muscular arms exposed. Hanging from the utility belt cinching his pants was a holster and gun. His hair was dusty blonde. A prickly German looking mustache bristled underneath his honk of a schnauzer.

His six and a half foot span was like a pillar of doom from where I sat on the bed, and I'm no small guy.

"I've come to collect some samples. Urine and blood." His voice was deadpan. He enjoyed his job.

I tried to act friendly. "Hey, do you know what time it is? I really need to know. You see I've got to get back to work as soon as I can and I don't even know if I'm already late or not. Maybe you can help."

My approach didn't work. "Just drop your drawers and pee in this jar. Then we can get the blood." He offered me a plastic container.

I shook my head. "No."

"I guess I'll have to do this by force," he said. "It'll be easier to insert the catheter once I've knocked you out anyway. Only god knows what else I'll do."

My fist curled and connected to his midriff, toned solid as a rock. He laughed, grabbed my struggling hand, pushed me back on the bed and swatted away my flailing arms like noisome gnats. In one quick movement he freed the taser from its holster, pointed it, and discharged some 50,000 volts directly into the still-fresh hole drilled in my head.

My spine curved as I pulsed upwards, magnetized, before slumping back onto the bed. All sight blistered out in a flash of white electric heat dissolving my entire field of vision before raining back in like supercharged particles observed under an electron microscope.

Then I left my body and saw the angel.

Hovering in terrible majesty, her resplendent wings outstretched welcoming me into her care, a shield of dizzying light holding back the unholy entities pulsing in dark hallucinogenic shapes behind her. Her purple hue shined brightly, driving the demons back into the cracks of this plastered wall reality, to the rifts between dimensions from where they had leaked.

From the demons I took no communion, but from the angel I drank. In her hands she held a cup of temperance, containing all the stars, seven pointed and glittering. I whetted my tongue with galaxial moonshine and my memories uncreased, the folds between the lives ironed out. Now I picked between the glimpses of other wheres and other whens, inhaling the frankincense steam of the angels starry hair. I saw myself as a Viking charging through ice-cold waters to the shore, a rune painted on my shield, the long ship behind me; and again as a Navajo in the broiling desert heat of the American southwest, consumed by the fire of prayer.

The angel locked me in a kiss transmitting all her knowledge to me as we absorbed and became each other. She will be with me forever, and I with her, world without end amen. I was given instructions in an unyielding tongue. The knowledge and conversation we shared was beyond linguistic comprehension. The purpose of my life and its destiny unfolded before me in the unending cyclical dance of the kaleidoscope scheme. I saw my place in it and formulated my special plan.

The eagle with the sun in its eye gazed from the pyramid temple of the mind. I saw eternity melting upon the holographic frame.

I was reborn.

Still floating in my plastic astral form I saw how it was attached by a subtle umbilical cord to my body of blood and bone lying on the hospital bed.

I saw the nurse untie the strings of my pants, pull them down, and reach for my limp cock. He had a leer on his face that spoke of sick pleasure. In his other hand he held a tube. A tube he was going to shove up my urethra to suck out the urine.

I acted swiftly to stop the bastard but being in my spirit body was like driving an unfamiliar car on the roads of a foreign country. Instinct took over as I reached into his body with my ghostly transparent hand and pulled on his own astral body, dragging him out into the aethyr with me.

His scream must have woke a thousand demons, drawing them back from the cracks: unattached eyes blinked into the misty gray

vapors of the nonphysical plane, silent sentinels, spectral spectators witness to the bizarre proceedings. I was not afraid of them and they stood clear of me, for I shined eternal light.

Looking at my malleable hand I willed the fingers to extend into slender knives. I took them and punctured the nurse's etheric body. It leaked worms of dim gray light, his life force. They swam out of him in sluggish ripples and were gathered into the hungry invisible mouths of the demonic watching eyes.

The nurse was still alive. I couldn't let him return to his body. I grabbed his tethering cord and slashed through it with my finger knife. The demons continued to drink, feasting on his soul blood. I perceived their monstrous hybrid forms, unnatural shapes that strengthened and took on solidity as they drank: dragon scales and goat hooves, curving golden candelabra antlers branching out of their heads.

I heard the wraiths chewing on the nurses shadow, and when it was gone the echoes of their teeth in endless gnashing, like broken shards of glass scraping against each other, pulverizing and grinding themselves into thick sand pouring from the cracked hourglass of time.

I had become their accomplice, feeding these wicked shades.

The soul of the nurse devoured, they looked at me with renewed thirst. One of them smiled looking at my vacated body: it would make a nice vehicle for it, a wonderful biological possession with which to walk about in the physical world. And me? I would remain trapped in these gray walled rooms, held captive by a consort of beings whose existence I had doubted only minutes before.

The angel took my voice and we spoke words I had never known, filled with authority. "Apo Pantos Kakodaimonos! Be gone from here! Crawl back to the sulphur mines, back to your master. I serve another!"

The demons slunk back, creeping back into the crack on the wall that opened onto stinking fumes and flames.

I sighed, and as I did, merged back with my physical body, opened my eyes. The slumped form of the nurse lay over my pulled down pants. His body was still warm but the life had gone out of him. No heartbeat pulsed through his frame.

I pushed him over, pulled myself up, and retied my pants, my body sore, my conscience weighed down by murder, my worldview shattered, my head trepanned.

I didn't have time to crumble and dissolve or contemplate the shifting templates of everything I had mistaken as reality. Reality was so much more. Penance would have to wait as would the prayers to a God I had never before believed in.

Searching his body quickly, I took the key ring, taser, and the watch off his wrist, fumbled with his oversized shoes and hastily laced them up. I had one hour and thirty-three minutes to find my ID and get

back to the barracks. My time was running out. Slipping into the hall, I locked the door behind me.

#### IV.

The hallway was darker than I had expected, the lights on the ceiling blinked only at irregular intervals. It didn't help that I had to shuffle through piles of paper trash, medical records from upended rows of filing cabinets, making nests for the rats I heard scurrying around me, and homes for the cockroaches that occasionally squished beneath my feet. As I strode, I looked down the other corridors that crossed this one, hoping to glimpse a red exit sign. I didn't see one, and luckily, no one. It seemed the whole floor was abandoned, but who knew, any number of people could be locked in their rooms as I had been, hooked up to strange machines feeding off their energy. I felt bad for them if they were, but I hadn't come to Saint Mitrius on a rescue mission.

As I approached the end of the hall, the taser shaking in the hand I held out before me, a nervous déjà vu swept over me, an oppressive feeling of inevitable destiny that I have since come to distrust (they are taunts from the Enemy attempting to break your will and steer you off the path). The thought ran through my mind to turn back, flee, I had come the wrong way.

I crept forward, leaning into fear.

The door to room 788 was open, emanating an orange glow. From it I heard the soft sibilant whispers of a madman. The urge to run was strong, like the need to piss when somebody sets a brick on your full bladder. But the hand of the angel, silent and invisible, pushed me forward, till my neck was craning around the edge of the doorway, looking at a withered old man cramped on a small school desk, drawing and erasing, the room filled with the scraps of his papers.

He saw me looking at him and smiled.

Despite myself, and the limits on my time, I smiled back and walked over to him.

A map of the city covered his desk. On it sat a compass, square, ruler, a pencil worn down to the nub, and chunky eraser. He was erasing a street, replacing it with train tracks. A house had to be moved away, eminent domain. He erased, and elsewhere in the city it and its inhabitants would disappear, swept away by who knows what tornado to Neverland or Oz.

And on the map he made a squiggle, the gently traced lines of the sigil, the one I had seen all over on my walks through the city, the magick mark moving concrete, metal, and wood. The symbol that subtly rearranged asphalt, plastic, earth and root.

"Now it just needs to be faxed," he said to me, in a low whiskery voice.

My mind raced, buzzing with all the seemingly chance operations I had seen enacted over the landscape of the city in my free night walks, realizing that I stood before the hand that guided them.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“What I’ve always done,” he said.

Lifting up the lid of his desk he brought out a pouch of loose tobacco and started rolling a smoke.

I looked at the watch on my wrist. One hour and twenty-two minutes left. “I’ve got to get out of here,” I said. “Do you know where the closest exit is? Or where they put the stuff they swipe off your back when they haul you in unconscious and unwilling?”

He lit his smoke, and nodded, brushing back brittle white hair from his rheumy gray eyes full of pain and wisdom. “I can help you,” he said.

“How?” I asked, incredulous, looking at the chain that cuffed his leg to the wall, looking at the bolts holding his desk to the floor.

“As I said, this just needs to be faxed now. If you look at the map, you’ll notice that I created a street that leads you from here, directly to Chemco. But the street won’t be there until this gets sent through the machine. The fax is in Dr. Charnell’s office. It’s a safe bet that your clothes and ID are in there too, so it’s kinda like one stop shopping.”

He let out a dry laugh, looking at the bewildered look on my face, as the familiar reality around me continued to crumble. I was flooded with internal questions, how’s and why’s and what the hell was happening to me? How did he know where I needed to go and...

He interrupted the unwinding reel of my thoughts, “The fax machine copies the image of my map, and the orgone -- a psychosexual biologic energy-- he has accumulated from the captive patients charges the sigils. I know you’ve seen the sigils, I’ve been watching you on one of my maps. Once the sigils are activated the city moves around according to the new design I’ve drawn. Dr. Charnell usually tells me what to draw and I do so against my better judgment, but it’s either that or my life. I’ve monitored your progress from down the hall, and prepared this map for you, to help you escape. Believe me, I know what it’s like being separated from family.”

I didn’t have time to integrate the new information and insights I was having. Some of the puzzle pieces locked into place, but there were still vast portions of the territory as yet unmapped for me. My hand shook as he handed me the map. A shiver of truth ran up my spine. Visions opened in my mind, blossoming from the third eye where I had been trepanned. I saw the city through his eyes, as an astral blueprint for the physical version of it. The sigils acted as DNA sequences for the labyrinthine array of the city’s numinous paths; the orgone energy was the key that unlocked its clockwork gears. The Map Maker spins a thread of fate and the cobweb metropolis hangs on his designs.

“Dr. Charnell’s office is on the first floor,” the old man said, “and to get there you’ll have to cut through the kitchens. They’re in the basement. The stairwell will lead you to them.”

“But what about you,” I said, my voice shaking with fear and gratitude. “I have these keys from the nurse, maybe one of them will unlock your chain.”

“No. The Doctor keeps that key to himself. Besides, someone else is coming to help me break out of this black iron prison. I’ve left him all manner of clues, so it’s only a matter of time. But do me a favor after you fax the map. Wait about five minutes to make sure it’s gone through and then smash the equipment for me. It’s the best that can be done for now, and it will put one small dent in the Entropic Device they are building.”

“I don’t quite understand all of this,” I said, “but thank you.”

“Others need you,” he said relighting his smoke, and a warm feeling started to glow in me, a fire in my belly, the beginning of purpose.

I thanked the Map Maker with sudden kindness, with a tenderness I had felt only when thinking of my daughter, a gentleness that Chemco had nearly obscured. I kissed him on the head next to the liver spot where his white hair thinned, then waved goodbye and scuttled out, to the door at the end of the hallway and down the steps.

## V.

Little did I know that by taking the staircase I was making a descent into the underworld. Each step I took brought me closer to the sulfurous fires of the basement where I found terrors far different from the more purely inebriated ones offered in the purgatory of the upper floors. Landing by landing I eventually hit bottom and opened the paint peeled metal door into the slithering underbelly of Saint Mitrius Hospital.

The smell greeting me was atrocious, as if boiled meat and old socks had been left in a locker for months, mildewed and rotten. The hallway was dark and hot. I must have been near the boiler room: steam hissed out of rusty iron pipes hanging from the ceiling, and down the dark corridors I could hear the echo of leaks dripping into puddles on the ragged linoleum floor.

As I crept along I heard voices mixed in with the steady drips, and I recognized it as the kind of banter workers everywhere spit back and forth. I couldn’t quite make out exactly what they were saying, as their words reverberated off the walls, layered with clattering metal scrapes.

The hall turned sharply to the right, at the end of which hung a swinging door with a small plastic window set at eye level. Swimming out of it was a bright artificial light. I sneaked up to it and my eyes took in the infernal kitchens. The brightness of the lights only served to illuminate how foul and decrepit it was. Looking at the scene made my

skin crawl, just as the roaches crawled about on the floor and over the prep table where a fat cook in a bloodied apron busied himself dicing up cubes of meat. Another cook stood at the stove, the sweat from his pimply juvenile face dripping into a thickly steaming vat of unspeakable stew. A young redhead with purple bruises around his eyes operated the Hobart dishwashing machine next to the metal door of the walk in freezer.

I watched as the sweaty pimpled cook sent cracked bowls of brown gruel upstairs in a dumbwaiter. Then I noticed the swinging door in the other corner, and through its clear plastic window I saw a set of steps leading up to what I hoped would be Dr. Charnell's office.

Able to hear now, I eavesdropped for a moment on what passed as conversation.

"Did you hear about the creature catcher?" the pimpled man asked.

"Nuh," the fat one grunted, whacking the meat with his cleaver.

"I already told you about how yesterday I saw Dr. Charnell pull him into his office on my way in, how he got his ass chewed out, because the upper floors are still overrun with rats. Well today I saw him outside. He pulled a dead coon from his bag and impaled its skull on the fence. I'm telling you, that fucker is a sick bastard."

The red headed dishwasher chuckled nervously. "Yeah, I don't like that guy. I hate it when he comes in here. He's always looking at me funny. But he sure is stupid."

"He just wants a piece of your ass," the fat cook said. Pimple face laughed uncomfortably.

Stuffing the taser into my pocket, I barged through the door without any forethought, without any plan.

The fat cook's cleaver came down on a hunk of meat with a dull thud. He looked me up and down.

"Where the hell have you been?" he yelled at me none too kindly.

Acting on deeply ingrained subconscious reflexes my tongue spoke before my brain thought. "I had to clean up a mess on the fourth floor, some old timer from Chemco, he was puking everywhere. It was all chunky, like cottage cheese but with blood in it, and it smelled something awful, so before I knew it, I was running to the john myself before I had my own mess to clean up too."

They all stared at me blankly, slightly amused as I stood there thinking how royally screwed I was.

Fatty, unimpressed, said, "Well, don't whimper to me about it. You've wasted enough time as is. Get the trash and take it out to the dumpster. When you get back, hose down the meat grinder." He pointed a stubby finger at the contraption in the corner. It sat up on cinder blocks so the blood could trickle into the drain on the floor. A large bucket sat on a low stool next to it collecting the scraps, pieces of

mangled brown and black fur congealed with blood, yellow white bones and pieces of spinal cord jutting out from it in a nasty wet heap.

I put the back of my hand to my mouth as an upsurge of bile burned the back of my throat.

“Oh yeah, and while you’re gatherin’ up the trash ya might as well get a bag and take out the rat and raccoon carcasses as well. And watch out for the creature catcher’s traps near the dumpster.”

They all snickered as I bit my lips nervously. Taking out the trash was the perfect cover and opportunity for my escape. I looked around, wondering how to go about the grisly task.

Scanning the room I saw a package of trash bags. I grabbed a few wondering if there were any gloves I could wear, knowing it wouldn’t be wise to ask. Whoever they thought I was, I needed to be that person.

A huge trash bin sat between the meat chopper and stew stirrer. Emanating from it was a nearly visible stench. Already crammed to spilling, maggots squirmed amidst the debris of eggshells, cigarette butts, empty hot dog packages, and decaying vegetables. I worked fast, forcing my nausea back into the pit of a stomach thankfully empty. I tied off the bag and lifted it up, my years of servitude at Chemco having prepared me for all manner of menial tasks.

The weight of the sludge was enormous.

I replaced the nearly empty bin (a few maggots still swam in the garage juices at the bottom) with a new liner.

The fat cook accosted me. “Watch what the fucking hell you’re doing! That bag is leaking!”

Indeed, it was.

“If the board of health were to come in here on a random inspection they’d nail you to the fucking wall,” his berating continued. “Clean this mess up you bleeding prick.”

I took the bag, placed it inside another bag, which was tricky, lunged for a pile of blue rags and mopped up the juices. The fat man laughed, showing what remained of his grey and black teeth. He spat a thick wad of chewed tobacco to the floor I had just wiped.

“I told you to clean up the floor but it looks like you missed something.”

His eyes stared at me coldly, meat cleaver in his hand.

Before I had become an indentured servant I never would have put up with this kind of humiliation. At Chemco, I’d learned to take a lot of flak. I wasn’t the smallest guy there, but I wasn’t six foot five either, and a lot of the guys didn’t like me because I spent most of my free time reading. Stoic faced, I’d learned how to keep my pride in check when insulted and injured. I played the game slow and steady, never letting my anger get the better hold of me. I wiped up his puddle of chew without a word, stood back up and looked him in the eye.

As we stared each other down another vision assaulted me. I saw the end of his life flash inside my mind: he is out on Rodez street trying to pick up a prostitute. The girls won't take him, not for drugs, not for money; they have regular johns whose gums haven't started to rot and recede from menthol tobacco dip. He offers one of the girls double the money but she still won't take him. He offers her some Bam!, a drug that erases short term memory, the memory of her ever having fucked him, and still the answer is no. He pulls out a Glock concealed in his coat, points, cusses, threatening to shoot. Rape is heavy on his mind, but a hand with a switchblade stabs him in the back, puncturing his kidney and he falls to the concrete, his head bouncing off the curb. It was her pimp. He quickly hustles his girls off the corner, down the street, into his tenement.

There is a high-pitched buzzing in my ears as I come back to the present, slightly delirious, knowing it was real. I've seen what lies ahead in this pathetic man's future. I see goose bumps on his arms as if he'd shared the vision with me.

"I'll get the dead rats now," I said with a smile.

Gripped by half submerged fear, he grunted noncommittally returning to chop his meat.

I moved the garbage bag out of his way and walked over to the bucket of rat and raccoon carcasses. Remnants really, skulls, furs, crunched bones were all that was left. I gritted my teeth, clenched my nose and tried not to breathe as I picked up the bucket and dumped the leftover shards of the creatures into the bag. Everyone was strangely silent. They watched furtively as I tied up the bag, grabbed the other one, and walked over to the far corner.

"I'll be back in a minute after I take this to the dumpster," I lied to them before pushing through the door and ascending the stairs.

## VI.

Dragging the dead rat bags behind me, I walked down the hallway looking for the office of Dr. Charnell. This section of the hospital was clean and well lit. I looked out of place in it, so moved quietly, adrenaline circulating through my blood, keeping me on the up and up. I looked at my watch. One hour left and ticking, make that fifty-nine minutes.

As I approached a corner I overheard two haggling voices. I recognized them both.

"Do I get the money now or what?"

"When can you bring someone else in to be trepanned?"

"Tomorrow night if you give me the medicine for my momma."

I heard the sound of pills being rattled in their plastic bottle.

I knew that Erik had somehow been responsible for landing me in this predicament. But I could hardly blame him. He was acting on an instinct of preservation, for himself and his family, much the same as I had, trying to get ahead on the sly, and being knocked down instead. I sympathized with Erik. I had grown to trust and like him, perhaps naively, but my sympathy didn't extend beyond my own instincts for freedom. He wasn't going to get away with just a slap on the wrist. Not for where he had landed me, not for what they had done to me.

"I need that paper gold," Erik said. "If I keep on hijacking people, others are bound to get suspicious."

"But the people you kidnap are nobodies, strays and indentured servants. Who's going to come looking for them when they're already lost?" The doctor was snide, cocky. He was about to pay his dues.

"Did you forget who you're talking to, doctor? I'm a stray, or at least I will be until I get his ID card reprocessed. Then his identity will be mine. But anyways, we had a deal. Now give me the gold and the medicine."

"They're in my office."

Feet shuffled. I carefully looked around the corner, made sure they had their backs turned, pulled out the taser, and sprang on them.

I grabbed Erik's shoulder and turned him back, cracked him hard with the gun across his jaw. He went tumbling to his knee, and moaned with pain. I kicked him in the stomach, knocking out his wind, and he collapsed to the floor.

Dr. Charnell lunged at me, but I easily sidestepped, then knocked him off his feet with a quick trip to his legs. Caught off guard he sputtered, unable to think, unable to believe he was being attacked by one of his own special projects, by one of his test subjects. I grabbed him by his coat jacket, lifted him up, and pushed him against the wall, the taser pushed against his temple ready to deliver the electrodes and connect him to a world of pain.

"What the fuck is going on here?" I said.

Dr. Charnell spat in my face. I'd been through a lot worse in the past day. I wiped it off calmly and spat back in his.

"I'll never talk to scum like you," he said.

I pulled the trigger and he slipped into convulsions, drooling on the floor.

Erik stirred behind me.

I gave him a quick dose of the electro current, just as had been given to me, straight to the head. When my foot connected to his stomach, I heard the wind go out of him again.

I had never felt so vicious or so alive.

Rummaging through his pockets I found my ID card, City Pass, and a fat wad of cash. Money I'd spent many painstaking years

squirreling away as to get out of this blighted excuse of a city and back to my daughter.

Swiftly looking around for a place to hide the incapacitated bodies, I found a janitor's closet. After a moment of fumbling, I finally found the key, unlocked it, and dragged them in. I gave them an extra dose of electricity for good measure, before dumping the contents of the trash bags I had carried over their inert forms. They would need something nice to wake up to and I could think of nothing better than the bloody remains of dead rodents, a farewell gift so they would always remember me.

I locked them in.

Dr. Charnell's office was just down the hall. Clean and well organized, papers were arranged neatly on a highly polished antique desk. Two filing cabinets sat in one corner. In the opposite was the fax machine fed by the same strange tubes I had been hooked up to earlier. Other wires led from it into a squat octagonal device, bearing the words REICH ORGONE FIELD PULSE MODULATOR 1.0. The lights on the fax and aforementioned contraption were blinking. I'd have been damned if they weren't.

I held the map, my mind racing, hoping that if I faxed it, as the Map Maker instructed me, everything would work. I felt an angelic hand rest on my shoulder. Her calm presence comforted me.

I fed the map into the fax machine. After the image was copied it spat the paper back at me. I folded it and put it into my pocket, a souvenir. As if the hole in my head wasn't enough to remind me of my visit to Saint Mitrius. I looked at my watch. I had five minutes to wait while the ORGONE FIELD PULSE MODULATOR worked its urban magick, transcribing sigils and graffiti, shifting the concrete, locking the asphalt trails of the city into new configurations.

As the alchemical work progressed I scrambled through the desk drawers looking for my Chemco clothes, trashing as much as possible en route. I found my jumpsuit and a few more souvenirs to take with me back to the barracks, mostly reading material. One sheaf of papers was haphazardly stuffed into a manila envelope with the words THE DREAMLAND REPORT stamped on it. From what I briefly scanned it mostly read like gibberish. Any sense I got out of it was made later. I also found a file with the ominous words: DESIGNS FOR THE ENTROPIC DEVICE. It's kept me busy for a long time since. Both had a strange symbol embossed onto them. I've come to recognize and fear it. Then the fun began. All the anger and rage, all the horror and atrocity of the past few hours was channeled into the wrecking of Dr. Charnell's office. The fax machine was gleefully smashed into a hundred plastic pieces, kicked in by my steel-toed boots. But fax machines are replaceable. Any lasting damage was done to the REICH ORGONE FIELD PULSE MODULATOR. After ripping out the tubes connecting it to test subjects

throughout the hospital, I opened up a panel. The machine was alive inside, a throbbing glob of grey cerebral tissues threaded by gold wires, coated in a milky white sheen of sperm and spinal fluid. A broad smile cracked on my face as I shot the taser into its living flesh, short circuiting the machinery in a cloud of ozone smoke.

I ran. In the hallway, I heard the insane beatings of Dr. Charnell and Erik pounding on the closet door, pleading for help. I raced to the exit doors, and knocked myself against them, but they were locked. My shoulder screamed out in pain. I used my left hand to find the key and eventually opened them.

I was desperate and crazed as I stepped out onto the cracked steps. Saint Mitrius loomed behind me, casting its shadow over an avenue that hadn't been there before, an avenue that cut through all the graves and tombstones, a road that shot straight through the industrial shambles of Blighton to the gates of the Chemco barracks. I ran down this long broad street past the early morning strays who were out collecting cans, over a small bridge where they fished the Millers Creek and where I chucked the taser. I had almost become one of them.

I said a silent prayer to the angel, giving her my thanks, asking her to watch over the Map Maker as his old visage crossed through my mind.

When I reached the gates of the penal factory, the guards stared at me for two whole minutes. It seemed a lifetime as I tried to catch up with my ragged breath, holding the sharp stitch in my side. It took a moment before I remembered they were waiting for me to show them my ID and City Pass. Not that they needed to see them to know who I was, but the barcodes still needed to be scanned before I was let back in.

"You sure were cutting it close, Stanley Keigwin."

"You don't know the half of it," I managed between gasps.

"The less I know the better. But your still going to be searched."

I went into their office, and they made me strip down. They ruffled through my stolen papers and then told me to get dressed. Searching my cavities and orifices was no more pleasant for them than it was for me so it was a formality usually dispensed with.

The metal gate rolled back. For the first time since I had gotten my City Pass I stepped back into the grounds of Chemco a happy man.

Then I looked at my watch. My next shift started in just over an hour.

## VII.

The next five days passed slowly as I was gnawed from the inside by anxiety and trepidation. At any moment I was expecting a security team to swoop down on me, shackle on the handcuffs and drag me back to the hospital. But they didn't.

I thought of my daughter and learned how to pray.

At night the angel would come to me in my dreams, sometimes comforting me, sometimes horrifying, always filling my head with visions I could barely decipher but couldn't explain away. The visions were pertinent, especially in regard to what I read in the texts pilfered from the office of Dr. Charnell.

On my sixth day, after completing my shift, the security team came, handcuffed me, lead me away. I nearly choked on my heart as it leapt into my mouth. They took me in a van, and I thought for sure my fears were coming true. But as they dragged me out the back of it to put me in a line with a few other indentured servants, I realized I was just awaiting my final hearing. My behavior had been good and my time had been served. The corporate judge stamped some papers, and I was then led into another room. The handcuffs were taken off me, and I spent two hours reading fine print and signing my name by the x. There were a lot of x's.

A van took me back to the barracks. I grabbed the few things I could call my own. I gave my books minus the two texts I had stolen to Charlie, the only other guy in the place who liked to read, and said goodbye.

On September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2095 I walked out of the Chemco barracks a free man.

I didn't ask Erik for a ride out of town, so I set out on foot.

How I got to Toronto and what happened there is another story.

-Justin Patrick Moore  
Cincinnati, Ohio  
August, 2008

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