Thirteen O'Clock

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

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FOREWORD

I always thought that I was too tactful to make the kind of impolite observations that follow. Evidently I'm not, so I won't bother to apologize for Thirteen O'Clock. But there are explanations in order.

During the winter quarter of the 1982-83 school year, I took a class on satire, taught by my advisor, Dr. Richard Brown. At that time, I didn't think of Thirteen O'Clock as a satire, but as a science fiction story.

After writing a little and reading a lot during that quarter, I discovered that I wanted to do more than invent futuristic machines and people to play with them. I found that I was more outraged, irritated and worried than I'd ever acknowledged. My honors project was destined to be the victim of all these emotions; I hoped that it would benefit from them as well, but that's for someone else to decide.

I made many discoveries during the writing of Thirteen O'Clock, only one of which could be of any use to anyone else. It was this: it is too common and too convenient to accuse the satirist of being a misanthrope, self-righteous and overly critical. In the honors colloquium on satire, Dr. Brown pointed out that the satirist is often an idealist who has been hurt in some way by the ugly realities of the world. I would agree with that statement, but would add something to it.

There is nothing that hurts an idealist as much as finding out that he or she isn't ideal. A satirist, then, writes not out of self-righteousness, but out of an intimate acquaintence with his or her own shortcomings. The sharpness of his attacks doesn't result solely from terrible bitterness or anger at others' inhumanity and hypocrisy. The satirist is able to hit so close to home, and offend so deeply, because he knows from personal experience where it hurts. The process of writing a satire that rings true involves confronting and exposing one's own frailties. If Thirteen O'Clock seems harsh and critical, I will have succeeded; I'll know myself better, and that is one of the goals of education.

I found that this was true for me when I was creating my characters. As I worked to make them become real to me, I began forming opinions about them—usually unkind opinions. When I asked myself why I felt so strongly about them, I understood how much your own faults will irritate you when you find them in others.

As I said, none of this is an apology. It is only an admission that I am imperfect and it bothers me. I only wish that more people were bothered by imperfection.

I'm very grateful to Dr. Warren VanderHill and the Honors Program for making my college experience a very enjoyable one, and to Dr. Richard Brown, without whose patient help I would never have turned this idea into a reality.

Julia A. Daugherty
Q: What time is it when it's thirteen o'clock?

A: Time to get a new clock.

--children's riddle
(Voiceover) The TCS Evening News, with Raleigh Denver.

Good evening. The top story tonight is the latest confrontation in the Middle East, where fighting broke out again among Israel, Egypt, and the Arab alliance. Leaders of all sides criticized the U.S. for not taking a stand regarding the conflict. Visiting the White House today, Israeli Prime Minister Meir Kahane said that, with or without U.S. aid, his country's forces will fight to the last man. (Cut to shot of prime minister)

"Our troops are willing to fight to the death for their holy land. It's the only steady job most of them will ever have!"

(Cut back to Denver)

On this note, Mr. Kahane and President Cedrickson parted, promising to keep the lines of communication open.

Political assassins struck in three countries today, killing two of their targets and bringing the year's total to twenty-two. One of the victims was Miguel Herreras of Mexico; the other was Giovanni Torelli of Italy. Torelli was inaugurated only three weeks ago, after former president Carlo Azzini bit the dust in the June wave of assassinations. Palestinian Prime Minister Daud Abu Namad escaped an assassination attempt when he lasered the unarmed gunman in the daring move that saved his life. Leftist factions in Mexico, Italy and Palestine all blamed the U.S. for the attacks, while rightists held the U.S.S.R. responsible.

The newly created Central American nation, San Diablo, held
its first free election today. Guards stood by as literacy tests were administered and while voting took place. The military-backed Social Conservative Party won by a landslide vote; the opposition Workers' Socialist Party massacred seventeen voters in what it termed "a symbolic protest."

In the news from northern Ireland, about 75,000 Catholics have been exterminated so far in Great Britain's decisive action to end the fighting in that troubled area. And still more blood will have to be shed to end the killing, said one British official, unofficially. (Cut to commercial)

COMMERCIAL: RICK WRIGHT'S HYDRO SHOWROOM

"Take a good long look at your hydro. Maybe it needs a new paint job, maybe its propulsion jets are shot--maybe it needs a complete overhaul. Or maybe it's time to visit Rick Wright's New and Used Hydro Showroom.

"Hi, I'm Rick Wright, and I can make you the best deal in town on a new or used GM hydro and give you a good trade on your old one. Here at the Showroom, all we have are hydros of style, performance and great value. So maybe it's not time to repair the old hydro--maybe it's time to buy a new one, at Rick Wright's Hydro Showroom. Take the right choice at Rick Wright's. On East Nixon at Fifty-Third."

COMMERCIAL: INSTAL-O-MINE

"Would you like to have the maximum security for your home? Who wouldn't? But old-fashioned chain link fences and barbed wire won't do the trick; not even electrified wire will repel
today's resourceful intruders. For **maximum** security, you need Instal-o-mine. For a price as low as $74,999.99, the professionals at Instal-o-mine will devise and install a mine field designed especially for your home. For an estimate and a visit to your home by an Instal-o-mine professional, register 012262. Be safe, not sorry--register 012262 and you can say, 'I got mine--at Instal-o-mine!''

A New York street gang robbed a Manhattan bank today, killing at least ten bank customers and getting away with over seven million dollars and the bank president's private hydrojet. Just as the jet left U.S. airspace, the New York police picked up this message on the telespy. (Play tape)

"You pigs are lucky we didn't blow you all to hell--we wanted to."

Seconds later, a bomb exploded at the bank building, where police were investigating. The bomb was said to be operated by remote control. The count is thirty-one dead, fifteen still missing. The gang's story will be published in hardback next month, and United Artists has purchased the movie rights, with Charles Hoight proposed to play Check Trenton, the gang leader.

In other national news, the spectacular Chippendale murder trial opened today in Long Island. Last week, Travis Chippendale III was charged with the torture and murder of the president of the Long Island Country Club, Jonathan Brissendine. Chippendale was allegedly offended by Brissendine's refusal or inability to wear Izod sports shirts. In their opening statements, the defense
described his client as "a loyal husband, a loving father, and a pillar of the community," while the prosecutor said that Chippendale is "as mad as a hatter, with very outdated notions of fashion as well." Izod-LaCoste made no comment. (Cut to commercial)

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

"Every year in the U.S., 87,000 people are killed in handgun accidents. Protect yourself and your family by learning more about how to care for and store your handguns. Don't become this year's statistic—send for this pamphlet—Weapon Safety—which will instruct you in proper handgun use. Also available—Fun With Guns, a guide to safe, instructive gunplay for the child still unfamiliar with weaponry. To send for Weapon Safety and Fun With Guns, register 555783. This has been a public service announcement."

COMMERCIAL: ZAP'EM ELECTROLASER

"'I'm sorry, John, but the firm can't keep you on any longer!' "'You'll have to wait your turn like everyone else!' "'Oh, I already have plans for that weekend. Maybe another time.'

'Have you ever been the victim in any of these situations? Wished you could retaliate and make things go your way, but felt helpless? Well, be victimized no longer! With Zap'Em Electro-laser, you hold the power right in your hand.

'Take a look at how it works: push one button and the Zap'Em Electrolaser will emit powerful electrical shocks to
your oppressor. Correct his or her behavior with light, barely detectable conditioning shocks, or eliminate it permanently by simply turning the dial to 'incapacitate.' The Electrolaser can be wired into your RTV set or carried manually--dogtrainers love it! Zap'Em Electrolaser, from Novelco, the makers of Deflectoshield. Buy both--for power and protection. Buy now and you'll get one third off the retail price. Register 773780 to order."

Also in the national news, leading economic indicators last quarter showed signs of economic improvement, but pointed to a slight decline in the state of the economy. While some experts greeted the new statistics with pessimism, others applauded President Cedrickson's economic plan and said that the nation is on the way to "complete recovery."

Finally--First Lady Marjorie Cedrickson kicked off her international drive to end world hunger, inviting nearly two hundred guests to a champagne brunch at the White House. A film on world hunger was shown after the meal, and Mrs. Cedrickson held a short press conference. Asked what she would like to change about the situation depicted in the documentary, the First Lady wisecracked, "'Well, if those were my children, I'd certainly dress them better--and their table manners leave a lot to be desired!" And that's the lighter side. This is Raleigh Bomber--good night.

COMMERCIAL: RELAXAPHINE

"What would be more delightful right now than a tall, cold glass of Relaxaphine? After work, after school, after a long day
of household security maintenance, you need to relax, and nothing helps you like Relaxaphine. In chocolate, vanilla, or strawberry, just add to water and relax. To order, register 212723. Relaxaphine is a patented product of Chemcorp—another way that we make your life worth living."
The timer ticked away the few minutes remaining before six o'clock. At one end of the large room, there was a desk and a bed, the latter containing a pillow, two sheets, a blanket and the owner of the apartment, who was sleeping. The other end of the room had only a large white box, open on the end that faced the room, holding nothing but tiny projectors mounted in each corner. On the wall between desk and box was a Realitivision console that wove the whole room together with a great many rubber-coated and color-coded wires that reached to the keyboard, screen and timer on the desk, and to the projectors on the white box. The console blocked the only window and would have been the first object to greet any potential visitor, but then, interior design wasn't the owner's area of interest.

The sleeping owner of the apartment had the grandly inappropriate name of Peregrine Francis Ponaventura. Far from being a masterpiece of a man, Perry Ponaventura was as blunt and non-fictional as the statistics he slaved over every day in his position with Ford & Middleton as Assistant Public Relations Statistician. This is not to imply that Perry was an insignificant person; like all of his brothers in nonfiction, he was of great importance to his firm and the public he served. Furthermore, Perry had an outside interest which elevated him above the crowd. That interest was the study and advancement of higher mathematics, a pursuit which satisfactorily consumed most of his leisure time.
The field of mathematics suited Perry well. Certainty, logic, predictability, and a detachment from everyday life—these were all part of its, and his, nature. Even as a beginning student, he'd liked knowing that there was one and only one right answer to every problem. This answer wouldn't be open to questioning; it wasn't a matter of foolish, changeable opinion. It was a fact, superior in every way to the weak "feelings" of other students in other areas of study. Perry respected only facts, for their solidity and purity—their calm.

Perry's life was likewise calm, its owner blandly unworthy of a name his father had given him proudly, thirty-three years before. He'd legally renamed himself with part of his passcode number as soon as his parents died, in the interest of efficiency; nevertheless, he couldn't shake that godawful name, even in his own mind. Well, it mattered very little when it mattered at all—certainly not enough to interfere with a calm life and the undisturbed sleep that Perry enjoyed on the morning of November 15, 2063.

Undisturbed, that is, except for the ring of the RTV's alarm, which switched on the RTV precisely at six o'clock. Within seconds, two smiling, coffee-drinking men in blue unholstered swivel chairs materialized inside the white box. Their three-dimensional images wavered momentarily, as did their voices; Perry had never devoted much time to the upkeep of the RTV's videotext reception. It worked well enough.

"—out there this morning," one of the ghosts finally said,
laughing. "What's the forecast?"

"Well, Bob," the other smiled vacantly, "it's going to be a good day in the tri-city area. High in the mid to upper nineties, low of about eighty later on tonight, with eighty-five percent humidity. Ought to be low-level smog most of the day, and visibility of up to seventy percent. All in all, a great day ahead."

During the forecast, the one called Bob beamed alternately at the Realcam and at the weatherman. He looked a little lost when the other stopped making noise, but at least regained his composure. "Fabulous!" he said warmly.

The RTV chattered in the background and Perry paid it no attention. He washed, brushed and shaved, then ate two slices of cold roast beef from a plate in the refrigerator, rubbing the concealed fat onto his already filthy pajama pants. When he'd washed down his breakfast with a lukewarm cup of muddy synthetic coffee, he yawned, burped, dumped his dishes in the sink and went out to switch the RTV onto Monitor, as he did before work every morning. He bumped his head on the decorative Spanish arch which separated the kitchenette from the main room, lending his apartment its "peculiar charm," as the for-rent ads had said. Perry had lived in this peculiarly charming apartment for six years, and every morning he'd bumped his head on that damned Spanish arch. Every morning, too, he'd resolved to do something about the situation, and for six years, the situation had gone unchanged.

Perry dialed W for Monitor, the VIDEOSHOW faded, and the morning messages began sliding up the screen. After informing
him of the sort of data it had industriously procured while he slept, the RTV asked, "NEWS?" Perry tapped the return key impatiently. The RTV obligingly skipped the news. "MESSAGE: 883-24-4402. ACCEPT?" It was Tyler's number; Perry typed "A" and his own passcode number. Letters and numbers flipped across the screen as the message was decoded.

REPORT TO HOM DOWNTOWN OFFICES. TEN O'CLOCK MEETING IN 14 FLOOR CONFERENCE ROOM. BE ON TIME, PERRY.

"MORE INFO." Perry typed, frowning. He tapped the return. The RTV hesitated a moment, then replied with a period, giving him the go-ahead. "TOCOL?" Perry asked.

"STATS REPORT, 110963."

"MORE INFO."

"NONE AVAILABLE. ACCEPT?"

Perry was unhappy. It looked as if he'd have to go to the office. Spitefully, he typed, "THANKS, NO."

"THANKS, NO UNCODED. TRY AGAIN?"

"I DON'T WANT TO GO," Perry typed irritably.

"I DON'T WANT TO GO UNCODED. ILLEGAL ' IN LINE 54. TRY AGAIN?"

Perry gave in. "A."

"FURTHER INSTRUCTION?"

Perry returned. The RTV seemed almost to sigh with relief as it hurriedly typed, "HAVE A NICE DAY" and switched itself off. After a moment's thought, Perry redialed Monitor and directed the RTV to suggest the proper attire for the office visit. Taking into account Perry's suits, ties, shirts, socks, shoes, selec-
tion of deodorant and cologne, and also the situation, season and day of the week, the RTV chose a navy pinstripe, navy tie, white shirt, navy socks, black wingtips, Right Guard unscented, and Chevron, a scent that the RTV described as "awe-inspiring." He dressed successfully and signed off the RTV. "HAVE A NICE DAY," the RTV typed warmly.

On his way downstairs, Perry stopped at the apartment directly below his and knocked. The door swung open to reveal a cluttered apartment. "Gene?" No answer. Perry locked and closed the door and continued down to the garage a little nervously. He'd half-hoped that Gene would accompany him that far; he didn't have his revolver. Not that Gene even owned a gun, but anyone who would leave his door open couldn't be afraid of parking garage ambushes.

The garage was dark but deserted. Perry quickly disconnected his hydro from the building's nuclear charger, climbed in, requested DOWNTOWN from the hydro's computer, and leaned back in air-conditioned comfort as the hydro pulled out into the drive. He almost ran over Gene.

Gene Dominic looked like a bundle of clothes lying on the pavement, eyes closed, smiling up at the sky. Perry stopped and lowered the window and was instantly hit by a solid wall of heat. The temperature already read seventy-eight. "What the hell are you doing?" Perry yelled.

Gene looked up, sat up, and grinned. Only slightly younger in years than Perry, he seemed childish in comparison. Perry was dark-haired, dark-eyed, sallow, slump-shouldered and somberly
thin. Gene, on the other hand, had wiry blonde hair that stood up on end, round, bloodshot blue eyes and a rosy complexion; he looked as surprised as he usually felt. He laughed and walked to Perry's window, leaned in.

"Don't tell me," Perry said. "Nature--right?"

"Ah yes," Gene confirmed, smiling benevolently.

"Aren't you burning up?" He indicated Gene's multi-layered shirts and sweaters.

"Only in a sense, Perry old boy. Physically, no. Mentally, creatively, emotionally, I would answer you with an emphatic affirmative. How are you this lovely morning?"

"Hot. And mad. I have to go downtown."

"God forbid!" Gene mocked.

"For a meeting, of all things. We could talk over the RTV."

"Lacks the human touch, Peregrine. Maybe they're turning into human beings."

"Doubtful."

"I agree. Well, bon voyage, Handball later?"

"If you don't get killed by the streeters before then. Or a hydro."

"'Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep--He hath awakened from the dream of life,'" Gene quoted. "Shelley."

Perry shrugged. "Never heard of her." He started the hydro and repunched the navigation keys. "See you later. Keep out of the road." He drove off and Gene lay down in the drive again.

Sweat trickled down Perry's spine as the hydro started the
ninety-five minute trip downtown. Perry leaned back in the deep seat and flipped on the radio.

"J.R. Thornthrottle and the Wall Street Chorus, with this week's number one song, Jesus Is My Banker," a synthesized voice announced in octaphonic sound. Number one song, eh? Perry liked dealing with generalities. A rich baritone was already singing a cappella.

"There's more to life than money / But there's a lot to be learned / From the rich men here on earth / Who invests till Christ returns / After saving all his life / He will gain the last reward / He'll be saved just like his money / Then he stands before the Lord. / Jesus Is My Banker and I-"

After a horrified paralysis had passed, Perry almost broke the radio knob off in his hurry to stop the music. The nation's favorite song. He scowled at the occupants of hydros near his own, in the hope that they could somehow be made to feel ashamed. No one noticed his disgust, however, as he pulled all his window shades and set the hydro's alarm for seventy-five minutes later. He could finally start reading this fascinating little tract on the law of large numbers....

After he'd manually guided the hydro past the three outer-security checkpoints, Perry left it with a black-uniformed parking attendant and stepped into the inner structure of Herd and Middleton, Public Relations and Information Consultants, Inc. From the outside, the building looked like a huge concrete M and an equally huge, equally concrete M, back to back. The few
windows faced each other, so that the edifice offered black man-
made stone to the street. The view from the inside of Herd and
Middleton was not much better.

There were ten inner-security checkpoints, at which uniformed
employees searched Perry's person and the case he carried for
electroshock devices, hand grenades, handguns, knives, lasers,
machine guns, matches, rifles and small bombs. They found a pen-
il and, after having the device explained to them, broke the tip
off and let Perry pass.

The fourteenth floor conference room was not the most opu-
luent in the building, but it was far from ill-appointed. Beige
synthetic wood lined the walls and made up the parquet floor.
Burgundy ReaLeather armchairs--twenty of them--were positioned
around an oblong synthetic wood table. A burgundy rug muffled
the steps of all twenty H&W executives as they began their subtle
jockeying for positions at the table. For all practical purposes,
the executives were all of the same sex.

Perry looked around. The pinstripe was the only detail that
distinguished him from anyone else in the room; the H&W had im-
peccable taste in clothing. Jeff Tyler, Perry's immediate su-
perior, came up and cleared him on the back. Jeff was considered
at H&W to be a "creative type," and he had accordingly substituted
a wildly creative burgundy tie for the standard navy. In fact,
if it hadn't been for Jeff's creative nature and his respect for
individuality, Perry would never have been hired--at the time of
his interview, Perry hadn't a decent suit to his name! And yet
Jeff had recommended him to "the boys upstairs," and had subsequently done Perry many similar favors.

"Are you ready to run it up the old flagpole, son?" Jeff asked him now. Although only five years Perry's senior, Jeff enjoyed addressing him as "son" or "kid," depending on his mood.

"I suppose so."

Jeff winced. "Project confidence, Perry!" he said, in a low but urgent voice. "Our team is up to bat and you've got to give 'em your best swing. You know who's here, don't you? Don Middleton."

"Really? Where?" Perry had never seen his boss.

"Cold tie clip. Listen, do it up right, okay?" Jeff stared deep into Perry's eyes, squeezing his shoulder. "Go get 'em, tiger." He was already moving away, in the hope that he could make it to the empty chair to Middleton's right. He did.

The executives started settling down. Tom Sandler got the chair to Middleton's left. They all lugged their bulky cases to the tabletop and began unpacking computer cassettes. Each place at the table—as well as the lectern where Perry stood—was equipped with a computer terminal, in evidence only as a slot for cassettes at stomach level, and a shiny acrylic screen set on the table like a placemat. They inserted their copies of the cassette of Perry's report, delighted with the efficiency of advanced technology.

Middleton leaned over to Sandler, who was staring uncomprehendingly at his machinery. "You youngsters don't know how good you've got it," Middleton said jovially. "In the old days, this table
would have been a mountain of paper."

"Yes, sir," said Sandler, ranting a little as he heaved both their cases off the table. Finally all the executives turned to Perry, red-faced and breathing heavily.

Perry cleared his throat and began. "Good morning, everyone. I'd like to reframe my report with a little something that I read last night." Good Lord, thought Tyler, now he's reading.

"The mathematical order of the universe is our answer to the pyramids of chaos. On every side of us, we see bits of life that are completely beyond our understanding—we label them unusual, but we really don't want to acknowledge them. The only thing that really exists is statistics. The intelligent person is the statistical person."

"The statistics before you were retrieved from POLFILE 363.14. I shall summarize the important findings so as to bring order to the pyramids of chaos on your RTV screens." He smiled up at his audience, and it didn't smile back. Most of it was looking at its screens, Tyler was glaring at him, and Sandler was still trying frantically to put his cassette in—a piece of it had broken off in his hand.

"What kind of audience will the President face?" Perry continued. "Without knowing that, it is impossible to know how to construct his speech. So, who is he going to be talking to? Please index bank fifteen of my report for a summary." Tape was beginning to snake out of Sandler's cassette.

"Roughly three-fourths of the population can be expected to
tune in. The vast majority of these are what we term middle-
class. College education, lives alone or with one other person,
very little social interaction, wild distrust of big government,
big business, labor and the other world powers. In a word, ali-
enation—solitude broken only by the RTV.

"Isolation can work for us and against us. It's an advan-
tage only in that it assures a large audience which is anxious
for human contact. Cedrickson is perceived as 'warm and caring'
by ninety-five percent of the people in previous audiences who
responded to the question. The great disadvantage we have is
the apathy which the President will have to overcome in order to
gain strong backing against his opposition, both domestic and
foreign.

"We have to walk a tightrope—create concern and avoid panic.
To this end, I have made several suggestions as to the content of
Cedrickson's speech of the twenty-second. First, start out with
a joke or two—the humor department can help us with that. Some-
thing sort of folksy. Second, throw them a bone or two to make
them more receptive. Further subsidies of recreational drugs,
tax credits for videoshow receivers; eighty-eight percent of the
public would be in favor of one or the other or both. But the
jokes and the gifts are the preliminaries to getting what we
really want. The third and most difficult part of our job is to
walk the line between creating apathy and commitment, while keep-
ing the audience on our side.

"Now, our studies have shown that Americans are the most
satisfied people in the world; upsetting them with talk of world news and foreign policy is unnecessary and counterproductive. So, the less said about the actual state of international affairs, the better. What we can do is play on the public trend toward isolationism in a way that's useful to our client.

"One of the first laws of public relations is to address the issues that concern people. To do this, we must create that concern, or, better yet, the issues themselves. And what better issue than Communist infiltration into American life?"

"What are the advantages of using this issue? It creates a target at which the average American can direct all of his pent-up frustrations, hatreds, and jealousies. It causes people to look outward for the source of their dissatisfaction, instead of inward, toward themselves and their government.

"A Communist scare promotes nationalism, a sense of a common bond, a feeling of superiority. It unites us in a search for the affirmation of our most ignoble hopes and dreams. Lastly, it is a time-honored American tradition, in which losers see themselves as winners, winners feel deserving, and dissenters become examples."

"It is," Perry concluded dramatically, "an end to a class war that poses the gravest threat to our client's re-election."

Perry sat down to stunned silence. Middleton cleared his throat. "Then the, uh, main concern is, in your opinion, the, uh...the, uh..."

"Promoting unity between the classes, sir," said Perry.

"Uh, yes...." Everyone but Jeff and Perry looked confused.
Jeff shot Perry a meaningful look which served to confuse Perry as well.

"I think Perry's talking about de-emphasizing polarization," said Jeff, dismayed at Perry's persistent inability to communicate. Middleton's face cleared. "Ah, yes," he smiled. Everyone looked satisfied, except Perry, who continued to look confused long past the time when it was fashionable. Meanwhile the others, having grasped the idea, were repeating it to each other, each trying to phrase it more importantly than anyone else.

"De-emphasizing polarization--by that you mean the systematization of proximatization, I assume?"

"I think Jeff's talking about an organized effort at assimilationism--am I right, Jeff?"

"No, really, my perception of the problem is that it's one of the attitudinization of several societal factions."

"More or less the organizational process of theorizing, commercializing and crystallizing new socio-political attitudes, class-consciousness-wise?"

"Are we still talking about the speech?" Perry asked.

"What else would we be talking about, Perry?" asked Jeff irritably. Chastised, Perry shut up.

"What we need here is optimization of understanding between the classes and a catchphrasenization that popularizes that understanding."

"A maximization, communication-wise."

"A minimization, polarization-wise."
"De-prioritizing prioritization," Sandler said, and pushed his glasses up his rather greasy nose with bound hands. Tape from the broken cassette had wound itself around other parts of his body as well.

There was dead silence as every eye turned to Sandler. "THAT'S IT!" the room screamed. For a few noisy minutes, there were loud congratulations and silent, jealous glances in Sandler's direction. Jeff finally signalled for quiet.

"Well, I think our business is finished, conclusions-wise, unless Dr. Middleton has anything further to say, addition-wise?"

Middleton stood. "I think Bonaventura and Sandler have this thing pretty well sewn up. One final thought: as we advise our clients, I perceive it to be our duty, obligations-wise, to utilize that advice ourselves. Polarization-wise, H&M could use some work in its own back yard. Too much divisionism between theorizing and practicalizing, don't you think, Bonaventura? Brainpower on this, people. Well anyway, Perry," he went on, "why don't you and Tom write up the final report—he can help you dress it up a little—and then go ahead and put your names on it right under Herd, Middleton and Tyler."

"Thank you, sir!" beamed Tyler and Sandler, shaking his hand.

"Yes, sir," said Perry absently.

"Well, I guess that's all, then. Thanks again, Tyler, you always give a good meeting."

"Thank you, sir." The executives began to file out, dragging their cassette cases. Sandler shuffled out, trailing tape.
"Ferry, I'd like to have a couple minutes with you."

The room cleared. Perry fell into an armchair and opened his cassette case; he took out a cheese sandwich, orange drink and pickles. Tyler stared in horror. "Where are your cassettes?" he asked, congratulating himself on his self-control.

Perry eyed him over his sandwich. "I wrote the report--I know what I said."

"Well, what if you'd needed other files?"

"We came here to discuss my report and the speech. Besides, I know the files frontwards and backwards, better than any of them. Better than Sandler," Perry added with a derisive, crumb-covered laugh.

Tyler snapped his pen smartly against his teeth. It was a habit of his--so much so, in fact, that his teeth were usually blue and his lips flecked with ink. He looked as if he'd been eating pens, but there were no crumbs on Jeff Tyler. "Sandler knows how to get along, communication-wise. It's a skill you'd do well to pick up." Tyler paused significantly. "Listen, I didn't keep you here to bawl you out--just the opposite. This is an important deal--that's why the face-to-face--and you did a bang-up job. Your report was a fine piece of work, insight-wise, research-wise, and presentation-wise, even if it did lack polish. There is a post open a little higher up on the corporate ladder, in another department." Tyler grinned broadly, flashing his blue smile. "I've recommended you for it. How does Statistics Verbalization Engineer sound, son?"
It sounded to Perry like something that would make a person swallow wrong. He choked on a pickle. "But, Jeff, that's got even less to do with math than my job does now!"

Jeff was exasperated. "Did you even hear what Middleton just said, Perry? You're too far into the science aspect of this business. Remember H&M's motto: 'Science discovers facts and business faces them.' Do you believe that?"

"As much as I believe any motto, I guess."

Tyler frowned. "Then believe me when I tell you that you can't afford to miss a step on the H&M ladder. You've got to face facts, kid. You've been with H&M for--how long?"

"Nine years." Perry knew what was coming.

"Nine years and where are you?" Tyler sat down and punched a few keys. An orange ladder glowed on the computer screen. Multicolored figures dangled from the rungs; one of the figures was flashing and Jeff pointed at it. "Two rungs above entry level, that's where." He sighed. "H&M is a good ladder, Perry, but like all ladders set up in the heavy traffic of the public eye, it's easily knocked over. The people who don't have a firm grip on the rungs will fall off and get run over by progress, while the ones who know when to hang on and when to reach for the next rung will prosper."

Suddenly, the rung disappeared from beneath the flashing figure's hands, and he fell off the screen, arms and legs flailing. Tyler gazed at the screen sadly, then turned to Perry. "You just have to know when to take that leap at the higher rung."
He stood again, quite businesslike. "I've done my best--I've protected you--now my back needs scratched. We need to mutualize our strategy, cooperation-wise. Right?"

Glassy-eyed, Perry shrugged. "I guess."

Tyler shook his head. "Perry, you've got to act more decisive if you want to climb that ladder."

With that, Tyler decisively forced Perry to eat another lunch, in the executive dining room, with the big boys. Resignedly, Perry consumed one martini, salad with oil and vinegar dressing, steak, baked potato, no dessert--what Tyler advised him was a "power lunch." Everyone ate the same things, but only Perry went home feeling bloated.
THE CREAM OF THE CROP

Marjorie Cedrickson was of the opinion that her humble Christianity had made her the worthy recipient of all of life's little goodies. It was a pattern that she'd observed all her life. "The cream always rises," she was fond of saying, with characteristic modesty. Given any encouragement at all, Marjorie—or Var—would enlarge on this idea, using it to explain all sorts of complex social problems:

"Suppose we had a glass," she would say, "a huge glass of resources and opportunity, a glass which represents our great nation. Then imagine that we have some milk and chocolate mix, two sectors of our democratic society, and we mixed the two sectors in the glass. Now, if you're like me, you don't care for chocolate milk, but even supposing that you feel differently, you must admit that one can easily put too much chocolate in, causing you to be sick. So it is with the economy—too much chocolate and the system does not work properly.

"After a few hundred years of progress, a nation might find the proportion of chocolate to milk that is desired by the majority of voters. If that properly-mixed nation sits long enough, something happens within the glass. The chocolate mix sifts to the bottom, the milk will gravitate to the middle and eventually," Var would conclude triumphantly, but humbly, "the cream will gain positions of power!"

What a comfort this was to those who heard it! Just a lovely
bit of Darwinism, with that faint flavor of homogenization—so soothing at a time when the world sometimes seemed to be falling apart around bejeweled ears.

"Mar now added a little power to her cup of sugar and coffee. "Send in the Reverend, Tina. And call the decorators again."

Reverend Thornthrottle entered, glowing like Technicolor. His bronzed skin and white-blond hair were set off by a purple velvet jumpsuit and pink leather cowboy boots—not to mention the incredible number of rocks and pieces of metal that he wore. His clothes were blessedly tighter since the release of his latest album, Christian Classics, and it was with considerable difficulty that he squeezed himself into the delicate French Provincial chair that Mar indicated.

They had met twice before, once during Thornthrottle's recent Las Vegas engagement, and again when War had first invited him to perform at a reception after her husband's November 22 speech. That date was now only a few days off, and the Reverend had arrived to make the final arrangements.

"Well, Reverend," said War pleasantly, "your love of God has certainly paid off."

Thornthrottle didn't realize that Mar's observation wasn't intentionally insightful and he sputtered, "Well, yes, uh, and not just financially either, you know, Mrs. Cedrickson."

She smiled. "Of course not. Spiritual salvation is a wonderful dividend in itself, I know."

It was the Reverend's turn to smile. "Lovely phrasing. I
couldn't have done better myself."

They both laughed, then her leaned forward and touched his arm confidingly. "I must tell you again, by the way, how much I love that song, Jesus Is My Banker. It's so inspiring!"

"You flatter me," he chortled, "though of course I don't call it inspiration. It's more incentive."

"Delightful!" She exclaimed, clapping her little hands together. "Christianity in the market system! How clever."

"The proud Protestant tradition, Mrs. Cedrickson."

"I can tell right now that we are going to be great friends, Reverend. You must call me Var--please!"

"And you should call me Jackson," the Reverend replied.

Just then, the door of Var's office opened, and her husband wandered in. Anthony Cedrickson, the President of the United States, was the man on the Ger-Alive! commercial who had a little lower back pain that was promptly cured by the diet supplement. He was a veteran RTV actor whose reassuring face had sold billions of dollars' worth of all sorts of products. In fact, Tony Cedrickson had never ingested a single Ger-Alive! tablet; he didn't need to, and anyone with a few extra billion could have the same kind of health. His 102-year-old body was a walking testimonial to the triumph of science over nature, since it consisted largely of mechanical devices rather than flesh.

"What's all this?" the new arrival demanded, tottering over to his wife. "Jackson, you say? Andrew Jackson? Best damn president we ever had, is all."
Mar glanced at Thornthrottle apologetically, then stood and took her husband's arm. "Now, dear, this is Reverend Jackson Thornthrottle—the man who is going to sing at the party. Remember?"

"That's his name?"

"Thornthrottle." "Tornswaddle?" "Thornthrottle." "Swordswallow?" "Thornthrottle!"

"Well, listen here, Hornswoggle--"

"THORNTHROTTLE!" Mar screamed into his ear. Tony staggered toward the door. Mar rattled her hair, obviously fighting for self-control. "Darling, don't you have business to attend to? I thought that the General was going to brief you today."

"No, I don't recall--"

"Of course you do. Ask your secretary." She was very nearly pushing him out the door.

"Well all right then. It was nice to meet you...Reverend."

He finally left.

Mar seated herself again, laughing. "You must forgive my husband, Jackson. He has so much on his mind, with running the country and all, and then he's been worrying about his health, too."

"Oh? I'm sorry to hear that. Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Oh no," Mar said, "not at all. His hearing, you know. He needs a new left ear already. We shouldn't complain, I suppose—with all that hardware, something's bound to go bad now and then."

"Does he have quite a lot of it, then?"

"Oh my yes! Over sixty percent of his body. It truly is a
miracle, what they can do these days, isn't it? The progress we've made!"

"Praise God," agreed the Reverend.

"Yes... oh, Jackson, forgive me! I've had you just sitting here, wasting your time! You wanted to talk about the reception." They discussed what sort of party it was to be, when he was to perform, what he was to perform--"and do sing my favorite song, won't you, Jackson?"--and all of the other arrangements that had been made.

"Unfortunately, the decorating still isn't done, or I'd show you the reception room. I left the whole affair to Tina, and of course it isn't done. But I simply had to go abroad for awhile."

"You went abroad?"

"Why, yes! It was sort of a working vacation--I went with Tony. Didn't you see the RTV broadcast from Asia? Tony and I even took part in the dispensing of food!"

"Yes, I think I did see those pictures on the news...."

"Yes, well, the media tried to twist things, as usual--but the pictures were good, I thought."

"Yes--delightful."

"Yes, and do you know, Jackson, that our workers have succeeded in converting over eighty-five percent of those people to Christianity? It was such an--incentive!" She beamed at him.

"Well, praise God!"

"Yes, that's exactly what they did. They just explained to the natives that one just can't eat without saying grace. Of course a few resisted, but most saw the light."
"Fraise God!"

"Yes, of course. But it was my idea."

Thornthrottle smiled. "And a clever one it was, too. If only God's love could be spread to all parts of the world, through investments such as those you have made. When I see those RTV broadcasts on the Latin American War..." He trailed off, shaking his head sadly.

"Isn't that just awful?" sympathized Tar. "It's just like those people to scramble around trying to bleed in front of the cameras. They know that it lowers American morale—just sort of takes away your appetite for it. I'm sure that nothing would please them more than to die on American RTV!"

The Reverend nodded solemnly. "And," he added, "the people that make that kind of RTV show—they're no better! To those of us who care about better RTV, the news is the devil's handiwork."

"I feel just the same!" Mar said happily. There was a timid knock at the door, and Tina peeped in.

"It's eleven o'clock, Mrs. Cedrickson. The decorators and your hairdresser, manicurist and dressmaker are all here."

"Please, Tina, can't you see that I'm busy?" The Reverend—"Thornthrottle broke in, "Please don't let me keep you, Mrs. Cedrickson. You must have a lot still to do before the reception. Perhaps we could talk sometime next week?"

"You're staying that long? That would be wonderful!"

"My pleasure. I have to stay anyway to open up one of my branches here in town, and I would look forward to talking with
you then, dear lady."

"A branch? Of what?"

"Oh, I should never have mentioned it. Just a pet project of mine--the First Universal Bank and Church of the Supreme Almighty Lord Our God--nothing much."

"Sir grasped his hand. "Do tell me about it, Jackson."

And of course he did. The FUBCSALG was a nationwide franchise that served the American public by combining its religious and financial services in the most efficient way possible--a drive-up window. Autotellers programmed by the finest accountants and theologians in the country were available twenty-four hours a day, six days a week, to take in money and give out sermons.

Or, of course, to give out money, if that was the desired service. But a bank, Thornthrottle emphasized, was really meant to hold savings. "And, as we say at the FUBCSALG, you can take it with you--by giving it to the Lord!"

"It sounds marvelous! Tony and I are both born again, but there really isn't the right sort of church, or bank, to attend here in Washington. This is ideal! Perhaps we could drop in on Sunday for the services?"

"Uh, banking or church services?" asked Thornthrottle nervously.

"I was thinking of church services just now..."

"Oh, I am sorry--we're closed on Sunday, except for a machine that accepts deposits. The computers are serviced then."

Mar frowned a little, then smiled and squeezed his hand.
"There's no law that says you have to go to church on Sunday, is there? Saturday might be better after all. Isn't that when the Jews have Sabbath? You certainly can't fault them on their money-making abilities, can you?" They both nearly howled with laughter, then she continued, "Can you go ahead and open our account, Jackson?"

"I think I can arrange that. Oh, I almost forgot—with every account of fifty thousand dollars or more, we give the customer a snakeskin-covered Bible, with special sections on family living and financial planning. Along with a lyric sheet for the Klassics album."

"Fabulous! Perhaps you could present it to me at the reception—maybe just mention the hunger drive...? Good, I'll see you then."

They parted, Thornthrottle to his bank/church and Mar to her manicure. As she was being buffed and polished, she imagined that glorious day when she walked through The Pearly Gates—perhaps with Jackson at her side. A French or Italian gown, cuffed sleeves, pleated, gauzy. A belt would be nice, but it wouldn't be appropriate, really, not for an angel. Silver or gold sandals—and which necklace? She could never decide, but it all made for such a pleasant daydream. Of course she knew that when the time came, it would have to be an American designer's gown, or else the media would have a field day. Thinking of this, she frowned and contemplated once again—but not bitterly—how much she was put upon. Was there already a Saint Marjorie?
TO EACH ACCORDING TO HIS NEEDS

Glowing green letters slid up over Gene's RTV screen.

"Individuality And The Pursuit Of Knowledge

"by Rhonda Henley
English One
Dr. Gene Dominic
November 20, 2063

"In these days of highly-advanced technology and mechanization, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to maintain one's own personal individuality, and, at the one and same time, one's own thirst for, and pursuit of, knowledge. Because of this, it is even more important than ever that one cling to these very individuality and thirst, so as to fully realize one's own human potential. But how to do this very clinging, when one's society urges one to move forward, and to progress, in the traditionally accepted pathways that that very society has constructed, is the problem.

"Far too often, one's career decisions are made for one not by oneself but by aptitude and intelligence tests administered, furthermore, when one is far too young, to object. From the moment one's test results arrive back, one is consistently forced into attending classes, watching RTV shows, and participating into activities, which have been predetermined beforehand to be appropriate to one's needs—Irregardless of what one's individuality is! Though this country supposedly deplores the crippling restrictions of Communism, yet we do the very same thing, in the
name of efficiency.

"What is the answer? Perhaps one can only follow in the well-worn footsteps which have been trodden by all those preceding one? This generation answers that with a positive negative! One cannot sacrifice one's very self in order to fit in with conformity. Therefore, one must assert one's own, unique, individuality, and furthermore, must hope that those who follow one through the labyrinthine maze of the educational system, will, likewise, do the same."

File that in the Deeply Held Beliefs On Demand drawer, Gene thought, see Bullshit. "B," he typed in, smiling. Gene graded on a curve, and this was B work, sadly enough. A half dozen essays still awaited his judgment but he no longer had the stomach for it, and he switched off the RTV. He decided to ask Perry down for lunch.

Gene's apartment had the same layout as Perry's--that is, a large main room, bathroom, kitchen and closet-sized bedroom--but even this similarity was obscured by the tremendous amount of junk piled on the floor and furniture of Gene's rooms. While Perry had barely been able to make one room look lived-in, Gene's books alone could have populated a city block. He shrugged off Perry's predictions of fire and the landlord's threats of eviction, and continued to fill bags and boxes with his own words and the words of others. And somehow, when it came time to play cards, watch a ballgame or just talk, it was always Perry who went down to Gene's place.
Gene picked his way over a box or two of his latest manuscript and tried to open his door, over its buzzing protest. The buzzing meant that the door's electronic scanning device had detected a living being lurking outside Gene's apartment—a potentially dangerous being that the door felt obligated to warn him about. Gene continued to tug at the knob in irritation, knowing from experience that the lurking was probably being done by a mouse or cockroach; the door did not discriminate in its fear of intruders. Now there was a red DANGER sign flashing on the door frame as well. Gene picked up an ashtray and gave the frame a good whack. The flashing stopped and the buzz turned into a whine, as the door disclaimed responsibility for the consequences of its opening onto a hostile world.

There was indeed an intruder. A tall redheaded boy was striding toward him, his hand extended. "Dr. Dominic?"

"Yes?" Gene was intrigued rather than frightened.

"I'm one of your English One students—Dirk Dendlewood." He grasped Gene's hand. "I'm really sorry to just barge in—I heard your door—" the boy gestured awkwardly and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Oh yes—you could have punched in the class passcode downstairs. I mean, that's how you avoid all that garbage." Gene, too, motioned towards the door, then stepped aside. "Well, come on in."

After they'd cleared off a couple of chairs, Gene waited for the kid to speak, smiling inwardly at the way he arranged
and rearranged the long lines and sharp angles of his body.
"You play basketball, Dirk?"

"Yeah, I'm on the team. How'd you know?"

"Just a guess. Listen, you want some coffee, or a Coke?"
Give him a chance to calm down, Gene thought as he went into the kitchen to get the Coke Dirk requested. These days it was so hard to meet people face to face, to talk to flesh and blood instead of near-transparent RTV images. Like all generous people who'd confronted and overcome a fear, Gene wanted to help others who were frightened. First Perry, now perhaps Dirk.

"I really am sorry about this, Dr. Dominic. I would have come over the RTV, but..." Dirk accepted the soft drink.

Gene sat down, smiling. "What is it you wanted to talk about, Dirk?"

"Well, it's the essay, partly. It started me thinking." Dirk looked away, seeming embarrassed.

"I never meant to stir up trouble," Gene remarked wryly.

"No, no, it's not that." Dirk was too nervous and upset to recognize the joke. "I mean, it's better this way. To be thinking about--things."

"Well, I feel that way. Most of the time. Thinking can make you pretty unhappy sometimes, though."

"Not thinking can do that too!" Dirk exclaimed, finally looking up. "I mean, once you think about it."

Gene suppressed a smile that would have been misunderstood. "What is it?" he asked gently.
"Well, you see, Dr. Dominic, it's the tests. I tested out to be a Bus Ad 76—that's business administration—and a Tech 58. Those were my two best scores on the first test I took. After they found that out, they started putting me in more and more Bus Ad and Tech classes and activities. Then they'd test me again, and I'd test even better in Bus Ad and Tech, but worse in everything else, because I didn't have those classes. The advisor kept talking about narrowing my focus and channeling my energies. I just kept doing better and better and everybody was congratulating me...I never even thought about it all, until I took this class." As Dirk recited his story, he seemed more drawn into himself. Talking about it made it so real somehow, and hopeless and terrible.

"How did you end up in an English One class, anyway?" Gene prodded.

"English One is an optional class within Communication Technology—Comm Tech—and Comm Tech is a subdivision of Bus Ad. I guess that shows that the system isn't perfect. I slipped through." Dirk's smile was oddly lacking in feeling. He watched his long fingers twisting around in his lap.

Gene wanted to just throw away all self-restraint and tell him to ditch the whole business. Fight back! he wanted to say. Tell 'em to go to hell, and then go ahead and do it your own way! But he knew that he had some sort of responsibility. After all, his class had started the kid thinking in some way; without it, Dirk might have been relatively happy with Bus Ad and Tech.
Relatively happy, Gene reminded himself, weighing the idea. At least before he started thinking, Dirk had been certain--secure in his success, praised by the administration, his future assured. Was a chance at something better worth losing something good?

Looking at him, Gene wondered whether he could start Dirk's fight, knowing that he wouldn't be around to help him win it. But what did he know that could help Dirk, anyway? He himself had ended up doing what he most wanted to do--teaching and writing. He could only imagine the long sessions with the stern counselor, the eventual expulsion from the state schools, the loss of many, more conservative friends. Students all talk a big fight, when they have to, for essays assigned by liberal English profs, Gene thought. The essay he'd read that morning came to mind. But who made them think I wanted to hear all that talk--and who's doing all the talking now?

"Dirk, I'll help you. If that's what you're asking."

The boy was instantly roused from his own thoughts. "You will?" He was relieved to have his need revealed to someone. "You will?" he repeated.

"Whatever I can do." Gene paused, scrutinizing him. "What do you think you want to do?"

"You mean instead?"

Gene nodded.

"Well, that's just it--I don't know. I mean, I never had a chance to find out. Will you help me find out, Dr, Dominic? I mean, what do you think?" Dirk's expression was anxiously en-
thusiastic as he leaned forward.

Gene smiled a little, "Don't you think you ought to think about it for once, Dirk? I can't tell you what to do, any more than the tests can. Don't trade one slavery for another." He patted the kid's shoulder to soften the criticism. "When you've given it some thought, we'll talk about it again, okay? And if you decide that you want to make a change, I can go to bat for you, although I can't promise anything."

They both stood and Dirk pumped Gene's hand gratefully.
"That's just great, Dr. Dominic! I mean, I feel so much better just for talking to you. I mean--" Dirk broke off and dug into the pocket of his jeans. He produced a folded, tattered sheet of paper and shoved it into Gene's hands. "That's my essay. I always write them out before I punch them in--I don't know why. I wasn't going to hand it in at all, but--no, don't read it till I'm gone," he insisted.

"This won't register on the machine, you know," said Gene, nodding toward the RTV screen.

"I know. I don't care." Dirk was once again stumbling all over himself, now with gratitude as well as embarrassment. He stumbled his way to the door. "Thanks so much, Dr. Dominic. It's so great what you're doing--" He ducked under a Spanish arch, just barely missing it.

"You're quite welcome. And you can call me Gene," he added.

Dirk paused a moment at the door, surveying the cluttered apartment for the first time. "It must be nice to get out of
the school dorm," he said a little wistfully. "Just spread out in a place of your own." They shook hands a final time, then the door opened peacefully and Dirk left.

Gene slung himself over a chair and unfolded the page he'd been given. The writing was round and childish and it filled both sides of the paper, edge to edge. He read first routinely, then with interest.

"...it's hard to escape from something that's comfortable. It's safe. All the decisions have already been made, you don't risk anything and you don't ever have to blame yourself. No one knows what would happen if all that order was disturbed--anything could happen then.

"So nobody challenges the tests or tries to find out what they want from life--what they wanted before the tests told them what to want. It's too easy to learn to want what you can get. Everybody learns that and pretty soon they don't even know what they need. And they'd never ask you what you need. What would you tell them if they did ask?

"The Communists say, 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.' They always told us that Communism was bad, but I thought what's so terrible about that—that doesn't sound so terrible. But now it seems different, because what you need always depends on who's handing it out."

"SCORE," Gene typed into the RTV.

"NAME?" the machine asked.

"DENDLEOOD, DIRK."
There was a moment's pause, then, "SEARCHED ALL FILES, LAST
ASSIGNMENT. NO ENTRY FOR DENDLEWOOD, DIRK. SCORE NOT PERMITTED."

"SCORE DENDLEWOOD, DIRK: A+" Gene tapped the characters
insistently.

Something must have shorted out in the machine just then,
because it suddenly abandoned logic and typed, "CONFIRMED" in
glowing green letters across the screen.
THE PRESIDENT AND THE Public

President Anthony J. Cedrickson and guerilla-in-the-street Gyray Trullane were preparing in similar ways for similar activities in the early evening of November 22, 2063. Both were being cosmetized to appear before large groups of people which acknowledged them, respectively, as the leader of the free world and the leader of the underworld—or vice versa, depending on the group.

Cedrickson was voted into the country's highest office by the only people who still felt they had something to gain by voting. Roughly twenty-six percent of the nation's population had turned out for the 2060 elections, and Cedrickson scraped by with about eighty-five percent of the vote. Strangely enough, none of the voters who were questioned at the polling places had any idea what any of the candidates had said about any of the issues, and in fact, only about one in every twenty people was aware that there were any issues. Tony Cedrickson owed his victory, it seems, to a certain twenty-one percent of the American people. He was the darling of the "old money"—people who had made their fortunes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Theirs were fortunes wrought by the building of corporations and the managing of speakeasies. After long years of hard work and self-denial, these entrepreneurs could have anything money could buy. Tony Cedrickson was one of their own, and they were more than happy to share him with the American public. Hence his early rise to RTV fame, and his current, even greater, position of power.
Until recently, Cedrickson had had very little cause to know of Gypsy Trullane; he had been born and bred to doze through the world's great overs, and Gypsy lived to blow up auditoriums. They really didn't have much in common. But a few weeks ago, Gypsy had taken over as acting leader of the nation's "streeters," estimates of their numbers ranged from ten to thirty-five percent of the populace. A better census might have been taken if the streeters hadn't had the unfortunate tendency to blow census-takers to bits with machine guns and land mines. Gypsy had been appointed their shepherd when her lover, Check Trenton, had gone into hiding to prepare for a bank robbery.

Gypsy hadn't had the advantages that Cedrickson had, but there are many ways to rise to power. She'd been born to a thirteen-year-old girl who'd only lived long enough to show her small daughter how to forage for food in the city's garbage dumps. It was at just such a dump that Gypsy had met Check when they were both thirteen. Up until that time, her life had been one of unspeakable poverty, senseless violence and unimaginable degradation. And in fact, it continued to be so. But Check had made a solemn pledge to make her a better life someday, if he had to die to do it—such was his devotion.* To this end, Check organized about a hundred of his fellow streeters into a gang. This was a revolutionary idea, since most of these punks had previously done their killings, raping and looting in a very haphazard and ineff-

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*Some of the biographical material is taken from the United Artists film version of Check Trenton's life, C.T.: The Extraordinary, and from Checkmate--The Life of Gypsy Trullane, by Gyspy Trullane.
icient manner. The time and energy saved by organizing was appreciated by all but a few malcontents, and Check gained a large following. By the year 2063, when Check and Gypsy were only twenty-three years old, they had virtually established an empire.

But now, all of that seemed to be uncertain—and all because of that bank robbery! Gypsy had tried to discourage him. "Why take chances?" she had begged. "We can get what we want and still stay straight with our people!"** But Check was greedy—he wanted it all now, and so he'd belted his beloved in the mouth and organized what was to be an anonymous bank robbery. It didn't turn out that way, because of Check's boyish impulsiveness. He'd deposited a bomb in the bank as a last resort; it hadn't been necessary. But then, on a whim, Check had boasted about the bomb to a police telespy, and to further demonstrate his cleverness, he'd gone ahead and blown up the bank with it. It was all due to a charming brashness on Check's part, but it had made the news that night, and every streeter who could smash a window not hold of an RTV set to watch it. It did not make them very happy that their leader was involved in such covert, bourgeois operations. They had congregated in front of Check's heavily guarded townhouse to hear Gypsy's explanation of the whole affair.

Tony Cedrickson wasn't aware of all the reasons for Gypsy's speech to her constituents; all he knew was that he had to talk

**from CheckMate--The Life of Gypsy Trullane, by G. Trullane.
to his own. Because of the unrest among Gypsy's streeters, a class war was a greater threat than ever. Even the middle class was becoming concerned. The American people would accept a certain amount of violence in their daily lives; they even relished it in the lives of others. But although they might tolerate a little killing, war was out of the question. With less than a year to campaign for re-election, Cedrickson's advisors had begun to fear a massive voter turnout—and possible defeat.

It was almost time for both speeches to begin.

The stage crew was scrambling madly around the Oval Office set, screaming instructions at each other, glancing at the clock. There was only a small audience of aides, members of the press, and War, of course. She, too, was being painted and polished for the cameras, even though no one would have a camera on her. A heavily decorated Army officer—General Russell Battenbaum—walked up and stood at attention next to a hairdresser named Bruce, who began combing the General's brush cut.

"Russ! How marvelous of you to come." War extended a tiny white hand, newly manicured. Bruce simpered and kept combing.

"How do, ma'am," rumbled the General. "Ow! Damn it all, boy, leave me be!" He snatched the comb from the hairdresser and flung it across the room; Bruce flitted away and War laughed tinklingly—she'd always found Russ exceedingly attractive. "Beg pardon, ma'am, but I gotta talk to you. We're all a little worried over at the Dee-sence Department."

"Oh? Why?"

"We're just wondering whether the President is sufficiently
committed to our firepower. "We've been hearing a lotta talk about negotiating down there in Central America...."

"Well, don't you worry, Russ. That's just a lot of loose talk. I'm sure that Tony is behind you all the way."

"I'm behind you all the way," giggled Bruce.

Doubt seemed to creep across the General's large, even features. "I just wanna be sure, ma'am. I've devoted my whole dang life to that dang RTT 451—best dang friend I ever had. Like a son. I don't want it getting left out in the cold, you know?" Tears sparkled in his piercing blue eyes. Bruce handed him a Kleenex sympathetically.

"Now, now, don't worry, Russ," Mar patted his arm. "Your bombs are in good hands with Tony."

Two sides rushed by, going towards "Take-Up. "Tell Tony to watch the drooling, will you," one was saying. "Caught a little of it on camera three last time. Public hates that kind of thing. Well, I don't have to tell you that."

About forty miles from the President's RTV studio, an aide was at that moment knocking on Gypsy's door. "Thone," the aide said, popping her gum.

It was the call she'd been waiting for. She took the call in her office, taking care to switch on the scrambling device in case of bugs. Then she picked up the phone. "Check? How's it going?"

"They just left. I gave them some flyers and told 'em to drop 'em around the Capitol building. The electrician was here
this morning. After he got done I lasered the shit out of him." The voice on the other end laughed softly. "I had 'em put the body in the jet--told 'em we'd dump it later."

"Didn't they suspect anything?"

"New. I been dropping a few people now and then. I told 'em that I was just getting nervous. They don't suspect nothing." He laughed again. "I gotta go. Hang in there, Gyp--we're gonna make it."

"Am I still supposed to meet you in the place we arranged?"

"Yeah. By seven tomorrow. I gotta go," he said again. "Don't screw up the speech." He hung up.

"Okay, Tony, seven seconds, six, five, four, three, two, one, go!" On cue, the President bared his teeth invitingly at the Realigner.

"Everything's ready, Gypsy. They're waiting." Gypsy walked out onto the balcony. Behind the microphones, her face was raging with color--purple cheekbones, orange lips, shiny green spiders around her eyes. She surveyed the gathered crowd regally, waiting for quiet.

"Comrades!" she suddenly cried out. "I am here to answer the cruel lies you've been told! I am here to tell you the truth!"

"My fellow Americans, I am happy to be a guest in your homes on this Thanksgiving Day. I only wish I were there in person, instead of as an image on your TV sets, because I'd dearly love a good American turkey sandwich right now!" Cedrickson grinned into the cameras, a thin line of saliva running from
the corner of his mouth. ("Look--already!" an aide muttered. "Why don't those doctors fix him up with a mechanical mouth?")

"There are traitors among us, comrades, people who want to start us fighting each other again. These people are telling you lies about our leader, Check Trenton--the man who has done everything for you, the man who wants everything for you, the man who told me just before he left on his latest mission, "Gypsy, we must take care of our people first, above all other things!"" Gypsy paused and almost whispered the next words. "He said, 'We must feed them, clothe them and shelter them--not with grudging charity, but with respect, because they are our comrades, our equals--no, they are our superiors, and we must serve them or kill ourselves out of shame!'" Check never said that many words at a time in his life, thought Gypsy as she raised her arms to receive the crowd's cheers.

"Today all Americans have something else to give thanks for," said Cedrickson, discreetly wiping his chin. "I have received word that the Senate has approved my recommendations for an across the board tax cut, and both houses have voted to appropriate money to subsidize the recreational chemicals which you the people deserve." He smiled modestly into the cameras for a predetermined length of time, and at the director's signal, he peered into the distance like a visionary. "But I also must bring you sad tidings on this most American of holidays. There is a shadow falling across this great nation, and that shadow is the dread specter of Communism."
The cheering died down. "Yet despite all that Check has done for us, there are those who whisper that he has betrayed us with his latest mission. I am here to tell you about that mission, which he carried out in secret so that only he would suffer if it failed. He went through the gates to rob the vaults of the bourgeoisie, to take back all that they took from you!" Another cheer went up, a longer, more sincere one. "He is at this moment flying back to you, to bring you the first fruits of victory—your victory!" Gypsy screamed, as the crowd went wild. "And now, if there is a single one among you who still doubts," she said, her gaze steady, "make yourself known, and I will do as Check has promised: I will kill myself before letting you think that I would betray you." NO! screamed the crowd. KILL THE TRAITORS! "Who are the traitors?" she yelled back. There was a moment of confusion while the crowd tried to come to a consensus on a scapegoat. BESSICK! BESSICK! it chanted, settling on the least popular of their leader's inner circle. Bessick was immediately seized within the townhouse, and dragged out onto the balcony, screaming and begging. Gypsy pulled a huge revolver from her shoulder holster and held it up. YES! roared the crowd. She put the gun to Bessick's temple and pulled the trigger. The shot couldn't even be heard over the noise of the mob. Some of the people just below the balcony were showered with blood. Bessick's body was thrown into the throng.

"It is time for all of us to band together against this evil which would destroy us." The President gripped his lectern
tightly. "They are all around us, within every class of our society, in every corporation, church, school and club. No group is immune to this disease, this rot. We must be ever vigilant, alert to the symptoms of Communist infiltration. We must be willing--indeed, eager to point out the traitors wherever we find them. Let every good American say to himself tonight, 'I shall be the first to point the finger of righteousness!'"

Mar almost swooned, overcome by emotion. Tony himself was overwhelmed by his eloquence, and was greatly tempted to play up the drama by pointing his own righteous finger at himself. Instead, he merely wiped off his dripping jowls.

An aide rushed to Gypsy's side, a piece of paper in his hand. Gypsy scanned it, and tears began running down her rumpled cheeks. "Brothers and sisters, Check Trenton is dead!" There was a deafening cry from the mob. "His hydrojet crashed on the steps of the Capitol building, as he was flying back to us. The bodies of Check and two of his comrades were found in the ruins of their hydrojet, in the very heart of our enemy's territory. They died to give us a better life!" More screams. "Now, Check died for us, and we're all thankful, but it's just not enough to be thankful, is it, comrades?" NO! "It's not enough, is it?" NO! "No, it's not enough to be thankful--we have to be vengeful!" YES, YES! "We must pledge ourselves to live as he lived, to spill the blood of the bourgeoisie, in return for his blood--to carry out his dream of a better life for all of us! Tonight we march on the city!" There was an insane, animal roar from the crowd.
Now the President leaned forward. "Let us show no mercy in defending this great land of ours from those agents of foreign influence. I pledge myself to that very task, right here, right now. If every one of you does the same, we will defeat this vile specter together." Cedrickson looked down and away, his face drawn with emotion. "My fellow Americans, in this struggle—as always—my door is open to you, my mind is open, as are my eyes. Some would say," he suddenly grinned boisterously, "that my mouth is open too much. But most important, my ears are open—open to the voice of the American public. What?"

The middle section of the President's artificial left ear had shut down operations without warning, laid off all its silicon chips and was probably sitting back and thinking of moving to a more temperate climate. The President stood gaping at the entourage of aides, cameramen and sleeping reporters; the vision in his left eye was blurring. He then turned a delicate blue shade—the same color as his tie—and slumped onto the lectern—rather gracelessly, Mar noted.

"His heart's gone out!" An aide punched numbers into a handheld monitor. "Damn! The whole system's down."

The President's personal physician, always close at hand, did some quick calculations on his own monitor. "Yes," he agreed, "there's some crossed wires in there someplace." Almost every system in Cedrickson's body was down. Presumably, though, his mind was still open. The doctor knelt down, monitor in hand, and started punching furiously. Nothing happened. He yelled
for another monitor. They had to make contact with Cedrickson's mind, and time was running out.

"There's a monitor on his belt," Mar pointed out as she was being helped into a simple black dress.

The doctor snatched up the indicated monitor. "No! That's--" someone shouted. But it was, of course, too late, and hundreds of nuclear missiles—including the XRT 451—were being hurled through space, towards Moscow.

"Oh damn!" said Mar. "The media will think this is all my fault!"

Her husband's last official act as President was to urinate on the Presidential Seal that was emblazoned into the deep blue carpet. His bladder, unlike the rest of his body, had been human and faulty.
WHAT HAPPENED

Some people believe that God created the world, wound it up like a watch, and left it in the hands of an animal He'd created in His own image. Maybe He thought that man, himself a creator, would treat His masterpiece with care.

What happens once the clock has been broken? Does God try to salvage it, or does He throw it away and start anew?