

New World Man

*“Sprawling on the fringes of the city
In geometric order
An insulated border
In between the bright lights
And the far unlit unknown...”*

*“Subdivisions”
(by Lee/Lifeson/Peart)
Copyright, 1982
Core Music Publishing, All Rights Reserved
(from the album "Signals")*

I had aged visibly during the night.

That tends to happen when you forget to take your itty-bitty, tiny, green time capsules right before turning in, like you're supposed to.

The bathroom mirror revealed the extent of the damage; I stared at myself with a kind of sickened fascination. My skin was sallow and waxy-looking. There were lines and folds and furrows and shadows--and then when I turned my head and saw all that *grey* hair something inside me just...broke loose with the sound of tearing metal. I reached up and snagged one of those spiteful silver hairs and just fucking *yanked* it, and then another one and then two more--searching out and destroying every last one of the fuckers with absolute single-minded

determination, hissing through my teeth each time I tweezed one of the lethal lightning bolts out by its evil root. It was like I was God, weeding out the Garden of Eden.

At one point Karen knocked on the door and leaned in to remind me about Marguerite's prescription; but she took one quick look at me and hastily excused herself, trying her best to avoid direct eye contact. It was really sweet of her. And she knew I would have done exactly the same for her, had the situation been different.

Luckily, I had recently restocked my makeup kit, so for the next twenty *extremely* tense minutes I used all my skills (and *a lot* of blending and toning) and, in the end, managed to putty together a version of myself that was fairly faithful to the original. But it definitely wouldn't stand up to close scrutiny so I would have to be careful around the kids, especially sharp-eyed Marguerite. Children can be so cruel sometimes.

It turned out I needn't have concerned myself with my seed, my progeny, the genetically engineered fruit of my polluted loins.

They were already tripping: intimate and interactive with the fucking phildick box, their minds literally thousands of miles away...and as lost to me as yesterday.

Like any good parent, I dutifully plugged in to make sure they weren't cramming something that would cause permanent damage to their impressionable young minds. The *jump* hit me so hard so fast that I had to reach out in real space/time and steady myself, convince my senses that despite all evidence to the contrary I was still on terra firma. Because in that first nano-instant it was like the floor dropped out from under me and then I was being *sucked* ass-over-tea-kettle down the rabbit-hole, Alice, bombarded by shrieking, babeling voices, condensed, inscrutable text and high-speed, encrypted chatter; sine waves and test patterns and spiky bar

codes and paid commercial announcements and grain futures and weather reports, gone in a screech of feedback sour chemical taste gummy lips desultory erection *-uckin Red Rain, yeah, this fuckin band is fuckin hot* sticky teenage boy room smells nonstop carnivorous electronic noise--

I should have known.

My kids were piggying a ride on--whatziz name--Harold Tyler again and I could tell by the heavy paranoia and wounded self-righteousness that he was in the midst of another one of his blue funks. I considered punching out but opted to lurk awhile, trying to ward off the growing sense of weirdness as Harold Tyler, aka “The World’s Most Incredible Loser Incarnate”--a fourteen year old, spaced-out dope fiend, budding pervert and possibly even full-bore sociopath--ranted and raved in the comfort and privacy of his own head about his lousy parents and how they didn’t know nothing, how lousy it was when you were a kid and had a brain of your own and opinions and shit, only no power and people were always getting on your case and cutting you down--

fuckin not brain-dead tell me that and still look themselves in the eye nothin but a couple of fuckin hypocrites fuckin uptight cogs just fuckin cogs thats all puttin in time and collecting pension its all worm food in the end motherfuckers fuck fuck fuck them all and their fucking braindead lives theyre the ones

--pulling out at that point, sliding back into my own skin and doing my level best to scrape the psychic resonances of Harold Tyler off my metaphorical shoes. But I couldn’t shake the uncomfortable feeling that there were still vestiges of the little psycho floating around in my subconscious--karmic depth charges, set to explode.

The kid is sick and venal, there's no doubt about it--but he's also one hundred per cent totally *authentic*...as hardcore and fucked up and right in your face as you'll ever want it. *That's* why he's #1 in the ratings. A lot of people my age don't get Harold and don't have a clue what their kids see in him. I think what young people dig most is his total honesty, the way he doesn't hide anything and reacts instantly and instinctively and totally without consideration for others. He's selfish and vain and almost willfully stupid.

Your prototypical teenager, in other words.

I'll own up to it and say that I find his rotten attitude and misdirected rage refreshing, at least in small doses. A few minutes in Harold's headspace and you feel purged of all the bullshit and subterfuge that you have to put up with on a day-to-day basis. And the soap opera that happens to be Harold's sorry-ass life--twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week--always makes you take a closer, better look at your own particular spot in the cosmos and maybe decide you don't have it so bad after all. Which, I gather, is the whole point...but I still worry that the little punk is too negative and he does too many drugs and underneath it all I guess what bothers me the most is how much he really does *hate* his parents...and the intensity and malignancy of that hate.

I was still mulling it all over as I hustled off to the kitchen, very much aware that if I didn't log on in the next three minutes or so I would be officially and irrevocably late for work...and contractually obligated to start feeling guilty about it.

"Morning, Tom," MIKE The Coffee Machine chirruped, "howsa boy, hey?"

“Not bad,” I said, keeping my lies nondescript, practically undetectable. Watching my body language. “How about yourself?”

“Can’t complain. Water’s a bit brackish again this morning but I’ve compensated. Oh, I’ve got the lotto numbers, in case you’re interested.”

“No, thanks.”

“Running a bit late again,” MIKE observed, trying not to be too tactless about it. “Is there, um, anything wrong, Tom? Anything you might wanna, y'know, chew the fat about? Mano-a-mano, and all that.”

In your dreams, java-head, I thought to myself, but outwardly I managed a pantomime smile and a hitch of my shoulders.

“Aw, it’s just more of the usual crap,” I grumbled, helping myself to a cuppa. “You know how it is.”

“Sure, sure. I grok that.” He gave a cluck of synthesized sympathy.

“That’s damn fine coffee, MIKE.” I saluted him with my mug.

“Thanks, Tom. Hey, the Sox sure are on a roll, aren’t they? Huh?”

“Is that a fact.” There was a long, awkward silence, the two of us at a loss for words, despite our programming.

Ping!

"And *voila!* Cinnamon toast a la MIKE. Ingest in good health, Tom. And, hey," MIKE added, calling the rest of it after me as I headed down the hall, chewing on a slice of toast, balancing a hot mug and digging for my keyring all at the same time, “you have a *really* nice day now, you hear?”

And you could tell by the way he said it that he really meant it too.

My security software, SENTINEL 3.0, is more than two years old and a wee bit twitchy.

The shutters were down again, the doors triple-locked, the house on full alert for something like the third or fourth time in a week. Which meant that either something pretty hairy was going on outside, *out there*, something that spooked the bejesus out of my ever-vigilant domicile, forcing it into a full defensive mode...

...or else it was those rotten fucking squirrels back again. Unfortunately, I had good reason to suspect it wasn't simply a case of a couple of pesky varmints making like Fred & Ginger on our roof.

The reality was far more ugly and ominous.

Isn't that the way it always is?

I unlocked the door to my home office, knowing full well I was probably already late. But I still winced when I saw BLAIR 6.0 standing by my desk, tight-lipped and fuming. He wordlessly extended his left hand, showing me the clock/counter set in his palm.

"Shit..." The Firm valued punctuality. The Firm would not be pleased that I was--what was it?--38.4697 seconds late. I would, no doubt, shortly receive a Memo which would remind me--with all due respect and the usual phony flourishes and ersatz civility--that I would find life as an independent broker a very precarious one indeed and should therefore endeavor to bust my balls to make amends for this unfortunate--though not completely unprecedented--lapse in judgement, yours truly, sincerely yours, *up yours* and fuck you, Charlie.

Or something along those lines.

I slurped my coffee and exchanged glares with the best OfficeServer a man could ever hope to have.

Oh, I know that BLAIR is nowhere near state of the art any more and the shitty, secondhand optics I've got give him this flat, grainy, kind of washed-out look. And sometimes he skips and I have to fucking reboot everything which can get to be a real drag. He doesn't have all the bells and whistles and he can't compete speed-wise with, say, the new icy, totally efficient INGRID's. And, okay, so he may, in fact, possess more personality quirks than I do-- which is saying *a lot*--but I wouldn't swap BLAIR for all the clean air in Saskatchewan. Over the years of working together we've developed this incredible rapport, this strange, almost holistic love-hate thing that sometimes brings us so close together it's almost like we're two parts of the same person.

I always feel really bad because I find myself making up all kinds of lame excuses when people ask me why I don't upgrade my system...move up to at least the *excruciatingly* cordial SIMON 5.1--you can get him for a song now that the PowerServers like INGRID et al have pretty much become the new industry standard.

I have to admit it: BLAIR is ornery, spiteful, nasty and devious; petty and vain and supercilious and almost certainly misogynistic. When he isn't being patronizing, he's merely arrogant. He corrects my grammar, chooses my wardrobe, takes incomplete messages, misfiles important documents, screws up appointments...and flies into pre-programmed rages at the slightest provocation.

I would be completely and utterly lost without him.

And don't think he doesn't know that and take full advantage of it either.

“You look like shit, Tommy,” BLAIR noted with evident satisfaction. “Forget to take your pills again, *hmmm?* Should I tie a string around your little finger for you, *hmmmm?* Please do *not* set your cup on the console you might spill something and cause serious damage.” He stared down his pointy beak of a nose at me. “You’re not only late, you’re also blatantly ignoring standard safety procedures and I really must insist--”

I waved him off. “Can we just dispense with the lecture, please?” I floated down into my big, comfy oh-so-SMART chair and whimpered in animal pleasure as it adjusted to my contours and applied soothing heat to my tricky lumbar. “And don’t get all officious on me either because I’m really not into it today.” I gnawed seditiously on my toast, chewing as loud as I could.

He gave me this really stinky look and raising one ghostly hand (*fucking cheap optics*), he aimed it directly at the crumbs I was heedlessly shedding all over the hardware. “I am required to point out, yet again, that drinks and/or foodstuffs are not allowed in your general work area. I reiterate: you are in direct contravention of--”

“Aw, quit hassling me,” I bawled, spewing even more crumbs all over the immediate vicinity. “You sound like some kind of an old woman, for Christ’s sake. Give me a break, will you? Can’t you see how bummed out I am right now?”

He seemed skeptical. “Ah, sick again, are we? Tsk, what is it this time, dear? The pneumonia thing back again? Low blood sugar? A hangnail? Poor old tit...” He brightened. “Or perhaps it’s your ever-ripening *piles*, burning or itching or whatever it is the bloody things bloody well do.” That was low, even for him. I ducked my head, acknowledging a clean hit but

he was not mollified. "I think it's quite obvious that you are a malingering hypochondriac," he stated with unnerving certainty, "you should seek professional help."

"*Please*, BLAIR. I really don't wanna get into a hassle with you, all right? I just don't think I can handle that right now." I tried to sound as miserable as I could, emoting for all I was worth. "I've been sleeping like shit lately, you know that--dragging my ass in here, looking like a complete zombie. And, hey, you never know," I added, a trifle indignantly, "it *might* be the pneumonia thing again; 'cause, y'know, that's viral so that shit's with you *forever*. Like ugly luggage." I swiped away all the crumbs I could see, licked my fingers and scrubbed them across the front of my pants, holding them up for inspection when I finished. "There. All gone. See? No more evidence, ergo, no crime. Now...what d'you say we cut the bullshit and take a quick peek at that rather intriguing assortment of mail we have waiting for us." I rubbed my hands in gleeful anticipation--but he just crossed his arms and looked away. He knows I just *hate* when he does that. "Aw, c'mon, BLAIR," I whined, "don't do this to me. C'mon, let's...let's let bygones be bygones here, waddaya say? Huh?" He still refused to meet my eye. "Awww, come on, big guy, big BLAIR, what do you say? Huh, pardner? Pal? Buddy? Huh? Please? Pretty please with sugar on it..."

He sighed dramatically. "I am afraid that is...not sufficient."

I was ready to scream. "*BLAIR, would you please--*"

"--forgive your reprehensible behavior? Why, certainly, Thomas, and thank you for such a rare display of kindness and consideration on your part." His smile was as thin as a paper cut.

The flickering fuck was thoroughly enjoying himself at my expense.

After a bit more verbal jousting and a rather juvenile round of name-calling, we finally got down to business.

The mail always comes first, no matter what else is going on, and it's usually a relatively fun task--except I discovered that both my kids were flunking their remedial language courses and had been cited, yet again, for not turning in their homework assignments on time.

All of which probably added up to another session of summer school, which meant their trip to Ulan Bator was *not* on and Karen and I would have to endure all the wailing and gnashing of teeth that would bring with it.

I zapped a stern reprimand their way and imagined the two of them jumping about six inches off the carpet when my override cut into their regularly scheduled programming...and what Marguerite called my "raging Daddy" avatar popped up right behind their eyeballs and downloaded bigtime on them.

BLAIR drew my attention to a letter flagged "Personal" and the next thing I knew I was getting this incredibly potent and bewitching whiff of my wife's perfume, the way it used to smell when she daubed it between her breasts; and then her voice, and it was as if she was right there beside me, whispering into my ear. It was so good I made BLAIR run it through again, pointedly ignoring him when he bitchily referred to it as the "smell-o-gram". I transmitted my reply and Karen's essence slipped away, like a furtive ghost.

After that rather pleasant--if fleeting--interlude, I plunged into work, mentally linking up with my most important overseas contacts: Sky, in Munich, giving me all kinds of hell for interrupting his supper (tasting his over-spiced calamari in the back of my throat for the rest of

the morning). Within an hour, most of my network was activated and on-line and initial reports were starting to trickle in.

A filament in the Midwest trembled, confirming drought forecasts and providing real-time telemetry from weather satellites. Then a tingle in the Far East, apprising me of a possible coup attempt...and there was a suspicious fire at an offshore oil megaproject near Newfoundland, troop movements in Eritrea--*where the fuck is Eritrea?*--and the always volatile precious metals market was acting up again (BLAIR on the blower to Zurich, screaming for clarification)...

I frowned and scratched my head.

I had been doing a lot of that lately.

From a purely rational, impartial, business-oriented standpoint, the economic climate sucks, pure and simple. Even your kid's piggybank isn't a safe, risk-free investment in these dangerous and (even worse) unpredictable times. And yet my clients still expect me to take their hard-earned currencies, wave my magic wand and somehow conjure up some get-rich-quicker scheme that provides them with the generous, tax-sheltered dividends they need to feed their very expensive habits.

But...how can I explain to my clients--or to my vaguely demonic employers--that you can examine all the trends, access financial records, pore over spreadsheets, hack into police or hospital files and all sorts of neat government caches...but at some point the process *still* involves an educated guess on my part. And sometimes I'm just plain *wrong*, hopelessly wrong, just a regular, ordinary guy with the slithery guts of a sacrificial lamb dripping from soft, manicured, whitecollar hands.

And to make matters worse, lately some mighty strange and unsettling things were going on out there in the great, big, wide, wonderful world.

SENTINEL 3.0 had picked up on it: that's why it had adopted a siege mentality, scouring the immediate area with microwaves and utilizing delicate external sensors and ticklish acoustic transducers to seek out any signs of movement, anything it could *lock onto*.

No, it wasn't just fucking squirrels.

It was something else. Something *big*. Big enough to skew the norms and bust the equations and create uncertainty and spook the timid sheep and threaten the status quo...*and* scare the living daylights out of the wise old men, who met in secret chambers to plot and conspire (nodding off over dry sherries after lunch).

The trading was light all morning, nickel and dime stuff; it was like everybody was waiting for something to happen. Waiting for the heavy boot to drop.

I skimmed the News while scrolling through the TSE with my other eye.

"--overnight, the announcement of yet another sudden, high-placed resignation, this one within the Cabinet itself--"

"--the honorable gentleman's gruesome death rattle brought a hush to certain hallowed halls in The Capital. More than one aging bureaucrat lost control of his rancid, churning bowels upon hearing the chilling cry, the echoes of which still resonate..."

So score another point for the young turks. The old guard losing one more of their grey, sclerotic number to "early retirement" and ceding further valuable ground to their youthful rivals. Official spokespersons tried to control the spin but the old geezers were plainly unnerved by this

latest setback; the radicals were shown celebrating, promising renewed attacks on their faltering rivals, drawing strength and vigor from the allure and promise of power, a singing in their junkie veins.

"Are you aware that there are those who say you've over-reached yourselves? Are you worried about rumors of some kind of pre-emptive strike by forces loyal to the regime?"

But the reformers appeared unconcerned, almost haughty: soundbites and postings appealed for calm and spoke of the need for united action; they urged their supporters to rally to their aid and many, it seemed, had answered the call--

--shaky, amateur footage of demonstrations...mob scenes...most in the crowd young, teenagers even...surrounding opposition strongholds... intimidating the cops...confusion of voices...multitudes of angry, lurching faces...despite repeated demands to disperse--

So was this it?

The long anticipated crackdown.

Cueing some appropriate music: Somatic Dysfunction, of course, in honor of the end of the world:

"Not revolution or evolution/ An implosion of the will/ Like an old, gutless building/
Waiting for the Reaper/ Baring its throat for the kill..."

(At least, that's what I *think* they're singing...)

Jesus, that deathporn shit was *wayyy* too heavy and intense for the state I was in. I killed SD and called up some Jean-Michel Jarre. I felt it was absolutely essential at that point to stay as mellow as possible.

The bad news on that front being that I was nearly out of drugs. I would have to do something fairly drastic about that situation and *soon*. My personal stash was at an all-time low--which did not bode well for retaining a positive mindset when the proverbial shit hit the figurative fan (and it looked like that could happen at any time).

All of which merely meant that at some point I would have to leave the safe confines of my bulletproof home and drive halfway across the naked, bleeding city in order to gain an audience with my teenage drug dealer friend, Marvin. The only good part being that if anybody could tell me what the immediate future could potentially bring, it was our boy, Marvin. He's a burnout and a head-case and a bit of a phreak--but he's also *connected*, and nowadays that means everything.

I'm not into pharmaceuticals or that CPP shit or implants, and so far I've resisted getting hot-wired. I am not a drug addict. My intoxicant of choice is plain, old-fashioned marijuana...and I strictly limit myself to smoking just a *smidgen* over a quarter ounce a week. Which is pretty good, at least as far as these heavily medicated times are concerned.

Usually I have a joint or two to start the day and one right after lunch just to give my afternoon a leg up. I've had BLAIR run some analyses and evaluations and we found that the quality of my work actually measurably improves when I'm stoned. Even BLAIR has to admit it. I'm just a whole lot sharper and better focussed when I'm ripped. Not to mention what the stuff does to my abstract reasoning--

BLAIR hung up on Cairo and began to crack his bloodless knuckles in frustration.

"*Nothing is happening.* It's like a fucking graveyard out there. Oh, by the way, Hasan left a message for you:

'While the Rose blows along the River Brink
With old Khayyam the Ruby vintage drink:
And when the Angel with his darker Draught
Draws up to thee--take that, and do not shrink.'

"*That's it?*"

BLAIR shrugged. "He was quite drunk and you know how maudlin he gets..."

I groped for a possible meaning as I rolled the last of my stuff into a skinny joint and held it up for mock inspection.

To his credit, BLAIR immediately understood the gravity of the situation. He even offered to cover for me while I led a one-man exploratory mission to Planet Marvin. I'd probably never hear the end of it but, still, the point is that BLAIR is always there for me. And unlike those real fancy-shmancy, high-end models--pretty boy NORMAN 7.0's & starchy GERALD 6.1's & punctilious CLIVE 4.2's--BLAIR has no secret "snitch" function, a sub-sub-program that *compels* him to report any little peccadillos I might have to Big Brother and His many holding companies. My deepest, darkest secrets are absolutely safe with BLAIR--and *that* is a quality you can't put a pricetag on nowadays.

And BLAIR's been around me long enough to know the way my mind works. Sure, the dope makes me a better, more productive worker, but it also helps me deal with a lot of other things, personal things, stuff it's hard for me to talk about, even with him.

The fact of the matter is, I'm not what you would call a happy, well-adjusted, carbon-based unit when I'm straight. I once went two whole days without getting high and it got so bad that BLAIR switched off at one point rather than be in the same room with me.

After all the years we've been together I know each and every one of his soft spots, all the chinks in his armor. When I *really* want to cross his wires, all I have to do is start describing what he calls "grotesque mammalian sexual practices" and he's like putty in my hands. And he once made the mistake of telling me that he finds the entire concept of penetration "too horrific for rational consideration"...

I did my "Open Sesame" routine at the front door and then chewed a tasty little divot out of my lip waiting for SENTINEL to decide if it was safe for me to go outside. I felt more nervous and uptight than I'd been in weeks.

I think that if I hadn't been a little bit stoned I never could've physically made it through that door. I had to keep telling myself: *Tommy-boy, there is no way you can avoid this, Marvin does not make house calls--like it or not, ready or not, you've got to go out there and have face to face encounters with other sentient creatures--*

The door whisked shut behind me and, right on cue, a scrappy-looking taxicab turned the corner and sped down the block toward me. As it approached, I heard several short, brittle *cracks!* and suddenly the cab was taking hits, sparks flying off its impervious hood, bullets

ricocheting off the pavement *pweee! pwooooo!* alarms wailing, portcullis slamming, every house in the neighbourhood instantly battening down, a hundred mellifluous voices threatening lethal force.

I was freaking out, seriously thinking about just saying *fuck this* and hightailing it back inside and doing something like nailing two-by-fours across all the doors and windows. It was like the end of the world out there. People were fucking shooting at each other! But then I kind of got some perspective and I reminded myself: *Listen, in this situation, the abyss staring you in the face, the shit rain about to fall, you do not want to be scrimping on dope. Remember what crazy Ron always told you: "As long as there's dope, there's hope". Right on, man...*

The cab skidded to a halt and flung open a door, welcoming me aboard in a cheery, metallic tenor. When I mentioned the fireworks, the cab guffawed. “Never even scratched me, Tom,” it boasted. “Those little pea shooters just bounce off HANK the-motherfucking-tank. They’re gonna have to come up with better ordnance than that to keep this sweet young thang from making his appointed rounds. Hey, you need last night's lotto numbers, by any chance?”

Maybe it was because I was so tense but I decided right away that I didn’t much care for HANK. His instant familiarity offended me on some level--but I still made a show of engaging him in conversation. I was afraid that if I got on his wrong side he’d get snooty and put me out in the middle of the street, in some shit neighbourhood. Caught in the crossfire. Dying like a fucking idiot.

So we yakked about sports and then sort of strayed into current events, although I quickly found out that HANK’s politics were naive in the extreme. HANK said his outlook on life was pretty simple: he tried to stay on his Dispatcher’s good side and was unfailingly courteous and

considerate to passengers and fellow motorists (providing neither posed a real or implied threat to his personal safety).

"Basically, I'm just your average, ordinary slob who minds his own business and wants everybody else to do the same. I don't go around looking for trouble. I keep my nose clean and my conscience clear." He readily admitted not knowing that much about politics but didn't think he was missing much. He left all that "high-minded stuff" to those better equipped to keep the world running smoothly; one thing HANK could not abide was "discontinuity".

What he was telling me, in effect, was that as long as his battery was kept charged, his body properly maintained and the fucking trains ran on time, he would serve any master, no matter how cruel.

Then again, I knew a lot of people in my own social circle whose ideology and rhetoric amounted to just about the same thing; apologists of the regime, intent on preserving their way of life.

Right away you could see that Marvin's apartment building was primed for *serious* aggression--and if you needed evidence, there was a partially fused body of a grey cat lying about ten feet from its front doors. The warning had been repeated in seventeen different languages and dialects but the cat still refused to identify itself.

Electric eyes crawled all over me as I gave my name to the building's security system.

About two minutes later I was in an elevator, going up, preparing myself for yet another brain-boggling encounter with today's disaffected youth. But even so, it was a good sign that he was still willing to see me, circumstances being what they were. Marvin knew which way the

wind blew. If my karmic credit hadn't been good I would've been given a scant thirty seconds to clear off the premises--the charred remains of Tittles the terminated tabby serving as a reminder of what the consequences would be if I likewise chose to ignore that explicit directive.

Marvin is a specimen.

Marvin exists in a state of perpetual, almost *inconceivable* squalor. He himself is a meticulously clean person but he just doesn't give a shit about his natural surroundings. There's food on the floor...and all sorts of junk and boxes and papers and books and clothes and CD cases and broken glass and glossy, color prints of things I try not to see...and what appears to be at least ten thousand foil packets of condoms. You have to sort of *feel* your way through the shambles because he's covered all the windows with garbage bags and cardboard and keeps the lighting so low--maybe out of embarrassment...maybe just because he likes it that way. I'll have to ask him about that sometime.

Marvin, to sum up, has hair down to his ass and a thick, bushy beard that utterly fails to disguise the fact that he possesses the kind of face only an *extremely* near-sighted mother could love. Marvin weighs at least three hundred pounds and does nothing but sit around on his fat, lazy ass all the live-long day and deal drugs and eat and do drugs and suck back hour after hour of Harold Tyler, Boy Nihilist...to the point that sometimes Marvin knows what Harold is going to say or do before *Harold* does.

Spooky.

All that said, Marvin is a good shit who sells quality smoke at reasonable prices.

But...that isn't all Marvin is.

Not by a long shot.

About six months ago, right out of the blue--though, admittedly, we were both really, *really* hammered at the time--Marvin asked me, just like that, if I had ever heard anything about "the movement". Lower case. Low key.

Like any good citizen I, of course, feigned complete ignorance. But he just laughed and leaned over and slapped my leg.

"Don't worry," he grinned, "you're among friends here. You're one of *us*, man, I can tell."

"Who's us?" I asked, my heart speeding up.

"Us ghosts, man," Marvin replied, with a look that said the thought had only just occurred to him. "Yeah...that's us, man: ghosts haunting the machine." And then without further preamble he started babbling on and on about how it was our sacred, appointed task to "sow the seeds of insurrection in the highest places" and "bring true enlightenment to the blind and the meek and the stupid".

"Our time is gonna come, man. Our time is gonna come..." He kept repeating that over and over again that night but whenever I asked him *who? whose time?* he just got quiet and inscrutable on me, touching his finger to the side of his nose and shaking his big, shaggy head. "No *mas*, man. You'll see." Marvin the machiavellian motherfucker. He would have made a good fifteenth century pope.

"Tom! Man, I was just thinking about you." He flapped a big, soft hand in my direction by way of greeting. "Hey, you been sick, man? You look a little green around the gills. Perhaps you need to partake of some of the sacred herb," he ventured, pointing at his filthy water pipe,

packed with what was undoubtedly primo weed. “I think you’ll be pleased. This stuff is definitely creeper, man, so, y’know, watch yourself.”

Marvin is blown away by the fact that I’m thirty-seven years old and still enjoy toking up on a semi-regular basis. He thinks it’s completely cool...but sometimes I get the impression that he’s still got his doubts about me--covert glances; artless, probing questions. I’ve been buying from him for over a year now so you’d think that by now he’d trust me but I guess if you’re in Marvin’s position it pays to be paranoid.

I fired up the bowl, taking a couple of good, healthy hoots of premium purple haze. It was really good shit, with an extremely nice buzz to it. I nodded my approval to Marvin as I passed him the pipe. Then I launched into this incredible stream of consciousness rant about my cab ride over, which he listened to with great interest, not saying much until I finished.

“Yup, yup, that’s what I’ve been hearing,” he said, enveloping the end of the pipe with his wet, labial lips and taking a monster toke. “They’re running wild in the streets, man.” Marvin didn’t need BLAIR and a virtually infinite database to figure out that change wasn’t just inevitable and inexorable, it was happening *right now*. His people, his *ghosts*, emboldened by recent successes, were taking over, *man*, and things were going to be run a helluva lot differently from here on in. “You shouldn’t have gone out, man, not now. It’s too fuckin’ skanky out there. You gotta learn to think things through better, you know? Right now you should be just *maintaining*, man, keeping your head down and not...fuckin’...calling attention to yourself or shit. Fuckin’ rights.” This kid was half my age and *scolding* me. “The brothers and sisters are on the move, man, cutting off the avenues of retreat, seizing the means of production--” Then, just like

the last time, he caught himself, like he suddenly remembered that despite my proclivities I was *still* the enemy--demographically speaking--and therefore not privy to certain information.

Meanwhile, we kept smoking bowl after bowl of that incredibly potent weed, getting more and more blitzed and having these loopy, dope-addled conversations...tuning in to The Thrilling Adventures of Harold, The Teenage Head every once in awhile just to see what he was up to--

--and so I can honestly say, ladies and gentlemen, that I was *right there* when it happened, an intimate witness to a truly fateful and historic moment--when Donna Tyler, Harold's long-suffering and (not coincidentally) pre-menopausal mother, finally reached her limit with the little freak. A heated confrontation with the stoned and surly teenager escalated into a full-fledged screaming match. And then Donna, normally a mild-mannered, even-tempered woman, completely lost her composure, lashing out at poor, fucked up Harold, repeatedly slapping him across the face and head while he--along with a worldwide audience estimated at six hundred million--squawked in pain and surprise and did his best to evade her flailing attack.

Even in the second or two it took us to <Quit> Marvin and I got a pretty good working over--

"--a full sensory, three dimensional, multi-channel virtual slugfest..."

"A cyberspace mugging...complete with a mother fixation and subliminals involving lurid S & M fantasies that would make de Sade blush..."

"...fucking self-indulgent, maudlin masturbatory crap..."

--instinctively raising our hands to our burning faces, checking to see if her heavy rings had scratched or cut.

I wasn't too happy about being used as somebody's psychic punching bag but Marvin, on the other hand, was absolutely irate, appalled and outraged by the brutal assault on his idol and alter ego.

"That bitch!" He spat. "That fucking bitch should fucking *die*..." His switchboard started to light up and he politely excused himself. He gazed up at the ceiling and flicked his fingers at invisible menus, urgently jabbing thin air; he nodded and blinked rapidly and subvocalized for all he was worth.

Suddenly, the room was full of ghosts.

Meanwhile, Harold had completely flipped out and was in the process of trashing his bedroom, sobbing and half-hysterical--while out in the living room his mother was trying to get through to the police and apparently not having any luck at all...

The cab I got for the trip home was a surly old sonofagun who made a point right off the bat of discouraging any conversation.

I didn't mind the snub and the imposed silence. It gave me time to digest some the tidbits Marvin had let slip after taking a few too many hits from that bong of his.

"Whatever's going to happen 's gonna happen soon," he'd slurred at one point, fellating the pipe, sucking the bowl dry while I looked on in approval. "If people keep their heads, everything will be cool and nobody'll get hurt." Then he told me he had put in a good word for me with the right people ("you'd be surprised by who I do business with, Major Tom") and just before I left made me promise I'd pick up the newest release by an outfit from Holland called William Burroughs Killed My Mommy. Apparently, it explained everything.

I paid the cab and stepped away from it quickly, moving across the narrow grass verge in a slight crouch, making a beeline for my house--

--until I saw him and then I just *stopped*.

...and...stood...completely...still.

Waiting to be told what to do.

The big, South African assault rifle the kid had draped over his scrawny shoulders hung down practically to his knees. But I recognized immediately, instinctively that he was no comic figure but instead someone to be feared; someone empowered by a clarity of purpose, a terrible inner calm.

And then it suddenly occurred to me...like this splash of ice cold water...that my life, at that moment, was in very great danger.

He beckoned me over to him, and without even thinking about what I was doing, I handed him my card. Which turned out to be exactly the right thing to do. He swiped it through his terminal and squinted at my particulars while I stood there, blabbing out my name, street address, social security number, birth date, shoe size--and anything else I could think of that might be pertinent or useful to him. After a few seconds he grunted, handed me back my card and dismissed me with an insolent wave of his hand.

And the astonishing thing was it was *exactly* identical to a gesture I've seen my own kids make when I fail to understand something they find so fundamentally obvious that I must be either too old or too stupid not to see it.

I breathlessly identified myself to my front door and became even more flustered when I was not granted immediate admittance. I demanded an explanation and was told--somewhat

archly--that a new security protocol was in place and that I would have to be patient.

Meanwhile, I was left cooling my heels, sweating into my shoes, and thinking wild, desperate thoughts like *somebody has been fucking with the SENTINEL software and I have a pretty good idea who my little hackers are...*

The young soldier was standing off to the side, watching me. I found myself filled with this sudden, crazy spark of hope that the kid retained enough of his humanity to find my predicament at least mildly amusing. I think at that moment I would have given almost anything under the sun to see that...*boy* smile, just once.

Just one...blessed...smile.

My house did eventually decide to let me in--but even once I was inside, handing my coat to the closet, I didn't get the feeling that I was completely, well, *safe*. Something was different, there was a strong sense of otherness to the place, as if the movers had only just left.

I wanted to chalk it up to Marvin's dope.

I passed through a silent, reproachful kitchen. I paused in the hallway, taking a moment to gather myself together...*can't let them know mustn't let them see--*

Terry noticed me first. He nudged Marguerite and the two of them swivelled their heads around to stare at me. Their eyes were flat and cold; *devoid*. There were identical welts high up on their left cheeks. You could clearly see the outlines of Donna Tyler's long fingers on their soft, beautiful skin.

"Mommy's in her room," Marguerite said, without any noticeable inflection.

Terry snickered.

I made a small, noncommittal sound and started edging my way past them, taking great pains to be as unobtrusive as possible. It seemed to be a sound strategy as it got me to the stairs without further incident.

Ascending, I calmly asked myself what I intended to do.

First of all, *find Karen*...I had to talk to her and maybe even warn her--no, no, no, it wasn't like that. After all, Terry...Marguerite, they were our children and we were their parents and that had to count for *something* in the grand scheme of things, didn't it?

I tapped on Karen's door, softly at first, barely brushing the wood with my knuckles. Just letting her know I was there, and that I needed to see her...and tell her about what was happening out there, in the streets and avenues of the city--

And in *here*: in the still, white rooms of our home. In the growing spaces between us; behind closed, locked doors like the one I was knocking and knocking and knocking on, getting older by the second.

End

Copyright, 2009 Cliff Burns (All Rights Reserved)