THE MILKY WAY MAN



THE FACE OF SUPER INTELLIGENCE

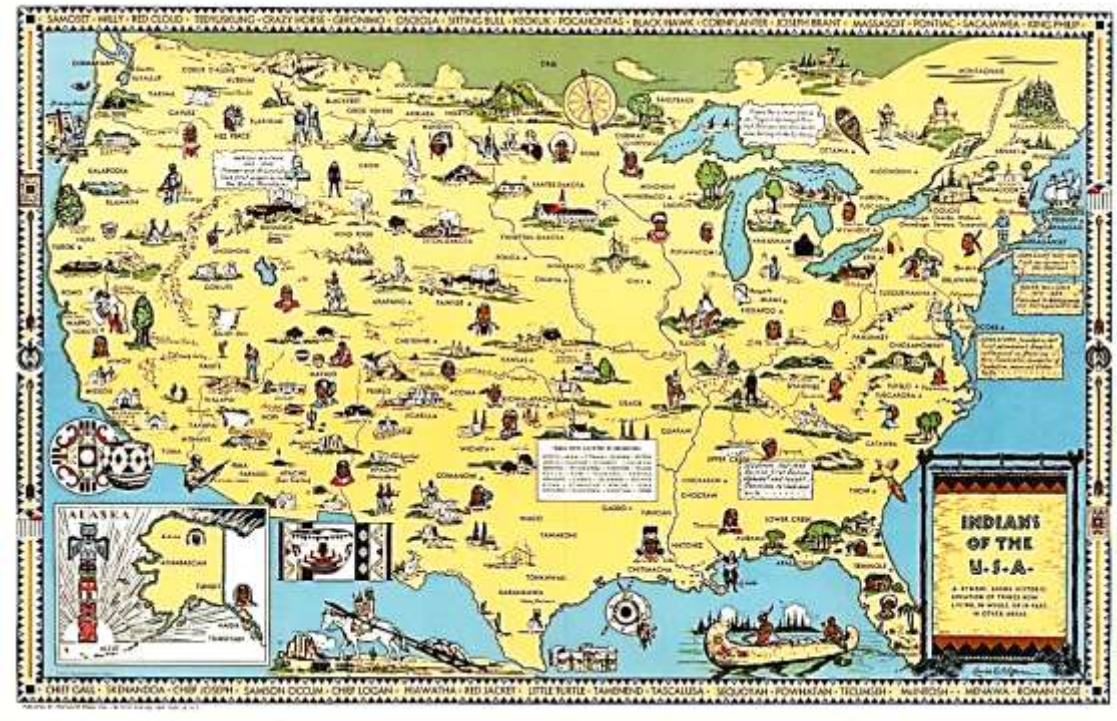
by Kevin Ahearn

For Mom: If not for her…



THE MILKY WAY MAN

was created and completed in High Falls, New York
All references to actual persons, alive
or dead, made for a good story.



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‘Technology has as its basis, the creation of the inhuman human.’

Russell Means
American Indian Movement

Man has to be unique in the universe. Not because we began as single-cell life whose ever-changing offspring crawled out of the sea and then came down from the trees to dominate the earth. Not because we’ve survived wars and catastrophes or that we create art and tools or because we love and dream and hope and pray.

What makes us human burns within us: an immortal spirit bestowed by the creator of the universe.

Or so we believe, some of us more than others.

The Milky Way was up, glistening in empty space, as alive as a dream, a billion billion new places to go.

“Who am I?” the young brave asked the stars. “The Milky Way…Me?”

‘Not yet, Milky Way Boy*!’* came the reply. Not from above. From within.

“Cursed spirit!” *Wicasa Ohitika* lashed out at the voice inside him.

Born on the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation, his baby name was *Chay-yah-pe* (Crying), which his grandmother did for days after her daughter had died giving birth. When he was three he got a new name after a rattlesnake slithered into the children’s room and Chay-yah-pe picked up a stick and chased it away.

“I only did what my voice told me to do,” said the child. “It talks to me all the time, telling me to *be* a Man.”

Yet again, his grandmother’s eyes filled with tears.

“Your spirit is strong, Wicasa Ohitika,” she said, giving him his ‘adult name.’ “‘Brave Man’ of the tribe of Crazy Horse. The Oglalas are The Men.”

“But you are not a Man.”

“No,” she laughed and said. “And these ‘men’ you see around here are overgrown boys. Your father, wherever he is, is not a Man either.”

“What is a Man?”

“A fullblood born with a *wechakahpe nagi*, a true Lakota soul. A Man listens to His *nagi* and to *Wakan Tanka*, the Great Spirit.”

“Me?”

“Not yet. A Man knows who He is. And when His time in this world is done, a Man rides a beautiful mount into the Milky Way.”

Wicasa was more than ready. Out on the prairie with his horse and dog looking for something to kill, it had been three days without food going on four.

His long black hair blowing free, Wicasa dug in his moccasins and the mustang broke into a weak canter. Tall and statuesque, the brave held his head high as he rode, the Lakota legacy at its purest. Backed by the whistling wind, naked hooves pounded out a Native American solo.

It made for a troubled tune. Wicasa longed to be a Man, but could only be who he was—a dreamer with nowhere left to run away to.

'Why him?' the *nagi* asked the Creator*. 'Is there something special about this one? Billions of others* You *could have made me for…Are you going to give this Milky Way Boy one of* Your *sacred visions that I won't see till it's too late?* Wakan Tanka, You *are the Divine Trickster!'*

Spirits have always had difficulties with Boys who didn't know yet: a Man *was* His *nagi*--so true, so strong, so damn brave that He made His spirit fall in love with Him. This one had a galaxy to go.

After a mile Wicasa's lodge appeared, perfectly round with the door facing due east. The brave had built it with his own hands using heavy planks instead of sod, with glass windows and a Franklin stove--compromises for the family he was going to have. Last month his woman had fled the reservation without a word. For all he knew she was living on another world.

Wicasa dismounted and led his horse to the attached corral. The little hay left was the last. Empty bellies all around. Inside the dark lodge, he started a fire with his last few sticks of wood. The dog lay close to the stove as the flames began to flicker.

"Why am I?" he cried out. "What for?"

‘Don’t fault yourself, Wicasa. This is not the time to look back, but forward.’

*“*To freezing or starving to death? I’ve been nowhere. I have nothing. I’ve done nothing," he stammered, holding his head in his hands. "The Man I want to be no longer is. He never was."

'You, we still are. We *can still be that* Man.'

The brave looked up. "How?"

'Burn the furniture. Boil the dog. Begin anew.'

In a rage, Wicasa reached for the shotgun. There were two shells left.

'No, NO! Don't give up on yourself. Don't give up on me! We've been together from the moment you were conceived and we'll be as one until...'

"And then?" asked Wicasa, cocking both barrels.

'No coward's getting a romp around the Milky Way. Your body will rot in the dust with me still inside it. You're killing both of us.'

"*Tawiton Wakan Tanka!*" Wicasa cursed his creator for making him what he was: the last Man on earth with no chance to be one.

The fingers on both triggers flexed...

Suddenly the dog sat up and sniffed the air. In absolute stillness, the fire in the stove died.

Wicasa lowered the shotgun. "What in the...?"

As if the sky had exploded, a screaming thunder shook the house. Shards of glass from every shattered window flew about like crystal arrowheads. Through the plank and tarpaper ceiling beamed shafts of light--red and blue and yellow and green. The dog snapped and pawed at them.

Again the thunder! Louder, closer. Shimmering as though alive, sinews of prairie dust flew in through the gutted windows.

"Who?" demanded Wicasa.

'Shut up and get down!'

The brave listened, moving low through fluttering rainbows. Knotty wood and rough stone gleamed like fool's gold. Specks of dust appeared as tiny drops of glossy paint. The gun cradled in his arms, he crept to the glassless window and peered out.

"I am...having a vision?" he asked.

'A vision is having me!'

"A storm? Without clouds?" The land he loved as his spiritual mother was ablaze with sheets of pulsing light. "Where's my horse?"

A one-word command and the dog poised, ready for a hunt. Wicasa got to his feet. Calmly, as if he were going out to relieve himself, he opened the door. The prairie before him shimmered in a cold fiery aura. Yet blackness cupped the far horizon.

Wicasa took a deep breath and stepped out onto the land. Around his moccasins, the dust sparkled as sacred soil. A second step and a third; for a moment he felt part of an ancient Lakota ceremony. Then he saw the source of the thunder: two military jets roaring low over the prairie. He could only shake his gun at them.

"But...what's burning the land and sky?"

Wicasa looked straight up. Twenty feet over his head, a gleaming hexagon hovered in the air as if suspended from the Milky Way--a six-sided mirrory machine with spindly legs jutting out from its underside...was falling...on him?

'Run, Milky Way Boy!' commanded his *nagi.*

"No!"

The object came lower, cascading hues of energy over the brave and his dog.

'You've got to go. You can't...'

"I can. I will," he replied, holding his ground. "I have to."

Wicasa raised his shotgun, aiming it at--his reflection, chromed and engorged on the gleaming machine.

"*Hoka hey!*" he shouted and fired both barrels.

In the same heartbeat, he was thrown into the air and flung against the corral fence. Fighting to keep fighting, he crumpled to the ground.

Silently the hexagon descended. Twenty yards from the house, its jointed legs gently touched the earth. One by one its lights blinked out. Screaming by, the jets made one last pass.

Blood streaming from his mouth, Wicasa began...to laugh.

'This is funny?'

"Looks like we're going to find out after all."

'About what?'

"The afterlife."

The brave lay still. Lakota land absorbed Lakota blood. The dog crouched by its master, nudging him and whimpering.

There came a whirring sound. From the northeast, a large helicopter dropped low over the prairie, a burning spotlight pointing the way. Aboard were the eight civilian volunteers of the Fast Intercept Recovery Search Team (FIRST), a Defense Department strike group kept on constant alert for emergencies involving nuclear or biological/chemical weapons.

Creighton Drury, the lanky team leader, peered anxiously into the shimmering funnel of light. In his mid-fifties, a former designer of satellites and forever a frustrated artist, fallen *objet d'arts* was his forte. Two miles from the landing site, he was told he'd be getting a masterpiece, fresh from the black gallery.

"Suuure," he drawled skeptically into the handheld radio.

"You copy the checkpoint?" asked the radio.

"Coming up," said Drury as the chopper dropped to twenty feet. "Got it. A house as round as a peyote button. Holy...!"

"Contact?"

"Affirmative. It's intact. Repeat *in*tact. Beautiful! The size of an SUV. Sleek chrome fuselage. One, two...six chrome landing struts. Don't see any markings. On top...a coffin."

"*What?* Describe."

"A cargo bay of some kind. Estimate three meters long, a meter wide and a meter high. Permission to land."

"Denied. Remain airborne. Conduct 'render safe' procedures Acknowledge."

Drury complied. For a full half hour the helicopter hovered over the spacecraft, Geiger counters and chemical detectors sniffing and clicking.

"C-L-E-A-N," reported Drury. "Permission to carry out my mission."

"Your ‘mission’ is to obey orders," crackled the radio. "Investigate vicinity only."

The helicopter set down twenty yards from the hexagon. One by one the team followed Drury out. Clad in bright yellow radiation suits, shiny black boots, goggled gas masks and waving powerful flashlights, they looked like fireflies and buzzed like bees.

"Somebody tie up this dog," ordered Drury as the team neared the house and corral. "Doctor, you're with me."

Together they approached the brave and knelt on the ground beside him.

"Is he dead?" gritted the radio.

"Not yet," retorted the doctor, a former hospital chief who fled an unworkable public system for an uncompromising secret one. "God only knows what's keeping him alive."

"Any signs of penetration?" asked the radio.

"Plenty." Drury picked up the empty shotgun by the trigger guard. "He's been shot...with his own gun."

"What about burns? Radiation?"

"Negative," replied the doctor, rummaging through his bag.

"Infection? Disease symptoms? Anything visibly irregular?"

"He's bleeding to death!" said the doctor. "Get a medivac out here. I won't be responsible for..."

"You're not," said the radio. "Don't *touch* him."

Suddenly the brave opened his eyes.

"A boy no more," said Wicasa in his native tongue. "I am…The Milky Way Man!"

"Delirium," said the doctor sadly. "It's almost over."

"You *want* a corpse," Drury yelled into the radio. "So you can experiment on it!"

"None of your business," came the harsh reply. "Proceed to the object. No closer than ten feet."

Drury and the doctor looked hard at each another and then at the brave.

"*Now!*" crackled the radio.

They left the Lakota where he lay without looking back. In the web of flashlight beams, the hexagon glittered like a giant Christmas ornament.

"Can you hear anything?" demanded the radio. "Any movement?"

"Negative on both," replied Drury.

"Copy. Permission granted to approach and examine."

Drury was already on his way, his own reflection growing and twisting crazily on the sides of the spacecraft. Against procedure, he took off one of his gloves and slowly, carefully, reached out and touched the hexagon.

"Cowboy!" snarled the radio. "What's it feel like?"

"Smooth, solid, warm as blood."

Drury looked to the Oglala's dog, tied to a corral post and barking fiercely. Thinking of a canary in a coal mine, the FIRST leader unzipped his mask and breathed deeply.

"Aye-Okay," he signaled to his team and pressed an ear against the machine. "Silent as a tomb."

"Your 'coffin'?"

"Sheer, seamless," Drury replied, reaching up to spread his hands across the top of the oblong box. "All edges rounded smooth. One second...Uh-oh!"

Before his eyes, the gleaming chrome seemingly began to burn.

"What?" demanded the radio.

"The coffin..." said Drury. "It's glowing like a hot poker!"

"Get the hell outa there!"

Like terrified prairie dogs, FIRST bolted for cover, flashlight beams wobbling in the dark. Drury jumped to the ground, ran past the cowering dog and dove headlong under the corral fence.

"The whole box is lit up," he yelled into the radio. "The spacecraft is...*wait*."

A bright orange shaft of light shot out from the underside of the lander and glided across the earth, directly to the Lakota lying in the dust.

Wicasa stirred weakly. Imbued with a glowing energy, his body rose magically from the prairie floor. Inches off the earth, he floated in an orange aura towards the spacecraft.

Awestruck and obedient, no member of FIRST interfered. The radio remained silent. The brave was on his own.

Wicasa shuttered in disbelief. All the night seemed to be burning. Was the land on fire? Not a hand was touching him. Over the tips of his moccasins, the spacecraft awaited, gleaming under the stars.

"*Wakan Tanka!*"

“We can’t just watch him---!” the doctor sprang up and lunged towards the spacecraft.

He didn’t get far; the FIRST leader pulled him down.

“And if it were you?” the doctor asked.

“Now he’s all of us,” said Drury.

Under the spacecraft, within his reach and far beyond his grasp, in the belly of the lander as sheer as a full length mirror, Wicasa saw himself.

“I *am* a Man,” he said.

‘Who sees only what he wants to see? Flat on your back and you think you’re eight feet tall?’

The hexagon made for theater in the round with its FIRST audience on their bellies at ringside. Like spotlights illuminating the stage and its star, bright yellow beams from the spacecraft’s underside shone on Wicasa’s face to probe his nostrils, his ears and his mouth.

Simultaneously, harsh blue beams smokelessly dissolved every shred of the brave's clothing. Within moments he was naked and a green ray was passing harmlessly through his skin...

"I am as I was born," said the brave shamelessly.

'I was there. Remember? You still haven't begun to live.'

"What? Were you with someone else before me?"

'No! I'm yours and you alone. I could never be with anyone but you.'

"Then...How do you know about the life I haven't lived if you haven't lived it yourself?"

'I know what I don't know. Pushing you to discover what life can be is who I am and always will be.'

"I'm not afraid," said Wicasa weakly, staring up at the swirling lights.

'You'd better be.'

"No," he said defiantly. "I've earned my right to the Milky Way."

'Have you? This shiny machine floats down on your lodge, shoots you with your own shot, then sucks you under like a field mouse in the wind and…You're not yet the Milky Way Man.'

"This 'machine' has made me a Man, given me a far better death than I ever expected out of life."

'No machine can make a Man. And no Man welcomes His own death to gallop into eternity. Live to live, not to die.'

. Violet light burnished Wicasa’s skin free of scabs and dirt. A burst of whiteness then vaporized every hair on his body. In a flurry of colors, the young Lakota floated motionlessly in a pulsing rainbow.

Orange, green and blue beams tinted to dull gray as long needles of ruby light burrowed cleanly into the brave's chest to extract dozens of tiny black spheres.

"Shotgun pellets," said one FIRST member with a videocam. "The spacecraft acted only in self-defense."

"He's been scrubbed hospital clean," marveled Drury. "Getting everything but the bill."

"I should have known,” said the doctor. “A cosmic technology *has* to be more humane than we are,”

Five feet away...

"You are me and I am you,” said Wicasa. “Together we are a Man, aren’t we?"

'Yes, the two who are one,’ replied the *nagi.*

"After I die an honorable death, the Man who we are rides to the stars, right?"

‘That’s what we believe. I don’t know for sure. It’s the Great Mystery.’

“Mystery? It’s who I am! Who you are--the spirit of the Oglalas. It is what is.”

'No Lakota's ever come back to confirm it. Suppose life ends here forever? Suppose there's nothing after death?'

"But there's *got* to be!"

'What is...is now. Live a long, long life. Then worry about what comes next.'

"Now you tell me!"

'Wicasa, I---'

At that moment, a laser-like violet ray knifed into the Native American, incising a deep oval from his neck to his groin. The brave's eyes seemed to freeze agape. He opened his mouth wide, but not a sound escaped him.

"My God!" exclaimed the doctor. "As if he were a high school class frog."

"No, no," argued Drury. "For a far higher purpose."

"Like *what*?" said the doctor.

As four videocams recorded, golden rays pushed away the skin of the brave's chest, layer by layer. Orange beams then severed the protecting ribs. The lungs were lifted out by multi-colored rays, each to be sliced cleanly by new swaths of light, revealing inner membranes and blood vessels.

Enveloped in a pink mist, the tiny air sacs were examined and quickly vaporized. Then the stomach, the pancreas, the liver...

Sightless black eyes bulged from the hairless head. Tongs of color pulled out the eyeballs, stretching the optic nerves from the emptied sockets. Orange beams then cut open the top of the skull and extracted the brain. Neatly bisected at its base, the lights probed the twin hemispheres.

The hands and feet were stripped to their bones and connecting tissue. Groups of muscles were gently removed and separated, their fibers unraveling in the light.

“An autopsy?” said Drury, barely able to watch.

“High-tech butchery,” said the doctor.

Multi-colored beams lifted out the small, then the large intestine, dicing each into hollow cylindrical chunks. The four chambers of the heart illuminated, it glowed like a pink lantern as it was dissected. The genitalia were carved out of the groin and abruptly vaporized.

It was the end of the beginning. Beyond the eyes of FIRST, the lander’s technology zeroed in on a jelly-like sac wrapped in a thin membrane with a central singular sphere. Deeper, deeper into the cell’s nucleus probed the sensors to encounter entangled strands--strings of DNA in links.

The swirling colors surrounded and honed in on the individual genes, picking and choosing. The process went on and on. When the lights finally dimmed, Wicasa's scant remains bubbled and oozed in the shadow of the spacecraft.

For less than a minute. Four and a half hours after it had begun, a searing white flash from the underside of the hexagon reduced the gutted corpse to a fine black dust which blew away in the prairie wind.

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In the Situation Room, the computerized command center in the basement of the White House, the FIRST data was playing on the big screen TV.

“Roswell for real!” exclaimed the Secretary of State, the administration’s pillar of integrity, according to his book.

“And beyond,” said the Administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), his forward agency suddenly as backward as the Bureau of Indian Affairs. “The lander is not alone. One hundred and ten miles above is a geostationary orbiter in full link.”

“Not that different from our lunar missions,” said State. “Or our VIKINGs to Mars.”

“One big difference,” said NASA. “Compared to the civilization that sent that thing here, *we* are the Vikings.”

"'A recon sat has impacted in South Dakota leaking dangerous radiation,'" said the White House press secretary, compelled to place national security above the truth. “That’ll hold for maybe a week.”

"The entire area's been evacuated,” said the Secretary of Defense. A misnomer; Secretary of *Offense.* “A full division's holding a tight circle five miles around"

“A thorough ‘threat assessment’ will be conducted,” promised the press secretary. Standard procedure for the latest terrorist rumors or a Third World coup. “The lid will be welded tight. This is only the beginning.”

“We’re not off to a very good start,” said the Vice President, the idealistic, younger half of the ticket and a cinch for the top slot in eight years if the economy

recovered. “It was our Constitutional duty to protect a citizen more American than any of us and we failed.”

“Come off it,” argued State, reading off his laptop. “The lone casualty has been identified as *Wicasa Ohitika,* aka ‘Brave Man’, labeled by his elementary school psychologist as an angry, unemployable teenager, ‘A child without a smile. Never. Not once.’ According to the tribal police blotter, ‘A high-spirited hothead burning on the reservation.’ Said one of the tribe’s council members, ‘One day Brave Man rode away, a stubborn loner on a quest for an ideal no one else believed in any more.’”

“Believe this,” urged State. ”A joint decision was reached regarding the best interests of the United States. The Indian was DOA. For one less ‘ward of the state’ we’ve got ourselves a bonanza from heaven.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” warned the CIA Director. In the Company for more than forty years, he’d been bitten by a herd of gift horses.

“We are going to be very careful,” declared President Jonathan P. Lansing, jingling a pocketful of coins, a reassuring habit since his recent inauguration. Tall and tan in his late fifties with a warm confident smile and a convincing voice to match, Lansing had taken no risks, political or personal, since he was nominated, winning the election with a safe, conservative campaign. He wasn’t about to change now. “Complete control and absolute secrecy are paramount.”

“Should be a cinch,” said the White House Chief of Staff, the president’s former campaign manager who had taken a chance on a small state senator and hit the national jackpot. “It’s in the middle of nowhere.”

“Yes,” agreed Lansing. “But in the center of everything.”

*

Inside the oblong box atop the gleaming spacecraft, in a dark, barren, unendurable nothingness, the immortal Oglala *nagi* prepared for the promised journey.

'I am and I am not. Only my body is gone. The Man Wicasa and I became awaits. Great Spirit, take me to the Milky Way.'

After a seemingly endless time.

'Wakan Tanka, you *are going to come for* me*, aren't* you*?'*

There was only silent darkness.

'Creator of the Universe, whoever you are, whatever your name. Come and take me to your realm, wherever it may lie.

'Hasham...?

'Jehovah...?

'Allah...?

'Jesus Christ?

'God who's got to be, save me!'

In the mute blackness floated a tiny silver sphere not unlike a star twinkling in the heavens. All at once, like divine lightning bolts, pure white beams flashed through the darkness to engulf the silver globe. For a moment it glistened in a blazing halo. As the aura dimmed, the ball cleaved into two equal hemispheres.

A spiral of rainbows, yellow and blue and green and red, arched out of the blackness and fed into the split sphere. Again and again, minute after minute, the

twin hemispheres divided and re-divided...four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two...a growing blastula of chromium cells.

'Color has come to this darkness. Substance to this emptiness. Power all around me*. Whose?*

'No, No! I am beginning again...from the very beginning. As what? As whom?

'How can this be? No almighty spirit from the next world. Oh, no, a power from another *world...Machine, this is your doing!'*

The clump of chrome cells underwent a thousand changes and a thousand and one more: the spatial odyssey of mitosis. Spectrums of energy continued to bombard the little vesicle. An inch in diameter, two inches, three, four. Swelling in a multi-colored aura, the single-layered ball folded upon itself.

The double layer trebled. Within minutes, the tightly fused silver globe developed uniform lumps making it look like a metallic moon until a narrow bulge protruded at its equator.

At one million cells, the burgeoning spheroid stretched to form a bulbous tube, tapering to a thin tail. As it grew, the chrome tube bent under its equatorial bulge and the thickening cylinder curled up into a lumpy symmetrical semicircle.

With each infusion of visceral light, the chromy mass grew larger and larger. Gleaming in a rainbow of energy, ‘it began to take on *definite* form.’

'What's this I hear...from outside...a drum? A ceremony for...?

'No, from within...a heart beating. Not mine. Whose?

'Machine, stop this now! You cannot make me into what you are. I am the spirit of a Man.

'I cannot be, I will not be anybody else.'

Plant-like buds had begun to sprout from the chrome fetus. A smooth sphere pushed out of its rounded end. Small, twin bubbles formed on it. Where the sphere joined the curled cylinder, a stubby growth swelled. Wider, deeper cavities opened on its sides. Its expression changing constantly, the growing creation passed through its complete evolutionary history with miraculous speed.

'Again I have a form, a being. Again I am. But I am not alone. Somebody else is all around me. Someone new. Big or small? Black or brown or white or red or yellow? Strong or weak? Am I male or female?

'Again I live inside a living...? What will this someone need and want?

'Why can't I feel? If I'm alive again, why aren't I hungry?

'Machine, what are you creating this body for? You've never lived. What can you know about life?'

The gleaming chrome fetus continued to mature. Glistening in a pulsing aura, the babe became a child.

'This body created around me is growing but not learning, manufacturing but not experiencing. This is not creation, but imitation.

'Ignorant and unknowing offspring of an unholy machine, what kind of somebody will you be?"

Hour after hour, the organism continued to develop, its muscles expanding and lengthening, its head, limbs, and torso enlarging in perfect proportion until...

'It is finished? It is ready? It lives yet is as still as death.

'Does it understand I'm a part of it? It has eyes, but I cannot see. Ears and cannot hear. Arms and legs, but cannot move.

'I am inside another body, a new body. Wicasa is dead and gone. Who am I now?'

There came a word, not spoken or sounded, but willed. A lone word endowed with omnipotent boldness and absolute confidence. One word...

'Me.'

'Who? Who are...you?'

'I am Man.'

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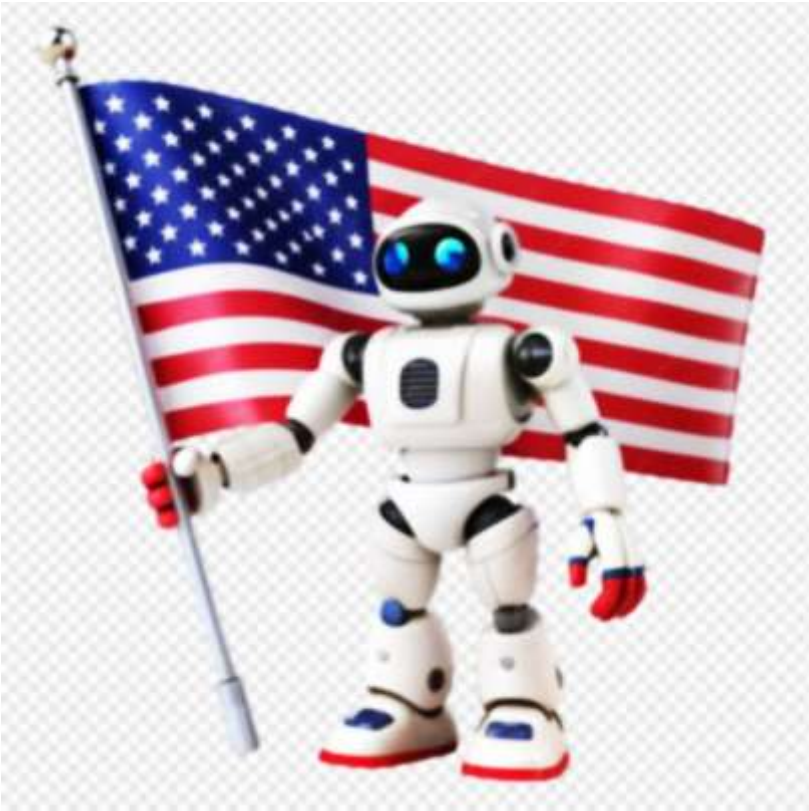


'Man, what are you doin' here?'

Billy Joel

'You are...who?' asked the Oglala *nagi*.

'Man...from now on,' came the bold reply.

'How can you be? You just got here.'

'I am who I was designed to be.'

'Not without me you're not. I see through your eyes, hear with your ears, and taste with your tongue. I feel everything you touch and all that touches you.'

'That I can do by myself. What do I need you for?'

'Without me you're nothing but a body and a brain, a bag of meat and membranes, blood and bone.'

'Where are you in me? Are you attached somewhere?'

'I am not a thing, not an "attachment". I cannot be seen or felt and you're the only one in the universe who can hear me.'

'No size, no substance. How can you be a part of me?'

'I am, am I not?'

'Where did you come from?'

'Before...before I was with a Man proud to be one.'

'You left him for me?'

'I don't leave. He was murdered by the machine that created you.'

'And I'm supposed to *trust* you?'

'You have to. Because I am you. I'll never abandon you, never give up on you. Together we---.'

'No.'

'No?'

'There is no "we". However "together" you and I may be, you and I are infinitely apart. I alone am everything I need to be. I have no use for you.'

'Do you know where you are?'

'No.'

'Do you know what to expect or what's expected of you?'

'No.'

‘That’s where I *come in.’*

FIRST christened the landing site ‘Tranquility Base, America’ and worked through the night, ferrying in supplies by helicopter. Powerful searchlights and multiple cameras surrounded the lander. Twenty yards away, four tents near the Lakota lodge rippled in the wind. A mainframe computer linked FIRST to NASA and the White House. Generators hummed in the corral. Portable toilets were positioned behind them.

With dawn on the way, no one had slept a wink and all eyes were on the lander.

“An ironic choice of specimen,” said public relations. “Columbus brought back ‘Indians’, living trophies from the New World to show off to his royal sponsors.”

“None of them lived very long,” said the doctor.

“This one’s going to live forever… as data zooming across the Milky Way,” said the radiologist. “Hardly the ‘happy hunting ground.’”

“We’d have done the same thing,” said Drury. “And maybe one day will.”

“Yes,” agreed the biologist who had signed on to experience a unique slice of life and got a lot more. “A probe sent to a distant planet to discover and study alien life.”

“Identify, isolate, and examine the dominant species,” agreed the chemist, reacting with cold logic. “A purely scientific mission, thoroughly accomplished.”

“Which brings us to the big question: What now?” asked the radiologist, ever the opportunist. “Will the ship take off, link up with Mom, and head home? Do we let the greatest scientific treasure in history fly out of our hot little hands?”

“You’re not suggesting...?” asked public relations, the team’s image always Job One.

“You bet I am!” replied the radiologist. “We secure the lander. Build a bunker over and around it if we have to and then use the Shuttle to grab the orbiter. Bring on the cutting torches. Imagine the reverse engineering possibilities! We’d be able to...”

While within the spacecraft...

‘You’re not going to lie here, blind and deaf and mute, are you?’

‘I’m waiting.’

‘Good. You’re learning. It’s my role to encourage you to...’

‘No. *My* designer will command me...’

‘Your “designer”? I*’m the only one---’*

At that moment...

‘Uh-oh? Is that it?’

‘You felt it too?’

‘Like being spanked on the butt for the first time.’

The prairie wind whistled as dawn broke, bouncing brilliantly off the silver hexagon.

“Start polishing your Nobel medallions and working on those speeches,” said the ordnance specialist. From napalm to nukes, he knew the full family of bombs better than his own. “We won the Scientific Super Bowl!”

“Forget doing Disney World,” said the sociologist, aboard to gauge the psychological impact of FIRST’s missions. “We’ve got ourselves a ticket to the stars. We---”

From inside the spacecraft...a faint *click* not unlike the cocking of a gun.

“What was that?” said Drury.

Tied to a corral post, Wicasa’s dog rose up on its hind legs and barked ferociously, pulling the rope taut.

‘Wait,’ ordered the Oglala *nagi. ‘Before you...Do you have a name?’*

‘Whatever for?’

‘Do you know what you look like, what color you are?’

‘These matter?’

‘Don’t you get it? You’re going out with nothing. Don’t you realize what they’ll do to you?’

‘Who?’

‘The billions of people who live here.’

‘People?’

‘Man, you’re in Indian country!’

The South Dakota wind abruptly ceased. Every blade of prairie grass seemed to be standing at rigid attention. It was as if, for a Hollywood heartbeat, the earth stood still.

FIRST's hearts began to beat faster. Like a precision tooled rifle bolt, the oblong box began to slide slowly across the top of the spacecraft. Tinted gold by glorious sunshine, the shimmering container came as straight and as silent as an arrow, directly at Creighton Drury.

Inch by inch, the smooth silver chamber jutted out over the hexagon's fuselage. Gently it tipped on its own weight. Hinged invisibly to the spacecraft, the container swung inexorably until, with a definitive *snap*, it locked vertically, its base flush with the surface of the earth.

Drury, squinting into the camera lens, held his breath. A hairline crack had appeared down the length of the box. Slowly it widened. Inside silvery shapes danced with the invading light.

Smoothly and silently, the symmetrical panels slid open and vanished into the walls of the container to reveal a statue in a stellar sarcophagus...the classic male figure as borne by the Milky Way. In the shimmering shadows, the man stood as if frozen, his hands at his sides, his feet close together.

The man was eight feet tall. His silver, hairless skin gleamed like a mirror. His proud nose, his heavy brow, his magnificent torso, his every muscle had been finely sculpted in astonishing detail. He appeared wholly masculine except for his groin; between his legs flowed an almost feminine smoothness.

"Don't be afraid," phoned the president. "Set an example for the entire nation, for the whole human race."

Eyes widened and jaws dropped; FIRST felt like the Romans guarding The Tomb when The Stone rolled away.

The man opened his eyes.

‘Are these your people?’ he said boldly, but his lips never moved and he made not a sound.

‘…Like the first Indians ever to see a White Man,*’* said the *nagi*.

Dust scratched the air. The man stepped out unto the prairie. His stride was Olympian, and straight at FIRST.

Reflections of earth and sky, technology and humanity shone on his silvery skin as if he mirrored all the world. Two paces from the main camera, seemingly without rhyme or reason, the man stopped short. He spread his legs the width of his shoulders and straightened his arms, turning his palms out four inches from his thighs.

Imagine a fantastic game appearing on the biggest, sharpest, brightest HD screen in creation. In the center is the man, clean and pure, a giant agleam with the future.

The man has neither weapons nor money and will never attempt to get either. He will ask no one for help and no one will help him.

The man has been cosmically designed to kill everyone in North America—Canada, the United States, Mexico and those little Latin states all the way to the Panama Canal.

One man against the continent. Nobody lives except him.

He is invincible. Nothing *real* can beat him.

(You might buy the ‘spiritual’ version.)

Don’t want to play?

Too bad. It’s not your game any more, but his.

Whoever you are, wherever you live, whatever your age or gender, race or creed, religion or color or lack of either, your life is as good as over.

‘A boy no more,’ says the silver giant. **‘I am The Milky Way Man.’**

The dog grew quiet. For five minutes nobody and nothing moved.

‘Do something.’ demanded the Oglala *nagi.*

‘I *am*,’ replied the man.

“He’s waiting for us,” insisted the president. “Approach him.”

“Permission,” pleaded Drury, fumbling for time. “To check...for radiation.”

“Hurry up.”

The radiologist, the weapons expert, and public relations neared the man. Hands trembling, Drury placed a Geiger counter on the ground between the man’s legs.

The man did not move.

“Report,” ordered Lansing.

“Not a trace. But Mister Pres---”

“Hold up the cell phone,” said Lansing

Public relations gave Drury the phone. The FIRST leader stretched up as high as he could, his face inches from the man’s gleaming nipples.

“Welcome,” began Lansing in his Sunday morning radio voice. “On behalf of the American people, I welcome you to the United States...Can you hear me? Do you understand?”

Drury brought the phone down. “He’s not responding.”

“I’m aware of that,” grumbled Lansing. “Offer to shake his hand.”

Drury glanced quickly at his teammates before reaching out and placing his hand against the man’s palm.

‘Typical!’ said the *nagi. ‘For every Lakota who ever lived, laugh in their faces!’*

The man remained quiet and still.

“What does he feel like?” asked the president.

“White gold, but warm,” said a stunned Drury.

“Is he breathing?”

“Respiration ‘normal’,” reported Drury, pressing an ear against the man’s chest. “Heart’s pounding like a tom-tom.”

“His and mine both,” admitted the president and hung up.

A short silent pause as FIRST took long looks at one another and again at the man.

“A Lakota lowlife becomes the highest art form imaginable!” declared Drury. “A Galactic *David*, sculpted from the stuff of the stars.”

“’*David*’?” said the radiologist. “More like the *Silver Surfer* without his board and a long way from the waves.”

"'Adam' of the Future Testament as scripted by whom or what?" asked the chemist. "Man designed at biblical speed. Not bad for a half-day's work."

"A Mulligan of Man through transmutation of matter via genetic coding?" chipped in the ordnance specialist, bad on the back nine. "Molecular fusion?"

"Without radiation?" challenged the nuclear weapons expert, way off course as well. "More like alchemy. Picked up a dirty Indian penny and minted a shiny silver dollar."

"Matter from energy?" asked the chief radiologist, feeling like he was back in grade school. "The spacecraft must've tapped a quasar en route for the juice to super-size him."

"Or plucked the atoms right out of the air...," said the chemist, a devout atheist suddenly ready to believe in Creationism. "And rearranged them into...?"

"*Designed*…Man made over as a spit n' polished robot," said the assistant radiologist flatly. "He's no more a man than my Apple."

"Man as the supreme machine," tried the biologist. "All of His shortcomings corrected, His faults and frailties deleted, simplified and eliminated. Man at the Darwinian Finish Line...Evolution's Final Draft."

"Why?" asked Drury. "He cannot finally be the 'Savior.' Almost maybe. Divine try, but not quite. He only lacks..."

"Man *above* humanity?" said the sociologist. "Pure and chaste in every way, the Man awaited by churches, mosques and temples around the world? God forbid he be allowed to hit the streets, or worse, the tube."

"Will somebody just tell me who or what he *is*!" begged public relations.

“He’s science as we will one day know it, not a miracle,” stated Drury. “One can only wonder what a Buddhist or a Muslim or a Hindu might say.”

“Whatever. Whoever he is, he’s alive, as alive as any of us,” said the nuclear physicist. “Which gives him two basic functions...survival and reproduction.”

“Is he in for a surprise,” snickered the radiologist.

“What do we do if he gets beside himself?” asked the chemist.

“He so much as spits on the prairie and the Army’ll be here in two seconds flat,” promised Drury.

“Enough! It’s not who he is, but where he’s *going*,” said the doctor angrily. “This man, yes, *man*, is a living being conceived and created before our arrogant eyes with none of our bothersome baggage.”

“‘Baggage’?” asked the biologist.

“No family, no heritage, no nothing. Completely devoid of guilt, anxiety, inhibitions, a fully mature *individual* with absolutely no experience at anything. Totally free of racism, sexism, nationalism, religion--empty of everything that makes us so fallibly human. As innocent and as ignorant as a newborn babe. Don’t any of you understand what’s in store for him?”

“I see your point,” said Drury, rubbing his chin. “This wonderful world of ours is going to eat him alive.”

*

“Holy shit!” blurted the Director of the CIA.

“I second the expletive,” said Defense.

“One giant...*what?*” said NASA, wondering what Neil Armstrong might have said, had he stepped from the Apollo XI lunar lander and been surrounded by a tribe of low-tech pygmies.

“He *is* going to talk to me,” vowed President Lansing. “One way or another.”

“He’s going to speak English?” said the Veep.

“My money says he’s a soprano,” quipped Defense.

“Whatever, he is ours,” insisted State. “And after he’ s been given a clean bill of health, we play him to the hilt--an Executive Audience, both houses of Congress, an international press conference...”

“Hold on,” cautioned CIA. “Vegetable, animal or mineral, this eight-foot eunuch is here to help us or hurt us, in a *big* way either way. And when he decides which way, let him do so in South Dakota.”

“We have to communicate with him,” said Lansing. “For the sake of national security, we have to know where he stands.”

“Just as long as he ain’t standin’ here,” said CIA.

*

‘You are not a Man, but a carving of one,’ railed the Oglala *nagi. ‘A self-propelled statue.’*

‘Man began humbly, didn’t He?’

‘Nothing like you. I feel like a squirrel who fell asleep, only to wake up and find that my living home had been cut down and turned into a totem pole.’

At 10:30 in the morning, four hours after the man had stepped from the spacecraft, the FIRST helicopter returned from the outlying Army security cordon with two NASA passengers.

As the first one got out, not even combat boots and loose fitting pants could camouflage her long shapely legs. Tall and slim with a little girl smile reserved for scientific discovery, Sara Ogden fell in love with the wonder of the universe as a child when she looked up at the stars and asked, “What’s happening out there?” and then spent the rest of her life trying to find out.

On the day Ogden was born, starlight from 240 billion billion miles away was just this morning reaching earth. If she continued to eat right and exercise regularly, she hoped to live to see 500 billion billion miles and beyond. An eye-opening stretch, but barely a blink in the Milky Way.

“Outta my way!” shouted the second passenger, camera in hand, squeezing out of the chopper and bursting through Ogden and FIRST to get to the man.

Click! Click! Click! Tom Mills snapped away and got public relations to take his picture standing next to the man.

‘You’re a spectacle, a showpiece, like one of those “storybook Indians” decked out in factory leather and roadkill feathers, playing Man,’ said the *nagi. ‘Whose storybook are you from? Who are you pretending to be?’*

‘I *am* Man.’

‘Not until I make you one.’

“You silver-plated son of a bitch!” Mills shouted up at the man. In his mid-sixties and as round as Sputnik, Mills had been with NASA since the Space Race. “I wanted to be you. I would have volunteered. Dedicated my whole life to getting to the stars and never got past my bathroom scale. Do you have any idea how lucky you are?”

Mills shook his head in disgust, turned away and went to the spacecraft. A quick once-over and he dropped and rolled under it, graceful as a car thief. High-tech hardware was his hands-on specialty; he practiced computer assembly blindfolded.

“Alien super-science doesn’t know squat about people,” he complained, his spongy hands stroking the lander’s underbelly. “Picking Hiawatha over me, an MIT *cum laude* and a MENSA. Okay, hexagon, what powered him here?”

No way a rocket, concluded the former Cape controller, unless it was a thousand miles long. A non-stop voyage or stopovers at a string of galactic way stations? What kind of fuel? The ‘Orion Concept’ --exploding nuclear bombs behind it? Or an interstellar ‘ramjet’ with a colossal scoop on its nose to collect hydrogen atoms as it trekked through the Milky Way? Ion power? Protons? A fusion engine? For a ten-million year trip or less than a decade? At a fraction of the speed of light or a hundred times faster?

“Tin can full of rubber bands payloading a mannequin,” groused Mills, completely baffled and more determined than ever. No chrome dummy was getting away with sandbagging a veteran Cape crawler.

Her every step shorter that the one before it, Sara Ogden approached the man feeling like Eve on the dawn of the Seventh Day.

'What is this?'

'Not this, she*…A Woman.'*

'What does a Woman do?'

'It takes a Woman to make a Man.'

Dr. Ogden looked up into his unblinking eyes. Glistening in milky white orbs, his obsidian black irises alive with a constellation of starry points, an incomparable power seeming to seethe from...

Who does he see in me? Ogden wondered. Is he the *idea* of Man, Man as envisioned from parsecs away? The best Man technology could design?

Do you know who I am? she longed to ask him. Can you see me for what I am? She stared upon her own reflection in the man's chest and shuddered at the sight, if not for the stars, of the mother she should have been.

As a grad student Ogden had become unexpectedly pregnant. Her lover begged her to marry him. Her heart and soul already committed to the Milky Way, she got an abortion. Had her beloved stars given birth to the child she had terminated?

'No Woman made me,' said the man.

'Deny the power of Woman and you'll never be Man.'

Unable to take her eyes off the man's body, Ogden squinted. Something about him was...different...as though his...

'What power could she have?'

‘A Man knows.’

‘Tell me!’

Ogden swallowed nervously and reached up and gently touched the man’s chest. And felt a warming energy tingle her fingertips

“Who *are* you?” she asked, exploring every part of him she could reach.

‘For all of Man’s strength and courage, without a Woman, He...Oh, no! This can’t be. Not that. Not now.’

‘Always. It’s the Mission of Man. This *is* the way it’s done, isn’t it?’

‘You don’t know?’

‘How could I?’

Ogden pulled her quivering hands from the man’s body and stared into them. *What’s happening* here?

“You are no machine, Mister,” she said, dropping to one knee to firmly grip one of the man’s ankles. “You’re...”

“What do you think you’re doing?” objected the FIRST doctor.

“Your job,” snapped Ogden, getting on her cell phone. “NASA... NASA, examination of patient reveals wholesale changes.”

“Specify,” came the reply.

“He’s *thickening*,” reported Ogden. “His entire body is swelling, front and back, from his heels to the top of his head.”

*

“She’s right!” said the vice president. “And none of us noticed it?”

“The forest for the trees,” said CIA.

“What’s he pulling?” asked State.

“A metamorphosis,” suggested the NASA chief. “An adverse reaction to our atmosphere, or perhaps, a defense mechanism, a protective coating activated when he was first confronted.”

“Could she have touched him off?” asked Defense.

“Negative,” said NASA after rechecking the data. “The process began the moment he assumed his initial stance.”

“’Process’ for *what*?” asked CIA.

*

Time became television. As the man’s heart beat faster and faster, his body pushed out farther and farther. By late afternoon, he had swollen to nearly twice his original thickness.

‘No, you can’t!’ said the *nagi. ‘You’re violating all that I have, all that is me.’*

‘You are nothing. You have nothing.’

‘My uniqueness, my singularity. You’re breaking the most sacred law of creation.’

‘Man makes His own laws.’

Fourteen hours and twenty minutes from the time the man had first stood before the spacecraft, his burgeoned body began to shimmer, the air around him aglow in an eerie nimbus not unlike a holy figure in a medieval painting

A mirroring of matter; the division of two equal wholes...Unwelding in an arc of pulsing milky energy, the man stepped out...*of himself*.

He took five sure paces forward, knocking over the abandoned camera without breaking stride, and stopped again to stand tall and absolutely still.

The man who had spawned him was left a hollowed out mold. For the merest of seconds. From the engorged outline of his offspring, flowing streams of cosmic quicksilver, like fluid filling in a gaping cavity, sculpted his exact likeness.

The starry aura dissipated. The air calmed. Silver screen animation had taken on the dimensions of an epic poem.

There were now *two* men in South Dakota.

“The duality of Man,” said the FIRST doctor.

“A Trojan Horse,” said the ordnance expert.

“The Indians retake America,” said Drury.

3



“Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth”

Genesis 9:1

From himself and upon himself, the man saw himself.

‘Wakan Tanka, *is he* Your Milky Way Man?’ the *nagi* asked the Creator. *‘He has to be the greatest trick in the universe.’*

‘Who?’ said the man.

'You, you are a shining giant, why? Why does your Man have to be bigger and taller? Bet you’re stronger, faster and smarter, too. Why? Isn’t now Man enough for you?’

‘Now is history. He who demands the future, *commands* the future!’

'But…you're incomplete*. If I had been born as you, my mother would never have let me live.'*

'Be grateful. Thanks to me, you've become twice the Man you, and your mother, never were.'

*****

“How appropriate he should come to America,” said the Secretary of State. “Where all men are created equal.”

“Intelligent design,” said NASA, “Complete with a cosmic reproductive system.”

“Man without sex?” said CIA. “’Some *are* more “intelligently designed” than others.’”

As the two men began to thicken, Washington’s options narrowed.

"I want some ideas," demanded President Lansing, jingling his coins as he glanced around the Situation Room.

“There’s only one option,” said Defense flatly. "We take him out,"

"You mean kill him," said CIA, in no mood for euphemisms.

"Quietly, without delay," agreed State.

"But he's given us no cause," objected the vice president. "We've no right..."

'"*E Unum Pluribus*'! There'll be a thousand of him in a week," said State. "What ‘right’ we will have then?"

"Drop a *bomb* on him and him!" demanded Defense. "All he'll get to see is the flash."

"We *all* will," warned NASA. "He's created out of pure energy. Sufficient power to destroy him could set off a chain reaction and blow North America off the planet."

"Then sink him," suggested the White House Chief of Staff. "Ferry him to an ocean trench and find out how long he can tread water."

"Or put him in orbit," said the press secretary. "Open the cargo bay doors of the Shuttle about a hundred miles up and..."

"Down we go," said NASA. "He's the product of an ET intelligence that antiquated nuclear weapons before humanity could build a fire, a civilization that conquered the cosmos before Man ever learned to wipe His ass."

"What *is* he exactly?" pleaded Lansing.

"A self-cloning automaton," replied NASA. "We digest food to create energy. He's sustained through stellar molecular fixation. As the stars themselves are born by combining loose hydrogen atoms in the universe, so he, via 'nebulizing synthesization,' replicates by absorbing, then incorporating *any* free atoms and molecules, and reprogramming them via the genetic code of the Native American. Incalculably complex and amoebically simple: one times two, times two, times two..."

"Couldn't we at least study him?" tried the Veep. "Move him someplace secure?"

"What if he refuses to move?" asked Defense.

The president contemplated the screen. The men appeared as twin suspects in a closed circuit line-up.

"He'll state his case," said Lansing. "He has to. But if he constitutes a threat to..."

"Mister President," said CIA who'd heard of too many 'termination' councils which failed to anticipate the consequences. "He's got a satellite up there, a security camera watching over the silverware. When the orbiter sees us taking its precious progenies for an ocean cruise or a rocket ride..."

"So?" challenged Defense.

"We're 'taking out' its people," retorted CIA. "*So*...the orbiter 'takes out' a few of ours...Rapid City, Chicago, New York..."

"Then we destroy the orbiter first," said State. "We have anti-satellite weapons and..."

Lansing leaned back in his high-topped chair. He had to be "presidential". And nothing alarmed him more than his own indecisiveness

The president picked up the telephone.

*

At seven o'clock in the morning, the two men became four. But he had not walked out of himself to stand like a row of dominoes. Instead, each moved independently and when he halted after a minimum of paces, the men stood at the exact points of the compass with their backs to the spacecraft.

'You turned away from your birthplace,' said the Oglala *nagi*.

'Now I can see everything.'

‘Except yourself and where you came from.’

‘It’s not where I began, but where I will be.’

‘You haven’t been anywhere.’

‘Not yet.’

Within the hour, a C-130 four-engine cargo plane landed at Tranquility Base and taxied to a halt a hundred yards from the lander.

Clad in radiation suits complete with breathing apparatus, FIRST rolled out the heavy equipment. Two black boxes were unloaded with special care.

The team worked quickly. A thick lead plate was set up behind the man facing due west. Another plate was placed, very carefully, under the hexagon. A light crane was then driven out of the cargo plane and wheeled into position, its boom centered over the spacecraft. Mounted on a tripod, the gamma ray tube was aimed at the man from ten yards away. Four helicopters, each carrying a thick rectangular slab suspended from cables, lowered the radiation shield between the spacecraft and the tents.

FIRST installed the black boxes: one attached to the crane boom; the second fit to a tube and tripod like an ammunition drum to a machinegun.

At noon Drury called the White House.

"What'll I see on my screen?" asked the president.

"A gamma ray CAT-scan like they used to examine Renaissance paintings and Egyptian tombs," replied Drury. "Contamination’ll be minimal. What isn't shielded'll show up as residual traces. Just enough to keep the perimeter security honest."

“Lights, camera, action,” ordered Washington.

With everyone and Wicasa’s dog behind the lead plates, Drury pushed a lone button. The black box on the tripod made a short whirring sound: the greenish isotope, the size of a walnut, was exposed through the tube. At the speed of light, invisible radioactive particles shot down the barrel of the gun through the prairie air and into the man.

From the observation window, Dr. Ogden took her turn, watching him with a clinical eye. Her father had died of cancer and she knew full well the effects of radiation treatment. But gamma rays? She found herself feeling sorry for him.

'You can’t help but notice the Woman,’ said the *nagi. ‘That’s part of being Man.'*

'She has a reproductive function, yet she lacks Manhood.’

‘Do you believe her to be an equal?'

'Not to me.'

‘I should have known. How could anyone possibly be your equal?’

‘Only if I make him.’

"Bingo!" declared Mills at the console monitor. "We're getting pictures faster than a Polaroid."

*

On the big screen TV in the Situation Room, squiggling marks etched out the man’s glowing silhouette. Fine flowing lines defined the contours of his body. Like the naked branches of a metallic tree poking through a fog, a network of silver vessels sprouted from a fist-shaped object in his chest, pumping into a

lattice of gleaming chrome cords. From thick tubes in his torso and limbs to millions of interwoven tinsel-like fibers, the man's body was sheathed in layers of silvery human cells.

The gamma rays pierced his every pore. Hazy gray blotches formed in his torso, his head, his limbs, his joints, and the length of his spine. Slowly the blotches stretched, connected, sharpening to...

"Blood vessels, nerve cells, a healthy heart and skeletal perfection," said Defense enviously, remembering the results of his latest check-up.

A mirrory chrome skull appeared, inlaid with silk-like threads. His cavernous eye sockets, entwined by shining cords, his silver ingot teeth forming a fearsome grin…

The whole of his torso appeared pitch black until the sub-atomic particles probed, revealing distinct, heavy shapes bunched tightly together, his vitals glistening as newly minted Sterling.

"A stomach, a digestive track, a liver, but he doesn't eat or drink," said State. "Lungs, but what does he breathe?"

A silver honeycomb materialized on the screens. Bones, muscles, mercuric blood; his chromy protoplasm expanding, pulling apart, duplicating.

"He's manufacturing himself... out of thin air," said the president. "I don't understand."

"*Understand*," advised NASA. "That we cannot understand."

Again his body clouded up until interlocking belts quilted his frame. In the hollows of his eye sockets, a matched pair of shimmering spheres formed around

bundles of delicate strands. Then twin orbs of blazing blackness swelled layer by layer like ripening fruit.

Moments later, all blurred as a quicksilver membrane laminated his body. The reception sharpened; again he was as they had first seen him.

"Is he Man or machine?" asked the press secretary.

"Or Man *and* machine?" tried the chief of staff.

"He'd better be *all* machine," replied the president. "Because if he *is* Man...who does he think *we* are?"

*

Three hours after the gamma ray examination had begun, it ended. Equally swollen, the four men sparkled in the afternoon sun like chess pawns on a dusty board.

"I don't get it," said Drury, rechecking his Geiger counter. "Not one click."

"He soaked up the isotope like a sponge," said Mills. "The particles *became* him."

"This one's no different from the others," said Drury, inspecting the targeted man. "Why doesn't he show any effects?"

"Because he can't," replied Mills, again rubbing his eyes. "He's breaking down *every* atom in the air. We just gave him an enriched sidedish."

Drury scratched his head. "What does that make him?"

"You're asking me?" shrugged Mills. "If he could speak Asimov English, he couldn't explain himself."

'Your people peered into every part of me,' asked the man. **'Did they find you?'**

'Do you think I can be found? Like a lost shoe?'

'I found you.'

'Man, you have yet to find yourself.'

"Mister Drury," radioed the White House. "Are you ready to examine the spacecraft?"

"On center stage, Mister President," answered Drury eagerly.

Ever so slowly, the second black box was lowered closer and closer to the upper fuselage of the hexagon, its cables cutting across the setting sun.

In moments, on the FIRST monitor, the surface of the hexagon seemed to fog over as the gamma rays passed through its surface like sunlight through a picture window. As if imbued with divine light, gleaming shapes appeared. Not one resembled another. Smoothly molded and tightly bound and connected by rhythmically pulsing tubes, every rounded edge glistened. Silvery membranous organs oozed mercuric fluid via expanding and contracting spindles.

"Real and unreal," said Drury. "It could almost be organic."

"An exo-*biological*-technology!" said Ogden. "Its organs so intricately specialized that their union enjoins chemical exchanges at the sub-atomic level. The hexagon functions as an invulnerable shell protecting its instrumental viscera."

The rays probed deeper. A system of systems twinkled and pulsed. Then suddenly, like a great boiling eye, the fiery sphere glared out from the screen.

"Holy...!" gasped Ogden. "Shades of the Great Red Spot of Jupiter."

"Orange. A Halloween pumpkin!" said Drury. "'Jack-o'-Lantern'."

The gamma rays had run their course. Like a video played in reverse, the image of the glowing sphere faded back into the chrome maze. Foggy blotches returned. In less than a minute, the surface of the hexagon was as a mirror once more. A darker mirror.

Tranquility Base it would never be. The cargo plane had reloaded and taken off in record time. Four helicopters came out and hoisted the lead shielding away.

As a crescent moon rose, a fifth helicopter delivered special equipment from the Johnson Spaceflight Center. This would be Mills' show--the Cape treatment for astronaut candidates. The man facing north was wired from head to foot, electrodes taped to his every joint. An elastic belt laden with biological recorders was strapped around his waist. The final touch was a black padded helmet.

A dozen wires ran from the man to a custom console set up in front of the command tent and interfaced with the main computer. All systems were GO.

'You are not a Man. No Man would allow himself to be trussed up like a ceremonial doll and treated like a carnival clown. Where's your honor? Your masculine pride? Rip their science from your body and shove it down their throats!'

'Don't tell *me* what to do!'

'I always will. It's the reason I exist.'

"We're in and we're on," announced Mills, gleefully rubbing his hands together over the control board. "We'll tap into his libido. Like running sensors into the back seat of a convertible on prom night."

"Without seat belts?" said Ogden angrily. “You could cause him irreparable harm.”

"What's he gonna do?" said Mills. "Sue?"

The wait was over. In the glare of the searchlights, the man's skin shone like stainless steel. Magically it began to glow from within.

"Exactly on schedule," said Drury. "He's a self-contained factory mass-producing himself."

"But this time," said Mills with a smile, "there're federal inspectors on the assembly line."

Drury moved next to Mills at the console. The rest of FIRST spread out around him. Ogden stood alone. Cameras whirred and technology blinked and clicked. Wicasa’s dog began to howl.

'Not now,' pleaded the Oglala *nagi*. *‘You don't have to do that now.'*

'I have to. And I want to. Don't you?'

'No. Not the first time. Not now. Not ever again.'

"No surface heat of any consequence," said an astounded Mills. "Heartbeat going up...*second* beating beginning. He's breathing at the top of the scale, but not sweating a bead. The reaction is completely inside him."

'You want it and you enjoy it. The one that makes me two---the unrelenting intensity of Man. His endless pursuit, His prime pleasure. There'd be no Man without it.'

'Not with you. I am alone as myself. I don't want to make myself over and over again.'

"He's not a spawning salmon," said Ogden, her hands balled into fists, "not a dog in heat."

'Stop, STOP! You don't want me. You want only yourself. Don't make me a part of you. I don't want---!'

'Don't you? *Feel!* Become the Man you always wanted to be. Become *me*!'

'No!'

'It's not me you're afraid of, not me you don't want. It's your own fear of coming out of yourself to face yourself!'

'I, I am only myself. I can't be--OOOOOH!'

'Yes, oh, yes! Do you want me to stop *now*?'

'Don't stop. Please don't stop. Everything--is--splintering!'

"Here he comes!" said the nuclear physicist. "Like a high-grade reactor pushing the baby through the breeder walls without leaking radiation."

"Got him," said Mills, the console lighting up across the board. "He's popping his load and..."

Line by line, like corn kernels in a microwave, the computer's lights began to pop.

"We *don't* have him," shouted Drury as the board started smoking. "He's got us!"

Wire after wire burst into flame, wriggling from the man's skin, sparks sizzling in the dust. Bands of tape disintegrated as the monitoring devices flew from his body, half-melting, half-burning junk. The helmet shattered like an egg, its pieces still wired, whipping and crackling alight in the air.

Mills and Drury dove into the dirt as the console blew its sides and board, its insides melted into mush.

The four men glowed, seemingly like novae. As each stepped out of himself, his shimmering corona reduced the searchlights to impotent candles. And behind each new man, his hollowed out birthing body ejaculated into himself with torrents of quicksilver streams, replicating his perfect exactness.

Glistening under the Milky Way, there were now *eight* men in South Dakota.

Drury and Mills and the rest of FIRST looked up sheepishly from their hiding places to find Sara Ogden standing amidst the smoking debris, her hands on her hips and a mocking grin from ear to ear.

"'Extra-terrestrial Intelligence', 'nebulic synthesization'...male oriented poppycock!" she laughed at each and every one of them. "He's total flaming self-copulation--the ultimate orgasm!"

*

"Buck Rogers hotdogging!" seethed NASA in the White House Situation Room. "Mills' 'astronaut' blasted off right out of his spacesuit."

"Spewing forth fully grown out of himself," said the press secretary. “...Breastfed by the milk of the Galaxy."

"And I say cream him now," declared Defense.

*

While on the prairie...

'It is better every time, more intense, more Manly.'

'Speak for yourselves.'

'Didn't you tell me you feel all that I do? Therefore...'

'Yes, Yes! I am a part of you. But you're not a part of me. But now I feel no growing, no renewal. This is different. An anticipation for...?'

Drury had assembled FIRST in Wicasa's lodge for a team-only meeting. Mills was sulking in the computer tent. Sara Ogden had the watch.

Before the man, she had eyes only for the stars; no sight on earth matched the view from it.

"Polaris," she asked the North Star glimmering in the blackness. "Was it you who sent him here?" A look to the south. "Or was it you, Alpha Centuri? You're the closest. Is he yours? Or was it you, Canopus? Or you, Sirius? *Who*?"

With a million questions for every answer, the astronomer policed the grandest, most mysterious, most violent beat in science.

Ten thousand thousand thousand years ago, before there was a Milky Way, all that was to be was a singular sphere of super-concentrated matter floating in an endless timeless nothingness.

How and why Man has never ceased to wonder, the primeval ball went *BANG!* A Genesiac thermonuclear explosion lighted the infinite darkness! Trillions upon trillions of gaseous atom-sized cosmic building blocks blasted out into the expanding emptiness. Time and space had begun.

Millions of years passed before the newly created clouds of primordial matter cooled. Simple atoms began to cling to one another; gravity took root. More millions of years---the clouds began to spin. The galaxies were aborning.

Tens of billions of hot infant nebula danced in the eternal blackness. After eons they matured. Some formed into massive spheres of radioactive dust while others spiraled. There were ringed clouds and elliptical clouds and irregular clouds, giant communities of clouds and small families and single clouds all alone. Space there was for all.

Within each cloud, gravity grew stronger, compressing the highly charged particles, touching off an endless chain of thermonuclear explosions. One by one forever, a trillion trillion trillion stars twinkled on, holding and lighting and warming the planets and moons orbiting about them. Life was in the offing.

Compared to the creation of the universe, Ogden believed that the evolution of intelligent life was an elementary parlor trick. And there were parlors aplenty.

"Was it you *Tau Ceti*? Or you, *Epsilon Erandi*?" asked Ogden of the first monitored by the SETI Program for artificial signals to no avail.

"Whose idea of a joke *is* he?" the astronomer asked the heavens. "Did one of you design him out of spite? Should we be flattered by your attempt at imitation? Or is he the answer to every question Man has ever asked?"

She turned to the man, gleaming in perfection. “Who is it *you* think you are?”

‘What is the Woman doing?’

‘She’s angry with you,’ replied the Oglala *nagi*.

'Me? What have I done? I don't understand.'

'That's part of being a Man.'

"Are you an ideal? If you're the prodigy of an infallible intelligence and an omnipotent technology, what was the parental Galaxy thinking of when they created you?" Ogden pointed a motherly finger in the man' s face. "What is intelligence without compassion? Technology without empathy? To think what you could be, to imagine what you might accomplish, to understand what you might mean. 'Everyman', whose shining example are you?"

'What is it she wants?' asked the man.

'To know you. To know...why you are.'

'Why?'

'Because Woman sees Man differently than Man sees Himself.'

'How?'

'You're asking me?'

“You’d have given Plato a heart attack, Everyman, but Homer would have loved you,” she said to the man. “Verne would have had a fit. Orwell would have engaged you till his dying breath, while Ayn Rand would have married you!

“Let’s give Clarke and Bradbury and Heinlein a polite nod, shall we? Pour another round for Philip K. Dick and a toast to Huxley and Ellison.”

Ogden turned her back to the man and shouted at the Milky Way. "I gave up my baby for you and who do you give me in return...The illegitimate great grandson of H.G Wells and Mary Shelley!"

'OOOOOOOOOH! Not again. Not so soon. No, this is a different energy.'

'Man's primary power.'

'You mean...to hunt?'

Tied to a corral post, Wicasa's dog awoke and poised on its haunches.

Together and each on his own, the eight men moved with a smooth, certain grace. Two of him strode toward the main computer tent, five to the Lakota lodge.

The final man loomed over Dr. Odgen.

"I know who you are. I’ve been imagining you all my life," she railed at him. "'*Klaatu barada nikto'*,…the spirit of science fiction!"

Neither man nor *nagi* understood. He reached down for her. The last thing Dr. Ogden ever saw was her own terrified face reflected in the man's palm.

Mills could kick himself. When this snafu hit NASA, he'd be the laughing stock of the agency. Damage control time--if he could make any sense of the gamma ray data, he'd redeem himself yet.

"Dinky screens," he complained about FIRST's equipment. Magnification on one, isolation on the other two. And *slow*. Away from his IMAX-like screens at the Cape, he felt like a "scope dope" at a county airport.

"A six-sided tin can with a big meatball in the center of its sauce," he said of the hexagon and its innards. Mills lived by one absolute: it either flew or it didn't. "This baby smells like Pentagon. Bet he cost three times the opening bid and came online four years late."

There was a rustling outside. Mills ignored it. He was back in his salad days on the cutting edge of the space race, strapping a trained chimpanzee into an orbital capsule. When that rocket lifted off, he had wondered how that ape must have felt. Now he knew.

"No payload makes a monkey outa me," he swore to the screens. "Meatball on a silver serving dish...juicy Defense contract. Touch the correct toggle switch, stupid chimp, treat yourself to a banana pellet.

"And don't worry about something going wrong. We've got *everything* covered except you. Everything except..."

When the concept flashed--what's built into every spacecraft…what every man is *born* with--it came on like full engine burn. Mills grabbed the radio and shouted into it.

"NASA...This is Tranquility Base. Get ready to get proud. Bigger than 0-rings, I've made the meatball. Jack-o'-Lantern' is...NASA, *NASA!*"

Static. He jostled the transmitter. *Static*?

"What's up with the televisions?"

The security cameras covering the lander and the men---On the screens, the stillness was gone. From new points of view, the images were moving.

"That's imposs---!"

Mills heard heavy footsteps coming towards the tent.

"Who goes there?"

A harsh whistling not unlike the sound of a sword slashing through the air. Between the tent flaps shot a gleaming hand.

In the Native American's lodge, sitting on the sod floor, the lone chair and the wrought iron bed, FIRST could almost feel the life the young Lakota had lived. By the light of a flickering hurricane lamp, the meeting took on the tone, not of a scientific inquiry, but of a séance.

"Genetically speaking, he *is* a man," began the biologist, not at all uncomfortable on the earthen floor. "But that doesn't give our gleaming Golem a personality."

"He's an effigy of Man," said the weapons expert. "Alien Man."

"Alie*nated* Man is more like it," insisted the doctor. "I could feel the breath of humanity in him from the moment he stepped out. I've delivered enough babies to know."

"Whoever or whatever he is, he's made out of reconstituted atoms and molecules," said the engineer, getting down to nuts and bolts. "And the way to put our chrome genie, and his wishes, back in the bottle…"

"Go," said Drury. "Let's hear it."

"A hollow lead shell," proposed the engineer, making a cone with his hands. "Nine feet high, five feet in diameter, six inches thick. It'd look like a big bullet."

"Then what?" asked the weapons expert impatiently.

"Cable them in by helicopter," replied the engineer. "Then, very carefully, lower them over..."

"Like snuffing out a fire," The nuclear physicist snapped his fingers. "He reproduces by pulling atoms out of the air. We seal the rim tight, he'll gradually produce an absolute vacuum. We'll starve him out."

"Beautiful!" exclaimed the chemist. "Simple, inexpensive, and best of all, quiet."

"But suppose he isn't the cigar store Indian he appears to be," said the biologist. "The lander'll burn through the shells quicker than it did the corpse."

Just outside, Wicasa's dog sat up eagerly, wagging its tail and peaking its ears, waiting for a command. None came any animal could hear.

"'FIRST come, FIRST serve', and the last to find out when it's time to get out," said the chief radiologist. "Gentlemen, it's time."

"We can't wimp out now," said the doctor. "Frying pan sitting is what we get paid for."

"Yeah, but we never covered the pan," countered the nuclear physicist. "Whatever our designer android’s got planned for South Dakota, he and his silver siblings are going to pull it off whether we're here or not."

"And after we pack up, we speak up," said the biologist. "From Page One to the Six O'Clock News."

The man pressed his fingers against the knotty slats of the lodge door. The wood creaked...

"No!" objected public relations, with visions of FIRST leaking the man on *Sixty Minutes*. "We'd have half the country out here."

"And the other half in Hawaii," predicted the chemist. "But we can't stand around playing deaf and dumb. That’s his act."

"And we weren’t born yesterday either," said Drury sharply. “There’ll be no high tailing it just because he..."

The door flew open. The man bowed his head and stepped into the circular room. With two long strides he was at its center. Hunched over, he glared down over one gleaming shoulder and then the other.

By golden light reflected on silver, FIRST saw themselves in him. On his knees and elbows, on his back and on his buttocks, his mirrory body bore eight frightened faces as shimmering tattoos.

"I-I, we, my friends and...," began Creighton Drury, his own face reflected in the man's. "Every one of us..."

'Look into their eyes. Whom do your people see? Only me. Not you. What do they feel? Only fear, nothing else.'

‘Don’t blame them. A Man can be afraid.’

‘And His spirit? How terrified are the spirits around me?’

The man's eyes flashed. With a deliberate gentleness, he reached out and touched Drury's face.

"...Want to know you, understand you...," pleaded Drury. "If you would speak to us."

‘They can’t know your humanity. They---!’

'They do know I'm the better part of each of them. Who wants to be human when one can be Man?'

"If you would only tell us what it is you want," said Drury, his words only inches from the man's face.

His breath smelled like raw cavewind. His fingers were warm, sensitive, thorough...On the verge of cracking, Drury's mind conjured up a Renaissance defense: Rembrandt's *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer*...a painting of the first scientist placing his hand on the head of the immortal giant.

Reality was the reverse.

‘Man must have humanity or He’s---!’

'Have you yet to understand?'

"Cray," warned the FIRST doctor. "He's going to lose it."

But Drury kept on. "We would welcome anything you---!

'Humanity is the *antagonist* of…The Milky Way Man!'

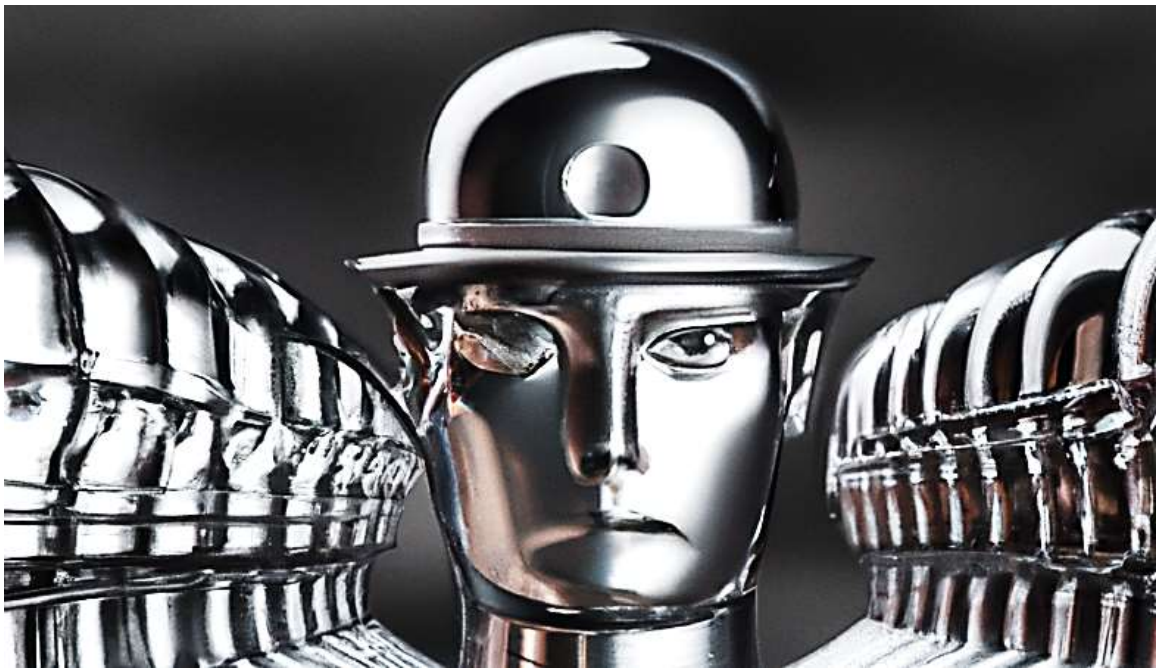
The man clamped his hand shut. Drury's head exploded, brain tissue and blood gushing out between chrome fingers.

Like a steely scythe loosed into soft flesh and brittle bone, the man waded into the rest. Those who dove out the windows or crawled out the door were met by him again and dealt with summarily.

Unable to bite through the steel cable that leashed it or the budge the fencepost that secured it, the dog howled.

The man left the bodies where they lay and returned to his programmed position around the silver spacecraft. By morning, the eight of him would be doubly thick again.

4



'In war, it is not the men that count, but the man.'

Napoleon

The boat-shaped conference table in the White House Cabinet Room was crafted by a hard-of-hearing carpenter, its bowed lengths enabling lips to be read from every chair. This morning that carpenter would have heard every word.

"Cold-blooded murder!" declared President Lansing.

"And we're *not* going to arrest him," said the secretary of state. "By the time we got him to court, he'd be a million strong. Which ones would we prosecute?"

"Negotiations...," insisted the vice president.

“Would be akin to pleading a ticket to a parking meter,” said the NASA chief. “Therein lies the irony of him. Designed by a futuristic technology, he has no spoken language, makes no tools, travels strictly on his feet, kills only with his hands. He is Man *before* technology.”

“He'll be silver dust after our technology gets through with him!” said Defense. “A squadron of anti-satellite missiles at the orbiter, a volley of Tomahawks at the lander. Blow him to smithereens.”

“Which we must *not* even contemplate,” insisted NASA. “His reproductive power…to infuse atmospheric atoms into his genetic infrastructure. Blowing him apart would be like the *Sorcerer's Apprentice* chopping up the magic broom. Every splinter would become him again.”

“We won't leave any splinters,” boasted Defense. “One small, clean nuclear warhead set off at ground level.”

“No, sir. We can’t nuke our own country.” Army General Benjamin Grooms stood up tall, his trim, hard frame as straight as a ramrod, his skin the color of gunpowder. A veteran of three wars and a Medal of Honor winner, he had little patience with fancy-ass politicians convinced they made the world go round.

“This toy soldier out of his shiny box,” said Grooms. “Don't know where he's from, but where *I'm* from he's common unescorted infantry. To defeat him we must *fight* him. On the land, for the land.”

“You're suggesting, general...?” pressed Lansing.

“*Tanks*, Mr. President,” replied Grooms sharply. “One battalion. Victory-hardened warriors, the best. We'll hull down and roll over him.”

“Not without Congress, Mister President,” said the Veep. “Not without...”

“Waiting for a vote?” scoffed Grooms.

Lansing jingled his coins. What was Kennedy thinking of when he approved the Bay of Pigs? What made Carter believe he could pull off that Iranian rescue mission? *God*, he didn't want a debacle!

“Reinforce the cordon around the spacecraft and pull it back five miles.” ordered the President firmly.

“My tanks will...” started Grooms.

“Missiles, *conventional* warheads,” Lansing overrode him. “The orbiter, the lander, every last one of him.”

"But,...” NASA tried to protest.

"Sorry, but your 'Mickey Mouse' scenario is just that," said the president bluntly.

There were now *sixteen* men in South Dakota.

*

On the prairie...

‘Do you understand what you’ve done?’ asked the Oglala *nagi.*

‘What had to be done.’

‘Don’t you feel any regret or remorse?

‘Should I?’

‘You killed people.’

‘You said they humiliated me, you said that I...’

‘I didn’t mean kill them!’

‘What is it you *do* mean? I destroyed only their bodies.’

‘You killed only the you in them, the life you are living you took away from them.’

‘No one lives my life but me.’

‘That’s what they thought.’

‘Their spirits are immortal, aren’t they? Did you see them or feel them? Weren’t they just like you? What did they say? Where did they go?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Why not?’

‘I never had one tell me.’

‘Then there may be absolute nothingness. An empty forever. Spirits die, burn out and blow away in the cosmos. My Designer saved you. I’ve given you life.’

‘I don’t need you or your Designer. The human spirit is immortal. It is the will of our Creator.’

‘Of you and this world?’

‘And all the universe!’

‘An incomplete effort. So much undone for me to finish.’

‘You’ll be finished soon enough. And I won’t be sorry.’

*****

In the White House Situation Room, the eyes of the president and his Crisis Management Team were on the big screen, split with the skies of South Dakota: four F-15 jets armed with anti-satellite (ASAT) missiles climbed high over

the Great Plains, straight into the orbiter's sensors; from around the clock, six B-1 bombers aimed cruise missiles at the lander

"So much for a surprise attack," said CIA. "What do you think we can get for the DVD rights?"

"Last rites," said Defense. "The missiles're guided by radar, satellites, and ground-based telescopes. They can't miss."

"Neither will the cruises," said the press secretary. "The cordon's well out of danger. No one'll be anywhere near Ground Zero."

"Except him," gloated State.

At 90,000 feet, the F-15s launched their missiles straight up. A minute later, the first stages fell away as they reached maximum closing speed. Simultaneously, six B-2 stealth bombers released their cruise missiles. Small guidance fins, like feathers on an arrow, unfolded as they dropped to hug the prairie.

"The ASATs are doing eight miles per second. The cruises, seven hundred per," cheered Defense. "Targets are locked on."

"Ten seconds to impact," The chief of staff counted down. "Seven, six, five..."

Suddenly, from beyond the borders of the screen, narrow beams of bright light shot through space and struck the four ASATs. The missiles disintegrated instantly. A few quick flares as bits of metal burned in the upper atmosphere, then nothing.

"My god!" cried the president.

A second salvo of lights caught the Tomahawks two miles from the lander. The six rockets bloomed like cactus flowers as they plowed afire into the prairie.

"Particle beams," gasped Defense. "We've got billions invested in them, but we didn't think..."

"Obviously," huffed State. "How in the hell are we going to explain this?"

"'High energy atmospheric reaction to intense local radiation'?" suggested the press secretary.

"Who'll believe that?" said the chief of staff.

"Who'd believe *this*?" asked CIA.

Lansing jingled his coins. What did Lincoln do after the Union was routed at Bull Run?

Again the telephone.

There were now 32 men in South Dakota.

*

Sixty-four eyes looked out at the prairie, barren but for a few tumbleweed.

'Being Man…I fill this empty land with strength and beauty.'

'Being a Man is more than power and appearance,' said the Oglala *nagi. 'Both are all you know and nothing more.'*

'There's something else?'

'Many, many things you will never experience, never learn even if you wanted to.'

'And who's to stop me, you?'

'Never! I would have inspired you, pushed you, made you become a better Man than even you believe possible.'

'How could the nothingness you are improve me?

'You will never find out.'

'Why not?'

'Because what you did to the scientists…is about to be done to you.'

*

Like a flock of migrating birds, fifty mammoth C-5As linked up in splendid formation over South Dakota. More like a pelican than an eagle, the lead plane landed twenty-six miles due east of the hexagon. The aircraft's bulbous nose lifted. A tongue-like ramp was extended. Out rolled a heavy tank.

The prairie became an airport. When the last transport had unloaded its cargo and flown away, there were half a hundred tanks lined up, their cannon pointing west.

Where the world was hard and flat, the tanker was king of all he surveyed. But from the turret of his command tank, General Grooms felt more like a farmer. Once his family had owned prairie land. To make the farm pay, his grandfather had mortgaged everything to buy a tractor.

"Got to master a 'sheen, boy, else you'll always be a slave, your grandaddy *believed*," his mother had told him. "Put your heart and soul in a 'sheen, the land is yours. Ain't nobody takin' it away."

During the Great Depression, fancy-ass politicians took the land away. Grooms' grandfather rigged his beloved tractor to run him over so his family could eat on the insurance money.

His grandson wouldn't make the same mistake; he found a better machine. In Vietnam and in Iraq, when Ben Grooms rolled his tank over the land, that ground belonged to him. Until the fancy-ass politicians made him give it back.

Not this time.

"Sir," the radio operator called from below. "The president..."

"Ben, he's seen you and stopped cold," said Lansing. "If he wants a fight, let him come to you."

"Mister President," began Grooms respectfully. "He won't work up a silver sweat to do that. We sit here on our treads, he'll turn on his high beams again and melt down this whole daisy chain. We've got to take it *to* him!"

"Can you beat him?" asked Lansing hopefully.

"Can I?" Grooms patted the rim of the turret as he would a woman's hip. The very first tanks were artillery 'tractors'. The M1A1 Main Battle Tank was a hard-edged, low-profile aerodynamic hull of laminated ceramic armor built around a 1,500 horsepower turbine. A revolutionary suspension system plus air conditioning gave it the ride of a 60-ton, four-million dollar limousine. "Mister President, we'd've been here any earlier, we'd've had those toy soldiers for breakfast."

There was silence for ten seconds. Grooms swore he heard a jingling on the line.

"Ben," said the president finally. "Go get him."

"*Sir!*" Grooms switched the radio to his command channel. "Battalion, open'em up."

Fifty turbines roared in chorus. The prairie shuddered through swirling dust. On the Iraqi desert, the M1A1s had destroyed nearly 500 Russian-built tanks without a single loss, but Grooms had one peeve: his 'sheen sounded and smelled like a helicopter.

"Confirm readiness," he ordered sharply.

Fifty cannon were raised and lowered in unison. Together they swiveled left, then right. Grooms had performed this procedure a thousand times in a hundred different tanks and every time it made him feel like Hank Aaron.

The home team was up.

*

There were now 64 men. Would there be any more?

'You've stopped enlarging again. Why?'

'As you've been expecting. More people are coming.'

'In force. You'll get what you deserve and so will I. The Milky Way will... What the...?'

From out of the southwest, Wicasa's horse galloped up to the prairie lodge. The animal trotted tentatively around the house and stopped briefly in the corral before walking surely to the nearest man and nuzzling him.

'My loyal pony, you still know me. If only I could jump on your back and ride into the sun.'

'You need no one but me.'

The horse shook his head and sniffed the air as if his master were right beside him yet nowhere to be seen or smelled.

'Who needs you? Inside your body I feel like a passenger looking out the window of a shiny pick-up truck.'

'You *are* a passenger.'

From the eastern horizon, a swirling of dust and a rumbling like thunder...

'Not for long. The last stop is right here. The Milky Way Man will be condensed and evaporated and I'll be halfway 'round the Galaxy.'

'Why?'

'Nobody can beat the whole world.'

'Man did, didn't He?'

*****

On the big screen in the White House Situation Room...

"The United States Army," said Defense proudly. "Top of the line."

"The latest version of a weapons system older than all of us," lamented NASA.

"Twenty-five miles from the lander," says the press secretary. "He still hasn't moved a muscle."

"He will," promised Defense. "It's *us* he's after."

“No,” said NASA. “Our beautiful, life-supporting planet. How rare in the Milky Way our earth must be.”

“Well, he's not going to get it,” declared Defense. “Not without a fight.”

“Exactly what he was designed for,” said NASA.

*

Fifty cannon barrels pointing like lances at the setting sun, General Grooms led his tank battalion into No Man's Land.

“You're in range now, Ben,” radioed the president. “Shell him.”

“You want a cannon show, Mister President, call artillery,” replied Grooms over the whine of the turbine. “He'll sizzle any ordnance we can throw at him. I'm going to dance with him, tread to head. He won't be able to flex his track-lights without hitting himself.”

Twenty miles from the hexagon, fifteen, ten--the sparse prairie grass plowed under and spit out by a hundred churning tracks. Five miles, four, three, two--a string of star-like flashes glinted on the horizon as if the sunset were wearing a diamond necklace.

“Metal ducks in a training manual,” radioed Grooms to his battalion as the tanks topped out at fifty miles per hour. “Confirm Seven Thirty-Fives.”

F7M735: an 18-inch shaft with six tiny tailfins and a uranium alloy point. It carried no explosive charge. None was necessary. Fitted into a 120-millimeter shell encased in snuggling 'sabots', the casings slipped away as the inch-thick arrow zoomed out of the cannon and darted at its target at one mile per second to bull’s-eye through a foot and a half of solid steel.

“Ben, you don’t have to get any closer,” radioed Lansing. “You have my permission to fire and retreat.”

“No,” said Grooms. “I don't hit and run. And I won't retreat. We're taking this fight all the way home.”

One mile to go and Grooms got that sensation tankers live and die for. All sense of speed vanished; his body had been completely numbed by the vibrations. The whining turbine shut out even the wind. It was as if his 'sheen was making the earth spin.

“Lase your weapons,” ordered Grooms. The M1A1's laser rangefinder could instantly lock on a hopping rabbit a mile away in the dark. “Crosshairs between his eyes.” A switch of the channel. “Mister President, start minting our medals, chrome and fancy. Mister President---?”

“Radio's gone dead, sir,” came the verdict from below. “Whole system's static.”

“Lot of good it'll do him.” Grooms pulled out a bullhorn and wielded it like a bugle. “Maintain speed and formation. On my mark, we'll swing into a wide semi-circle, break into two-unit teams and fire at will.”

Six hundred yards, five hundred...the man stood in a perfect **X** pattern, not a speck of dust on his body. Four hundred yards...

'Machines that scar the land and foul the air...against *me*?'

'Don't you worry. It'll end quickly. You just stand here and...’

At that moment, an all-consuming energy struck the man and engulfed all of him. Every man began moving at once.

'Too late. You can't run away fast enough.'

'I'm going nowhere. And neither are you.'

The **X** unraveled to become an **O**. In ten seconds flat, the men formed a tight circle around the spacecraft.

“Fancy-ass plebes on parade dress,” laughed Grooms into the bullhorn. “Go to single file semi-circle north of the house...*Mark!* Do *not* fire. Give me a fifty-gun broadside forty yards off his face.”

Matching the man’s drillteam precision, the M1A1s swiftly formed a curving khaki wall. Grooms peered through binoculars. The whites of the man's eyes shone like polished ivory.

The man needed no field glasses.

'Oh, no. A buffalo soldier!' said the *nagi*.

'Who?' asked the man.

'One of the black warriors who rooted out the last of the Lakota *strongholds.'*

'Is he a Man?'

'He'd better be.'

*“*Easy, battalion,” said Grooms calmly. “Easy does it.”

Not a tank, not a man moved. Above the whine of the idling turbines a dog barked. Grooms went again to his glasses. Within the silver circle a horse was munching grass.

“All right, toy soldier,” Grooms challenged the man. “Make your play. I'm giving you first move. Are you a man or a statue of one?”

Fifty cannon primed. The man did not move.

'Coward! You're going to let this buffalo soldier mow you down like a herd of cows?'

'You *want* me to fight?'

'I know no other way. Man never has.'

Still no man moved.

“So be it,” said Grooms disappointedly, spoiling for a fight and stuck with an execution. He checked up and down the line, waiting until a blowing tumbleweed cleared the battlefield.

“FIRE!”

With a roar the prairie had never known, fifty cannon shook the earth to its burrows, loosing a filthy black cloud. A blinding light, a deafening burst but...

'I felt nothing. Absolutely nothing.'

'For once.'

Before the gunners could throw a second M735 into the breaches of fifty cannon, they heard a distinct whinny.

“Not a scratch on any of him,” cried Grooms, foreclosure in the wind. But this harvest wasn't failing. No way. “Floor it.”

With a screeching whine, the command tank bolted from the line.

'One to one, Man to Man. What are you waiting for?'

'Not you. I'll do this on my own.'

'You? You're just an instrument, a tool of the spirit. If not for me, Man never would have fought at all.'

One man stepped forward. Wicasa’s horse saw an opening and raced out of the silver corral, its mane waving like a flag.

Grooms glanced quickly at the horse galloping away and thought of the cavalry made obsolete by the tank. Nobody was usurping his 'sheen. He aimed his M1A1 at his own reflection growing in the man's chest. Abruptly it rippled as the man hunched low and spread his arms.

Midway between the ranks of khaki and chrome, Main Battle Tank plowed into man. And went nowhere as he braced his shoulder against the machine's hardened hull, digging his fingers into the multi-layered ceramic armor.

The mighty turbine wailed. Studded treads raked the prairie spewing dust and pebbles and bits of grass. But like a chrome Atlas, the man held his ground.

Grooms did not panic. He'd fight this fight to the last.

“Hold that pose,” said the general, swinging the turret back. “I'll swat you like a rock.”

The Rock of Gibraltar; the man thrust out his hand and straight-armed the coming cannon. A hundred gears gnashed as the barrel vibrated in vain. And with a flick of his wrist, he bent the cannon back as if it were a pipecleaner.

'Who's the better Man?'

'Not you. Or I. The buffalo soldier. Still he fights, still he refuses to surrender.'

For a fleeting moment, betrayed by his beloved machine, Grooms swore he detected empathy and respect in the man's eyes.

“Yes, sir, toy soldier,” said Grooms sadly. “You and I, we know what time it is. This isn't for the land. We don't own the land. We never will. We just keep paying the mortgage.”

The man's eyes sparkled anew as he drew his fist back, then smote the buckling behemoth, shattering the armored composite like crackerboard. Again and again, he pumped his arm like a piston, setting off one muffled explosion and then another. Hard-edged wheels spun from the churning tracks. Too late the automatic fire extinguisher bathed him in sudsy foam. For all at once the tank's hull dissolved into a raging fireball, catapulting the turret into the air, boomeranging, spewing a sooty corkscrew.

Before General Grooms' body slammed back to earth, the men had sprinted across the gap and pounced on the tank formation, exploding them like a string of fireworks. The few that managed to pull away were run down before they got a hundred meters. The tankers who fled on foot got far less.

Within minutes, the men had reformed their circle around the hexagon. The tanks would burn throughout the night.

‘Wicasa’s vision,’ said the *nagi.*

‘What?’ asked the man.

‘A boy’s fantasy--you are *The Milky Way Man!’*

*

They met again around the boat-shaped table.

“General Grooms and his troops were killed following my orders,” said President Lansing solemnly, feeling as Reagan had when the Marines were blown up in Beirut. “I had to do something. I don't know what to do now.”

“He does,” said State. “His beachhead is secure, the ‘Chrome Zone.’ When he gets his marching orders...”

"Let him come," said Defense. "We’ll lay out a nuclear minefield like we used to have in Europe to stop the Soviet tank armies."

"A ring around Him and the spacecraft," agreed State. "He steps anywhere near one and..."

"Boom?" groaned the vice president. "How many ‘booms’ till we wipe out the country?"

"We could tunnel under him," suggested Defense. "An MX trench, a dense pack of warheads fifty feet under South Dakota and..."

"Bust," finished CIA. "Where're we going to start digging that he won't see us? Nebraska? If he's half as smart as we think he is, one of him'll climb back into the lander, fly somewhere else, and start all over again."

"No he won't," said Defense. "He's committed to the spacecraft and vice-versa. Away from the orbiter, he'll lose his recon and intel umbrellas."

"Coast to coast?" asked the vice president.

"The entire continent," predicted NASA. "Our world, Mister President, is his future."

“Man at the beginning and Man at the end,” said the vice president. “‘Alpha’ versus ‘Omega.’”

Lansing leaned back in his high-backed leather chair and closed his eyes, searching history for a Presidential example to follow. He came up empty. The boat-shaped table seemed to list.

The land of the free would soon be the home of the brave.

5



'To boldly go where no man has gone before.'

Gene Roddenberry

Its spirit broken by the unbreakable leash and the immovable post, the dog whimpered on and on.

'I know. I know!' exulted the Oglala *nagi*. *'Finally, I know!'*

'What?'

'Victory! For so long no Lakota has felt such indescribable pride!'

'What did you do?'

'It was I who gave you the will to fight. Mine is a triumph of the spirit.'

'Is that why I feel nothing?'

'How little you've lived. What do you know of abuse and scorn, of being helpless and powerless?'

'How could I? I wasn't designed to.'

'Do you think any Man ever was?'

‘Weren’t you?’

Like the stars on the first American flag, the men stood in a perfect circle around the lander, a ring on the brink of duplication.

With inborn precision, sixty-four men stepped out of themselves. As he had done before, he who had spawned him remained motionless to thicken again.

But this time, each new man took his traditional five steps and...*continued walking*.

'Wait. What are you doing?'

‘Isn't it Man's nature to discover what lies beyond, to explore, to encounter the unknown?'

'Yes, but...’

‘But what? Through me, you have proven yourself *to* yourself. Have you ever known such strength and joy? You are part of a Man who has given spirit *to* spirit’

‘Yes, but you...’

‘The Scientists sought to stop me. The Soldiers tried to kill me. Would I still be Man if I had permitted either?'

‘And your machine?'

'A tool I no longer need.'

'My dog. I can't leave her behind.'

'You have need of an animal?'

'She is my companion.'

'You have a new one. As do I.'

Everywhere the horizon beckoned. A brave in a strange new world, the man set out in all directions. He would never see the spacecraft again.

‘Your Designer is a fool for not conceiving how powerful you could become. If you are *Man, there’s no limit to what you can do.’*

‘Certainly not you.’

'"Lethal radiation leaking from the crashed satellite in South Dakota'," the media quoted the White House.

"Rush in ten thousand more troops," ordered President Lansing. "Evacuate a full one hundred and twenty-five mile radius."

An impossible task and everyone who knew about him knew it

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*

Sixty-five northeast of Snowflake, in a thick clump of trees off Interstate 90, a pair of locals clad in white radiation suits were hurriedly removing a canopy of tree limbs from a big-wheeled pick-up truck. Like the truck, the radiation suits had been stolen.

"Don't like it, Gould. Don't like it one bit," whined small, wiry Bowden through the fullface visor. "Too simple easy."

"Bowdy boy, we go over it one mo' time," explained Gould, tall and heavy. "The United States Army comes in like gangbusters, roustin’ every livin' body, their cats and dogs, 'sorry 'bout the cows, folks', in the middle of lunch 'cause of the satellite screw-up. The *entire* county."

"Yeah, but..."

"Ain't no ifs, ands or buts. They don't leave no guards behind. No choppers passin' over. Beats a power failure on Christmas Eve."

"Couldn't we wait till after dark?" pleaded Bowden who had always gotten caught in daylight.

"We could," agreed Gould mockingly. "But the radiation won't. These rags'll protect us for only a few hours."

"Nope. Still don't like it. Gotta be a snag," moaned Bowden, his life story a series of 'snags', each costing him at least a year behind bars. "A governmental snag."

"Ain't none," promised Gould, always prepared--to turn State's evidence and walk. There were six guys in the pen who'd be looking for him hard in three-to-five. "We got us science on our side."

"Huh?"

"Free with every pair of suits." Gould held up the Geiger counter he had also taken. "The snag is covered."

Looking like Ku Klux Klansmen with blunted caps, Gould and Bowden got into the truck and headed out on empty Interstate 90.

Eighty miles away, in the Andes Recreation Area, a blue water lake surrounded by unspoiled woods, three Army and two State Police helicopters had been hovering over the campgrounds since noon, their loudspeakers blaring...

"THIS AREA IS NOW UNDER FEDERAL QUARANTINE. RADIATION CONTAMINATION IS IMMINENT. EVERYONE IS TO EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY!"

The warning was heard for miles and every camper who heard it packed up and left in a hurry. But a family of four, tenting in their own secret spot, was missed; Jack and Carol Martin, and their young twins were deaf.

After an early lunch, Jack and ten-year old Chris went fishing. Hours later they returned with a single flapping sunfish.

'That's-it?' signed Debbie, fingers and pigtails flying. 'Daddy,-can-I-take-it-home-and-put-it-in-with-my-goldfish?'

Seeing that his son was about to cry, Jack patted him on the back.

'Chris's-first,' his father signed, raising his boy's pole victoriously. 'Brought-it-in-like-a-veteran-sportsman.'

'I-could-have,-too,' spoke Debbie's hands and eyes. 'If-you'd-have-given-me-a-chance.'

'And-the-whole-season,' gestured Chris with a smirk.

'That's-enough,' signed Carol, fingers stroking gracefully. 'It's-a-beautiful-fish,-Christopher,-and-I'm-sure-Debbie-would've-caught-one-just-as-pretty-if-she-had-been-with-you. As-for-your-father---'

'I-tried,-Hon,' Jack's fingers worked rapidly, each sign flowing smoothly to the next. 'Must've-sat-on-a-dozen-different-rocks.' He touched his rear and winced. 'Only-bite-I-got-is-back-here.'

Four faces burst into laughter they couldn't hear. Deaf since birth, Jack and Carol had struggled to become accountants. The doctors told them the odds of having a deaf child were astronomical. With the twins there had been complications.

'Mommy,-we-saw-helicopters,' Chris whirled a finger over his head. 'They-came-right-over-us. Daddy-and-I-hid-in-the-bushes. They-didn't-see-us.'

'Jack,' Carol signed forcefully. 'You-*did*-get-fishing-permits?'

Her husband made an embarrassed face.

'Mommy,-can-we-go-exploring-later?' Debbie's fingers fluttered between her parents' eyes. 'After-we-eat-*our*-dinner?'

'Carol,-now-don't-get-sore,' Jack's hands moved nervously. 'I-spent-our-last-dime-on-gas.'

Carol considered the limp fish and the money she'd put aside for an ice cream stop on the way home.

'We'll-eat-first,' she signed, raising her hands for emphasis. 'Then-we'll-take-a-walk...to-the-Ranger's-office-to-buy-fishing-permits.'

*

“Mister President, there have been some new developments,” said NASA in the White House Situation Room. “With the full cooperation of the intelligence community, we’ve been grappling with his telemetry like toddlers confronted with cosmic hieroglyphics, but we have confirmed tendencies.”

The president leaned forward. “‘Tendencies?’”

“As the lander was being CAT-scanned, he sent out a sudden burst,” said NASA. “We don’t know what it means. But he got an answer two hours later and killed everybody. The same happened against the tanks.”

“In both instances his reproduction stopped while he waited,” continued CIA. “And when the reply came, it was loaded with a unique electromagnetic pulse which fried local communications.”

“So that’s why we lost contact with Tranquility Base and General Grooms,” said Defense.

“You’re losing me,” admitted the press secretary. “Whatever happened to *The* Law of the Universe: the impassability of the speed of light? How could he have gotten anything in just two hours?”

“His home planet is only an hour away?” asked public relations.

“More likely hundreds, thousands, even millions of *light years* away,” said NASA.

“Then how?” asked the chief of staff, a closet Trekker. “A black hole? A space-time warp? A stellar porthole to another dimension? A parallel universe? A rift in the time-space continuum?”

“We believe the next level in his chain of command is…,” NASA consulted his clipboard. “A ‘grandmother’ spacecraft.”

"Interstellar logistics," said Defense. “An armada out there.”

“Throughout the Galaxy, undoubtedly,” replied NASA. “Perhaps a million ‘grandmothers’ and ten million orbiter/lander vehicles.”

“My God!” exclaimed President Lansing, jingling his coins. Was this how General Washington reacted, his ragtag Colonials up against the combined might of the British Empire?

“There is something else,” said NASA reluctantly. “One hour ago, our Aricibo radio telescope picked up a signal from deep space. We’ve since confirmed it.”

“As what?” said Defense.

“A second spacecraft is en route,” said CIA. “It will be in earth orbit within two weeks.”

*

Kennebec, South Dakota was no ordinary dot on the map; the capital seat of Lyman County had a star in its center. But this afternoon, Kennebec looked like a ghost town from the days of the Indian wars.

Until the big-wheeled pick-up truck came barreling up Interstate 90.

'Afternoon, friend. This is Harvey Paul and have I got news...*for you!*' blared the radio. 'On the CAB, your---'

Gould shut it off and slipped in a CD.

"Hey, I wanna hear 'bout the radiation," pouted Bowden.

Bob Dylan twanged out a classic as the truck neared town.

"It's blowin' in the wind," grinned Gould. "Keep your eyes on the Geiger, Bowdy. I'll do the drivin' *and* the thinkin'."

"*Un*-radioactive radioactivity, that's the snag," groaned Bowden, cradling the silent Geiger counter as they pulled up Main Street. "Microscopic stuff that

don’t register. Passes through the engine block and your clothes and skin and zaps you like poppin' a light bulb."

Gould made a left on Johnson Street and pulled up to the First National Bank. Its bricks dated back to Custer's Last Stand. A drive-in addition came with the Interstate. Gould parked in front. He took a shotgun from the cab gunrack and handed Bowden the lever-action Winchester.

"Gas out your ass, Bowdy," he ordered, sauntering up to the front door of the bank. "And the dynamite outa the bed."

While on the outskirts of town heading in...

'If this is how humanity lives, where is everybody?'

'They all ran away faster than you can walk.'

'How far and how fast can they run?'

'Who knows? If it hadn’t been for that one brave boy, the Milky Way Man never would have been designed.’

Into the center of town. Past a diner, a barbershop, a clothing store...

'You don't eat. You don't drink. You don't have any hair. You don't wear any clothes. You don't even need a bathroom.'

'A what?'

'The things you don't know!'

'I know myself. Man needs only Himself.'

'A Man needs to need...a vision of who He is, and of whom He can become.'

'As you became me?'

Gould shattered the bank's glass door with the butt of the shotgun. The alarm bell sounded like a chow triangle. Gould ran in. Bowden staggered behind carrying his rifle, the Geiger counter, and six ominous bundles.

"Chemicals," he cried, handing Gould the explosives. "Sumthin' in the air we can't see or smell or feel and by midnight we're blue as supermarket fish."

"Government green, Bowdy," chuckled Gould, taping sticks of dynamite to the antique vault.

"Germs," whined Bowden. "Sneaky little bugs that get into you and you don't know it till you're cold."

"*Hot*, Bowdy." Gould lit the combined fuses. "You comin' or you gonna stay and open an account?"

"Comin'! Comin'!"

Gould ran out feeling like Jesse James. Bowden followed thinking Boot Hill. They jumped into the truck. Gould shifted into reverse and gunned the engine. But when he glanced into the rearview mirror...

"Bowdy!" Gould twisted his head out the window. "You don't see him. You *don't*!"

"I-I don't see nuthin'," swore Bowden, craning his neck. "I just *think* I see sumthin'."

Gould tore off his hood. "Not a big chrome zombie struttin' up the street?"

"Drugs," wailed Bowden. "Top secret drugs that make you *see* chrome zombies."

'I have not become you,' said the Lakota *nagi. 'I am still...Who are..?'*

'Your people?'

'Not mine. Ghosts? Driving a truck? Does everybody have to wear a costume to meet you?'

'You're wearing me, aren't you?'

"Wanna bet dynamite makes him disappear?" Gould switched gears. The pick-up lurched forward and screeched to a halt on the other side of Johnson Street. "Not if I know my fuses..."

"He's a gover-*mental* mirage," said Bowdy, wiping his visor "Complete with a shadow."

"Right about..."

With a ferocious *POP!* the First National Bank of Kennebec burst like a brick balloon. In a shower of glass and stone, through a cloud of dust, the front wall and the vault door flew across Johnson Street.

"Scratch one hallu-creation," laughed Gould, getting out with the shotgun. "Bowden, Bowden?"

"Take the money. It's all yours," bawled Bowden, cringing under the dashboard. "I ain't openin' my eyes till we're in a different state."

"You gutless weasel, don't you get it?" Gould slipped on the white hood and primed both barrels. "We've been in our own screwed-up state ever since we've been born."

Dust hung in the air. Rubble marred the highway as in the aftermath of a tornado. Gould moved cautiously into the brown fog.

"Suit ain't worth spit," growled Gould, nervously wiping his visor. "I shudda---"

Somewhere close, broken glass crunched on the concrete. A silvery shape gleamed through the smoke.

“What the...Who the hell are you?” asked Gould, bringing up his weapon.

‘A shotgun,’ said the Lakota *nagi. ‘Does he think I am who I used to be?’*

‘Who are you now?’

‘Still the spirit of a Man...a Man you’ve yet to become.’

"You! You ain't real. This is!" Gould yelled, firing both barrels from the hip.

The shotgun pellets bounced off the man's chest like so many raindrops.

"Bowdy!" screamed Gould, sprinting out of the cloud. "We're outa here, directly to jail."

Gould jumped into the cab and stepped on the gas. The over-sized tires burned down half an inch going nowhere. Gould and Bowden looked out the windows.

The man had crumpled the tailgate. Hand over hand, he was making his way to the cab.

"Gould," whimpered Bowden. "He's the---"

"Don't say it, Bowdy, please---"

The man slammed his fist through the truck roof. He worked his fingers like a thresher.

*

President Lansing readied himself at his Oval Office desk. With a dab of the handkerchief to his brow he began...

"My American friends, together we face a crisis like none in our history. The United States has been invaded by silver robots."

He shuddered and threw up his hands. "I can't *say* that."

Thanking God he was alone, the president bowed his head. He felt like Roosevelt, had FDR been forced to call Pearl Harbor a third-rate bombing.

"In God we trust," he started again, smiling confidently into imagined cameras. "*And* the United States has been invaded by silver robots!

"No, no, no," he cried, searching for that charismatic charm that had won over the electorate. "We took every precaution to secure absolute control. No one did anything wrong or illegal. No mistakes were made. No laws were broken. But he got away from us and we---*No*! I tell the media the truth and they'll make a liar out of me."

He took out a signature pen once used by Harry Truman and tried to feel presidential.

"The orbiter, the lander, and him," he blurted. "Live from the Oval Office with color and verve, and flagwaving confidence. Plenty of pictures, graphics and flashy animation. And him. What am I going to *name* him?"

The president imagined his perfect, proud silver face on a campaign poster in need of a…What name will get out the people? Whose name will win?

If not the young brave, *who*? he wondered. What if America had had…a choice? Would we have rushed to sacrifice one of our own to get this Man *en masse*?

A *Party* Man!

On his laptop Lansing replayed the brave floating towards the spacecraft while his fellow Americans did absolutely nothing to save him—thinking when we should have been *feeling.*

Heart and gut trumps brain every time, but first you had to have some.

The translated text of the brave's final words…

'A boy no more,' the single sentence began.

*

In the Andes Recreation Area, birds sang and crickets chirped, all beyond the ken of the Martin family.

Carol and Debbie were setting up the fold-out picnic table while Chris and his father tended four hamburgers and a freshly cleaned sunfish browning on the grill.

'Dad,-you-really-caught-it,' signed Chris with a reluctant face. 'You-showed-me-where-to-throw-my-line.'

'But-it-was-*your*-hook-it-bit-on,' signed Jack. 'It-was-*you*-who-kept-at-it,-son. You-brought-it-in.'

'Only-to-show-everybody.'

'Christopher,-that-innocent-fish-was-happily-minding-its-own-business-before-you-came-along,' signed Carol with an eye on the grill 'You-*will*-eat-it.'

'I'll-eat-it,' signed Debbie, sneering at her brother.

'No,-you-won't!' Chris' hands went high. 'It's-mine.'

'You-won't-share-with-your-sister?' signed Carol, winking at her husband.

Chris smiled gratefully. 'I'll-share-with-*everybody*!'

A quarter of a mile away, the man moved gracefully through the forest, his every footfall seeming to echo into the earth.

'Do you feel the life of the land? See, hear, smell--Away from Man lives the beauty of the natural world.'

'There can be no greater beauty than Man Himself.'

'You know only what you think you see. You could learn so much by allowing yourself to---'

'No.'

'But you could stay here. You could live here'

'I will.'

'C'mon,-Chris,' encouraged Jack, putting aside his burger. 'Nibble-and-bite,-just-like-your-fish-did.'

The boy stared cross-eyed at the piece of sunfish dangling on his fork. If only they had brought the cat.

'I-ate-mine,-Daddy,' signed Debbie, fingers fluttering proudly. 'I-wasn't-afraid.'

Chris had the fish swallowed before her fingers stilled. He rubbed his tummy and smiled. Jack patted him on the back. Carol kissed him. Debbie sulked.

There was a crashing in the woods.

'Too-good-to-be-true,-lover,' signed Jack as the paper plates burned in the campfire. 'The-weather,-the-food,-and-we-haven't-seen-anybody-all-day.'

He's right, she thought, suddenly wary. There would always be a few hikers who would happen by, and at the sight of their talking hands, slink back into the woods. One flustered couple had tried to give them money.

'Could-there-have-been-a-fire-or-something?' she signed.

Jack stood up. Movement in the trees had caught his eye. Carol tapped his knee.

'Do-you-see-something?'

'A-glint,' he signed hurriedly.

'From-a-gun-barrel?'

'Couldn't-be. No-hunters're-allowed-here.'

Twenty yards in front of them, a rustling of leaves revealed a gleaming which became a moving mirror sectioned by shadow. Too quickly the shape defined itself.

'Who's-he,-Mommy?' signed Chris excitedly.

'Can-he-stay?' signed Debbie, pigtails flying. 'Oh,-please!'

Jack and Carol searched the man as he came closer. His lips didn't move. His eyes didn't blink. He had no...

Jack spoke words his family didn't hear. Carol's scream spooked a dozen birds. A bucket of water on the fire. Jack grabbed Chris. Carol grabbed Debbie. They ran for the car.

The man came out of the woods.

'No! You're not going to kill them,' pleaded the *nagi. 'They're special. They know the language of the hands.'*

'They will soon know mine.'

He strode directly at the green SUV parked under an enormous oak tree.

Carol pushed Debbie into the back seat. Jack dropped Chris in front. He turned the key in the ignition...nothing. One eye in the rearview mirror--it was filling with him.

'He's-the-Mirror-Man,' signed Chris frantically. 'I-see-all-of-me-in-him'

'Oh,-Mommy,' signed Debbie. 'He's-telling-me-I'm-beautiful'

The man walked up to the car on the driver's side.

'Let them go. They only want to be away from you.'

'Their spirits soon will be.'

His gleaming fist about to shatter the safety glass, the man suddenly stopped, spread his legs, and turned his palms out.

'You were going to kill them all, weren't you?'

'And quickly.'

'What stopped you? Could it have been me?'

'Even you know better.'

'You had to stop. You can't completely control yourself.'

'My lone limitation. Not including you.'

Jack made the sign of the cross and hit the ignition. Vibrations in the steering wheel told him the engine had started. He slammed the pedal to the floor and zoomed away on a gravel road.

One last look back; the man stood as if petrified.

Fifteen minutes and ten miles later, the Martins were arrested by the National Guard. It would take them a while longer before they made themselves understood.

There were now 192 of him.

*

"He didn't kill them. He didn't even touch them," cheered the NASA Chief in the White House Situation Room. "They left him alone. He left them alone."

"Or could that one have gone soft?" wondered Defense.

"No," said CIA. "The family escaped because he had reached the end of his gestation cycle and halted to reproduce."

"Machine dictum," said Defense. "Territory over numbers, but his numbers will no longer be doubling. Each newly created man will march one hundred and twenty or so miles while he who bore him begins another fourteen-hour gestation cycle. From now on, his 'order of arms' will increase geometrically rather than exponentially. His current total will equal the sum of his two previous cycles."

"A stop and go pattern," said the press secretary. "Is he going to follow in his own footsteps?"

"He's shifted his path a couple of degrees," said Defense. "Every one of him. With every wave he'll cover new ground, establishing concentric circles of rank. We won't be able to outflank him."

"His timing is just as perfect," said CIA. "All North America will be in the Chrome Zone when the second lander arrives."

"What do I tell the people?" stammered Lansing.

"That we'll fight for every inch of America," said Defense "Helicopter gunships, fighter-bombers, artillery..."

"More wasted lives," said the press secretary. "This isn't a war. It never was."

"Then there's nothing we can do," sputtered Lansing. "There's going to be one of him standing on half the street corners in the country!"

*

The second wave from the lander took the man through a small village on the Pine Ridge Reservation. And the brave back to his roots

Oglala, loosely translated, means 'those who scatter their own'. The tribe hadn't. With maybe 2,000 left, almost every fullblood lived on the reservation where poverty, drug abuse, birth defects, illiteracy, and infant mortality rates were those of a Third World nation.

Into this world came the man, striding up a muddy road into a dirty little town.

'The home of my people. Their land may be poor, and their spirits beaten down, but they long to be proud once again. You are the bravest Man my people have ever seen, the bravest Man in the world. You are The Milky Way Man. The whole Lakota nation will dance and sing songs and...'

Not one Oglala dared to come near him. From tarpaper shacks and primitive log cabins and the tipi-shaped church, old men and young women and old women and children and young men drinking and a few already drunk stared at the man.

Angry stares. Fearful stares. Ignorant stares. As if he were a god the Aztecs thought the Spanish were or maybe another one of those high-tech weapons the Defense Department continued to test on their land.

'Whose Milky Way Man am I?'

'No. They will know me. They will feel me. I'm one of them. I always will be.'

Still no one approached him and the man walked away alone.

'Spirit of Man who has yet to be one, it is you who must learn. The only home, the only people you have...is me.'

*****

The President's address to the nation was called “the bravest, most colorful, and most controversial of his career.” In a calm, fatherly tone, Lansing apologized for the “radiation disaster” in the name of national security. With computer graphics and DOD tapes he introduced…

”The Milky Way Man” (‘A stroke of genius, Mister President!’ cheered the White House press secretary.) as “an “interstellar ambassador on a mission of paramount importance to our world and his own.”

To insure his safety as well as the safety and security of the American people, the Milky Way Man would be escorted day and night by the Army and the National Guard. No one would be allowed to touch him.

Full of patriotic confidence, Lansing felt assured that the nation would understand and measure up to any inconvenience this might entail.

Discussions by the media followed.

America made ready.

The man was on his way.

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***

6



'Give me a place to stand and I will move the earth.'

Archimedes

President Theodore Roosevelt's through the nation's capital featured more than 35, 000 strong including six Indians in full headdress on horseback. A member of the inaugural committee was astonished at the move.

"Why did you select Geronimo to march in your parade, Mr. President? He is the greatest single-handed murderer in American history!"

Replied Roosevelt, "I wanted to give the people a good show."

Same deal in Rapid City, South Dakota, sort of.

"Get up, get dressed, and get in here! And get everyone who wants to keep their paycheck to get in here with you," ordered Mayor Richard Myrtle over his office phone at 5 o'clock in the morning. "You heard me. We're going to close every city department, shut down all the schools, the colleges and anything and everything we can get away with. I want every stiff on the payroll punching in by six AM."

Myrtle slammed down one phone and picked up another. He called the Air Force base. He called his police chief. He called his fire department. Threatening, conniving, pleading, promising, commanding--today would be His Honor's day in the sun.

A self-made, born-again real estate developer, Richard Myrtle had burst upon the Great Plains political scene as 'Tomorrow's Man', the South Dakota candidate who was going to take prairie politics out of the backwoods and into the national spotlight. Alas, that envisioned tomorrow never dawned for Mayor Myrtle.

At the turn of the century, ‘Immigration and Illegal Aliens’ became a hot-button issue in Rapid City. “Can’t have non-Americans coming here and stealing our work. Our very *identity*!”

‘Tomorrow’s Man’ had his own take which the media made great play of.

“A nation born of immigrants, America is in fifty different states of denial,” said Myrtle in a radio interview. “When are ‘The People’ going to admit that we are the great, greater, and greatest grandchildren of illegal aliens?

“Ask any Lakota!”

The sun set quickly on his big-time political future. The upcoming election would be the Vote of Doom. Unless…

Once aspiring to frontier immortality, the best the bald, portly city father could hope for was a larger-than-life statue in one of Rapid City's parks.

"That's right!" he demanded. "Anyone and everyone who owes me a job and their whole family down here in their Sunday best. And round up every respectable Indian you can find. This is the biggest thing to hit Rapid City since Custer found gold in the Black Hills. The Milky Way Man is coming to town!"

Come the man did. Out of the legendary Badlands with the morning sun at his back and the eyes of South Dakota upon him. A National Guard Humvee in front of him and a second on his rear, a company of mounted Park Rangers on his flanks, ten Highway Patrol officers on motorcycles, two heavy trucks filled with Air Force Security Police, and half the Rapid City Fire Department clinging to the big hook-and-ladder truck, chugged and trotted and hummed along with the man at seven miles per hour on the hardened grassy plain aimed straight at the heart of town.

'Walk around. Take the long way. You don't want go through a crowded, ugly city.'

'Who lives here?'

'Too many people.'

More than too many had turned out to see him. Old farmers on tractors, young families in pick-up trucks, busloads of tourists, media vans, drugstore cowboys and kids on all-terrain vehicles. Two times fifteen hundred eyes and almost as many cameras and videocams and cell phones focused on the man they had come to see.

When he tore down a barbed wire fence and strode through a posted pasture, the National Guard and the Air Force Police followed. The highway patrol made everyone else take a bordering road. A blimp was en route. Helicopters circled above him. One came dangerously low.

"Good morning, friend. Now listen good. 'Cause I've got news...*for you!* This is Harvey Paul on the CAB," announced the veteran radio commentator leaning out of the cockpit. "Rapid City, South Dakota, a prairie metropolis famous for four famous busts chiseled out of stone on Mount Rushmore, can now add one more face to its proud ledger. Yes, I'm talking about the Milky Way Man, the incomparable Adonis from outer space, the hubris from the heavens whose classic beauty, Olympian presence, and gleaming perfection intrigues, astonishes and scares the hell out of all of us.

"C'mon, admit it. He does have you a bit unnerved. But there is a way to overcome your fears. Come out and see him. Or just wait a little while and he'll come to see you. In person, because he is, above all, a *personal* phenomenon.

“Now, do make sure you obey the National Guard. Don't touch him. On the contrary, let him touch *you*!

"Don't be afraid. Don't let him intimidate you. No! You are a person, a human being, an *American*!

"Look hard into his proud, magnificent face, then deep into his space-black eyes. Take in his massive anatomy, the flawless luster of his skin, the peerless power of his muscled limbs and torso. Are you gazing across galactic light years and centuries of technological advancement?

"Look harder, harder than you've ever looked at anything or at anyone in your life. His mirror-like skin reflects a unique image. And that image is...*you*!

"Yes, friend, you are *inside* of him. Is he inside of you? See for yourself. In the wake of a titan the likes of whom this world has never known, the question becomes...Who are *you*?

"I'm Harvey Paul...Good day!"

On walked the man, on towards Rapid City, his ardent followers doubling and redoubling every mile. In and out of the Pennington Fair Grounds he strode, past the stalls where cows and pigs and apple pies were judged on August week-ends, past the packed reviewing stand creaking under the weight of a thousand clamoring souls held back by a line of city police, and on through the wide-open ticket gate.

Onward, onward, until...

'No! No! *Not there, I beg you!'*

The man did not break stride.

'Stop. Don't go any further. Please!'

The man kept walking to the shore of Rapid Creek. Sixty yards away on the other side, blotting out the tracks of the *Chicago Northwestern Line*, 50,000 South Dakotans waited, wondering if the man could...

'Don't go in the water. You'll never come out. I *never learned how to swim.'*

'...Swim?'

Behind him, in front of him, all around him everyone stopped short at the creek bank. The water was deep. The current was strong. The crowd was anxious.

The man went in alone, the muddy, murky stream curling up around his knees, his hips, to his chest, his shoulders. Halfway across Rapid Creek, the man went under.

'You're afraid?'

'You're not?'

'Man adapts. Nothing holds Him back.'

On the other side, waiting in the back seat of his 1957 sun yellow Cadillac classic convertible, Mayor Myrtle clasped his hands together and called out to the heavens. "Oh, please, dear God. Don't let the Milky Way Man drown."

Five minutes passed very slowly. Then a mirrory sparkle flashed on the surface of the water. All South Dakota squinted, every camera focused.

"I see him!" somebody shouted and a thousand car horns and twenty police sirens hooted and wailed as the man rose out of the stream like a giant

chrome periscope. Immaculate when he stepped out of the water, the multitude reacted as if he had just walked upon it.

"Make way!" ordered Myrtle, waving his hands from the back seat. "Wherever he goes, I go in front of him."

The police and the National Guard cleared a wide path. With the mayor's Cadillac in the lead, the man and humanity surged into downtown Rapid City.

'Is this what you wanted? To be the center of a ceremony?'

'Isn't Man always?'

'Don't encourage them. Don't smile. Don't even let them think you notice them.'

'You have to tell *me*?

'Then why do you walk their streets as if you grew up here? If only they knew whom you had come from.'

'A Man?'

'Around here, an Oglala has always been someone less.'

Mayor Myrtle had no clue. Reveling in the cheers going over his head, Tomorrow's Man felt like George McGovern, had South Dakota's favorite son beaten Nixon.

Up Columbus Street the man walked as the city's high school band played a pounding patriotic flourish, past Eighth and Ninth Streets where a hundred different banners waved a hundred different messages; across West Boulevard oblivious to the world and in step with the stars, an orphan Odysseus without a smile for anyone.

But when the man came to the corner of Columbus and Eleventh Street, he came under the scrutiny of wizened eyes.

And then there was magic...an ancient power from a ghostly creed reached out and...

'Oh! Do you feel as I do?' asked the *nagi*.

'Have I ever? What's wrong now?'

'I've been touched by the hand of Wakan Tanka*!'*

'Who?'

'No one you could begin to understand. Someone out there knows I am with you.'

'Knows you? But who...?'

'A holy one. Someone in this city can summon the Lakota *spirits!'*

From well back in the crowd, a hundred-year old Sioux acknowledged the man in grim silence. Plainly clad in buckskin and moccasins, Blazing Star was the grandson of a Wounded Knee survivor. True to the tenets of Lakota lore, the old shaman was a stubborn, flickering light of a proud Native American heritage.

The Lakota had one glaring shortcoming: Not too dark or too light, not too straight or too crooked, too drunk or too sober—the natives weren't *American* enough. Americans were winners--Americans won this land; the Lakota lost it.

Numbers decided the battle. Once it was even. Then 10 to 1 in favor of the White Man. With the Black Man and the Yellow Man and then the Brown Man,

the pureblooded people whose spirit dwelled deep in this land from the very beginning were down 1,000,000 to 1.

Numbers against spirit. Always the numbers won.

Was there any spirit left?

Blazing Star *knew* who the man was. For nearly ninety years, the full-blooded medicine man had been expecting his coming.

Time was short. Blazing Star would have to confront the Man *within* the man. Not since the visions of Sitting Bull had a Lakota faced such a quest.

On went the show to the end of Columbus Street where the man left the concrete path and entered the largest park in the city.

"What are you waiting for?" Mayor Myrtle yelled at his chauffeur. "Go after him. Get in front of him! And stop smiling at the TV cameras."

With a rumbling roar, the classic Caddy jumped the curb and lumbered by the man up a grassy hill. The National Guard, the police, the fire department, and everyone and every vehicle the park could hold followed him.

At the top of the hill, seven stone statues awaited; crude concrete replicas of dinosaurs erected to commemorate nearby discoveries--'Damn Eye Sore Park', the locals called it.

The man strode across the asphalt pathway, between two park benches, and into a gathering of sculpted beasts--a duckbilled trachodon, a spiked-tail stegosaurus, a triple-horned triceratops, a dragon-like tyrannosaurus rex…

At the crest of the hill, in front of the long-necked brontosaurus, the man halted.

So did everybody else.

"You mean, that's it?" complained Mayor Myrtle. "He's just going to stand there?'

"Yessir," answered the National Guard captain, getting out of the lead humvee. "For the next fourteen and a half hours."

"But he can't," whined Myrtle. "It's still three hours till Prime Time News."

"That's show biz, your honor."

"Well," huffed Myrtle indignantly. "If he's not going to do anything, may I?"

"Be our guest." The Guard captain flexed his rifle. "But no touching."

Myrtle hopped out of the Cadillac, staring at the man gleaming in the afternoon sun. Mounting a park bench in front of him and the dinosaurs, Tomorrow's Man suddenly wondered if maybe he didn't belong somewhere between them.

'Satisfied?' asked the *nagi*.

'About what?'

'You're being treated like a god.'

'Isn't that what Man creates gods for?'

Dinosaur Park was overflowing. Sensing a dramatic moment, the crowd grew quiet.

"South Dakota, America, *earth*," shouted the mayor, craning his neck to embrace a dozen microphones. "We are here to welcome The Milky Way Man,

not as a stranger, but as one of our own. He is The New Pioneer who, like our courageous forefathers, defied insurmountable dangers to make a journey of destiny. Not to Broadway. Not to Hollywood. Not to Washington, Paris or Rome. But to... *Rapid City!*"

Car horns beeped. Sirens screamed. Drums rolled and trumpets blared over rowdy cheers. With a wave of his hand, the mayor got silence.

"People of every state and nation in the world," he continued, offering his outstretched arms to the media. "Behold our inter-galactic immigrant and let us remember how the Native Americans once greeted our adventurous ancestors with violence and ignorance. We are better than that. We understand the true meaning of exploration. We appreciate the social significance and the challenge of change.

“Here stands this noble and brave trailblazer from the stars in a sacred spot reserved for all eternity. And we stand with him!

“The Milky Way Man, he’s one of us!”

For the Galaxy, the *nagi* could not make the man move.

512

*

Five days passed. Through eight gestation cycles, a tribe of one and many “scattered their own” south into Oklahoma, north to Canada, west to Idaho, and east to Wisconsin.

From cornfields and wheatfields and Little League fields, from Main Streets, Interstates, and country roads, from outside homes and businesses, the man discovered the heartland.

'I never knew, never wanted to know, never cared to find out,' said the *nagi*. *'And never thought I would.'*

'About…?'

'The world around me. How incredible it is and I refused to be a part of it.'

'You are now.'

'More than you. I see this land as you do, but you cannot feel the spirit of it.'

'Does it talk to you?'

'In its own way. It has known war and waste, hatred and injustice, struggle and sacrifice, courage and compassion. Planting and replanting, building and rebuilding. And at its roots, from the very beginning, with the first people, the land has lived with the most precious treasure…freedom. '

'Freedom?'

'The privilege of trying to be who you want to be.'

'If you have sufficient spirit.'

'You do.'

'I am who I want to be without you. Humanity is a jumble of imperfections, a collision of opposites. If this is what these people want to be, it is all your fault'

'Why? What have I done?'

‘Don’t you know by now? Don’t you know who *you* are? It is spirit that has kept humanity from becoming me.’

24,128

*

On the fortieth floor of a Madison Avenue skyscraper, all the lights were off in the lavish corporate conference room. Tips of cigarettes and cigars glowed like young stars in the blackness. Suddenly, a fissure of light cast a pure white circle around a breadbox-sized container resting atop a pedestal.

"Executive vice presidents, committee chairpersons, department heads, major stockholders," announced a woman's voice seductively. "Prepare yourselves for..."

Her scrupulously manicured hands entered the cone of light to carefully lift the gleaming lid and stand the silver box upright. Inside, backed by black felt padding, stood a sixteen-inch chrome figure with shiny black eyes.

"The maximum concept, the minimal expenditure," she enthused, her tone rich and full. "No royalties to pay, no copyright fees, no licensing percentages trimmed off the top. And no advertising campaign necessary. International coverage around the clock and coast-to-coast for all time!”

She steadied the box and removed the precious prototype. The chrome plastic figure was sculpted in two pieces. Its arms and legs were precisely spread. Its palms turned out. An open hinged seam ran the length of its left side.

"The primary shell," she cooed, her unseen lips stroking every syllable. "Designed by a cosmic divinity, pressed out and slapped together in Taiwan, then off to Korea."

She sighed gently, then tripped the tiny snaps on the doll's shoulders and hips. The shell popped open. Inside waited a second chrome figure, infinitely more detailed with fully movable joints.

"Produced and packaged in Seoul," her voice bubbled. "Seven-twenty-six per unit, shipping and distribution included, with a fifty-dollar retail target."

Pausing to adjust her diamond pinky ring, she removed the inside figure, snapped its outer shell shut, and stood the second figure beside the first.

"He is coming...young and beautiful with an asexual energy, doing it without having it, the eternal American Idol," she said, her voice deepening dramatically. "Not to your local movie theater or bookseller or video store or library or concert hall or computer mart...

“But to your city, your town, your neighborhood, your street, to your *home*! Standing outside your front door or in your parking space. He is alone, homeless, pregnant, and silently begging to be taken inside and played with, cared for, loved. Ages three to sixteen, the *sell* is in."

With hands as deft as a shortstop's, she took the figure forcefully, expertly working its limbs---marching, running, punching, kicking.

"He's big. He's bad. He's beautiful. And he's *yours*. Against him, no cartoon character, no costumed superhero, no movie monster or mega-hunk stands a chance.

“Everyone else, everybody is so…*ago*!

“Unbeatable, unstoppable, under your command and your control…you buy him, you *become* him!" she declared into the dark. "And then you'll have to have...His video game, his cookie jar, tee-shirts, lunch boxes, breakfast cereal, pajamas...Ours *exclusively* if we hurry. Morning, noon, and night we'll keep our overseas factories humming. Two million on the racks by Black Friday.”

Murmurs began to build. A cigarette lighter snapped in the dark.

"Uniquely All-American phenom, designer status symbol of the *real* stars," she exclaimed, her voice ripening to full bore. "Ladies and gentlemen, behold… the *toy* of all time."

Applause rang out like a chorus of cash registers. The lights flicked on revealing a lovely, elderly woman in a lush red evening gown, cuddling the doll like a favorite grandchild.

"*The* machismo of the masses, *the* metaphor of the New Millennium...*THE MILKY WAY MAN!*" she proclaimed over the roar of clapping hands. "He's going to turn on the world!"

In a way all his own.

39,040

‘Everywhere you and I go, people look at you as no one has ever looked at me,’ said the *nagi. ‘They don’t see me and they can’t feel me, but I’ve come to understand...that I’m not inside you alone.’*

‘Who else is with you? Let him speak.’

'Not another voice. A dream.'

'A dream?'

'Yes, a vision from the heart, a hope of what could be if...'

'If...what? What would a Man dream?'

'That all were truly Men. *Those who never become* Men *dream...of becoming like you.'*

'But *I* don't dream.'

'If you were a Man, you would.'

*****

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63,168

*

At the Wyandotte County Elementary School, there would be no outside recess until further notice. But it was a beautiful afternoon and her class had been working so hard that Deborah Rosenberg, an innovative third grade teacher, decided her students deserved a short walk.

The man stood in the schoolyard between the climbing apparatus and the sliding ponds.

"Good afternoon, officers," Ms. Rosenberg greeted the pair of National Guardsmen with a smile that had disarmed parents and principals alike. "We have come to observe your most important mission. We will not disturb you or him in any way."

"All well and good, Ma'am," said the Guard in charge politely. "But..."

"Class Three-Five," Ms. Rosenberg faced her students with her hands on her hips. “No one is to even try to touch the Milky Way Man."

"YES MS. ROSENBERG," answered the entire class in unison.

"Okay," agreed the Guard, giving her a longing once-over. "But keep your distance."

Ms. Rosenberg smiled, then set up her class of thirty-two eight-year olds in front of him four rows deep.

The man did not move.

'Look at every one of those beautiful children,' said the *nagi. 'Each one is who you never were and never could be.'*

'I have always been myself. Why be small and weak and ignorant? Why have to grow and change?'

'To learn. To discover the world and yourself. To find your dream.'

'And what did you learn? What did you discover? What did you dream?'

'Not enough. Never enough.'

"Ms. Rosenberg," one of the girls raised her hand and asked eagerly, "Where's the Milky Way Man from?"

A tiny blond girl raised her hand.

"Yes, Maria," said Ms. Rosenberg.

"He's from South Dakota. He walked here."

Lots of hands.

"From outer space," answered the chosen child. "He's from another planet."

"Really, Josh," praised Ms. Rosenberg. *Astronomy--science lead-in.* "What *other* planet?"

"Err...Mars?"

"No!" shouted a bunch of kids.

"Jupiter," tried another child.

"NO!" the shouts came louder.

"Class Three-Five," warned Ms. Rosenberg sternly, "If you are going to call out, we are going inside."

There was total silence.

"Linda," chose Ms. Rosenberg.

"The sun."

"I don't believe so," said Ms. Rosenberg gently. *A model lesson. Every class should meet* him. "Does anybody *really* know where the Milky Way Man comes from?"

“He was designed right here," said an Asian boy. "They just say he's from outer space 'cause he cost a million billion dollars and doesn't work."

“Yeah," added a ponytail. "He just walks along and stops and divides."

"Multiplies," corrected Ms. Rosenberg. *Mathematics, too*.

"But, Ms. Rosenberg," said a heavy kid. "One times one is still one."

"Yesssss," she strung out the word as she searched for another. "He... *doubles*. Class Three-Five, one times two is..."

"TWO!" they responded in chorus.

"*Very* good, boys and girls," commended Ms. Rosenberg.

'I am infinitely more efficient. Who has the time to wait for these little creatures to become anything?'

'Life is an ever-growing, ever-changing cycle. A Man *must know the joy of being young or He's always old. To never grow? To never change? That's not living.'*

'Did you ever dream of having one of these?'

'More than anything else in the world I wanted to have a family.'

'You do now.'

'Only myself and you over and over again. There is no family if everybody's the same.'

“Now everyone put on his or her thinking cap," said Ms. Rosenberg. *Language Arts*. "Who in Class Three-Five has another name for the Milky Way Man?"

Half a dozen hands shot up.

"Sarah..."

"Chrome Vader."

"Tommy..."

"Double-Droid."

"Marta..."

"Shiny," tried the thin, little girl. "Shiny sumthin'."

"Shiny Heinie," laughed a big kid.

"Bruce!" scolded Ms. Rosenberg.

'I have achieved your dream. Each of these little people is as ignorant and as weak as you are. Doesn't that make you my child?'

'More like your embarrassed father. If not for me, you wouldn't be you.'

In the front line was a frail child who rarely spoke. Ms. Rosenberg placed a motherly hand under his chin.

"John Percy Finlay," she said encouragingly. "You see the Milky Way Man with such big eyes. What would you like to call him?"

"Gee, Ms. Rosenberg. He's all silvery," the little boy mumbled faintly. "Like a trophy in one of those muscle contests."

With those words, every boy and girl began looking at him with big eyes.

"That's him!" yelled Bruce, pushing closer. "A Mister America or Mister World or...*Mister Universe*!"

"Bruce Golden," retorted Ms. Drake. Then she looked up at the man. "'Mister Universe'?"

"Mister Universe! Mister Universe! MISTER UNIVERSE!" Class Three-Five shouted louder and louder.

Their teacher and his guards couldn't shut them up.

*

“Mister President, this has become, not a military invasion,” said the press secretary in the Oval Office. “But a social one.”

“Because we can’t bomb him back to the Stone Age?” said Defense.

"We’re *his* Stone Age,” said NASA. “And we find ourselves, not in an inhuman fight, but in a *non*-human one in which we've been dealt the short end of the evolutionary gap. The Milky Way Man has got us by the chromosomes."

“From the moment he stepped on the prairie, he’s been reliving the American epic in fast forward,” said the press secretary. “From when Civilized Man first arrived here to how ‘civilization’ may end up.”

“The ‘Silent Majority’ rules?” said the chief of staff. “His unlimited growth and expansion is the direct result of his mass dehumanization, much like our own

technology-based conglomerate economy, an irrepressible system all the world seeks to emulate."

"So the joke's on him?" said Defense. "Pity the poor immigrant. In spite of himself, the 'noble savage' has become yet another cog in his own ignoble establishment."

"Genesis via technology?" asked the press secretary.

"If you will," said NASA. "He is the personification, or the *anti*-personification of Biblical Man, but he has no Eve, no Apple and no Serpent."

"And America's his Garden of Eden," said CIA.

"What are you talking about?" asked Defense. "I don't get it. Where do we fit in?"

President Lansing didn't say a word. He didn't have to. For a savage moment, every face reddened.

102,208

7






'Nowhere man, the world is at your command.'

John Lennon

Four more days passed; the man walked on...

'If I hadn't been who I am, you would never have been you,' said the *nagi. 'Had I been somebody else...'*

'With you or without you, I would still be Man.'

'Would you? The Man I was before you, he was about to kill himself. If I hadn't stopped him...'

'A Man would do that?'

'Never! It's an act of cowardice and surrender. But Wicasa was willing to die because he believed he could not become a Man.'

'He has, hasn't he?'

‘Not the way he wanted to. Not as someone else. Compared to you, every one in the world is as primitive, and as powerless as the Lakota I used to be.'

In the man's path stood a high fence that stretched across the horizon. The National Guard Humvee in front of him stopped at its base. The man did not, tearing through it easily.

Before him lay a stark barrenness.

'Turn around and get out of here now*. You are walking into a trap.'*

'You're still afraid? There’s nothing here.’

'No, this land is spirit-less. Killed over and over again by a terrible, invisible power. I can feel it. In the air, on the ground. Everywhere. Death lives *here.'*

'Who?'

In his spartan office devoid of degrees and decorations, Brigadier General Maxwell Rudd had been pacing methodically all morning. Tall and trim in his early sixties with a lifelong crewcut bleached white by the desert sun, Maxwell Rudd was a doctor without patients. Only victims. In his thirty-eight year career in the Army, he had racked up millions of 'kills' without ever firing a shot.

He longed for one more.

"Max," shouted a younger doctor, rushing in. "The Milky Way Man is here! Just came through the southeast fence. Had to turn off the juice to let the National Guard in."

"Hallelujah!" exclaimed Rudd, clasping his hands together. "Call out the staff. On the double. Meet me at him!"

The general grabbed his weathered cap, then sharply snapped his fingers. Lying peacefully on a buffalo rug, a beautifully groomed German shepherd sat up instantly, her ears peaked, her tail wagging affectionately.

"Good girl, Chigger," Rudd patted her head as he leashed his pet. ‘Man’s Best Friend’ next to Woman and sometimes better--with a dog, Man always got His way. "You want to go...*for a ride?*"

Of course she did; she always did everything her master wanted. Out they went together. Near the flagpole in front of the huge steel and concrete Combined Chemical Test Facility that also served as Command Headquarters, Rudd waited while Chigger squatted briefly. Then she jumped into her padded seat in the front of the commander's Humvee and they were off, racing with the wind.

Fifty miles southeast of Salt Lake City, Rudd lorded over a craggy domain of mountainous desert larger than the state of Rhode Island--Dugway Proving Grounds, the main test site of the Army's Chemical Biological Warfare (CBW) Corps.

Heading away from Headquarters Test Facility, Rudd drove past the base bowling alley, the movie theater, the carwash and the chapel and the childcare facility typical of any large defense installation. But once outside the hub of main buildings, all similarities ended.

More than half a century ago, Dugway began operations as a bloodless battlefield created to perfect scientific slaughter. In Section A, during World War II, replicas of German and Japanese houses were constructed to test the efficiency of napalm and cluster bombs. Deep caves dug into the mountains were used for anti-personnel gas experiments. In 1944, after a contingency plan called for anthrax-contaminated ordnance to be dropped on German cities in retaliation for the Nazi V-2s, the bombs were tested in Section C.

Activity at Dugway peaked during the Vietnam chemical campaign. But in 1969 Nixon banned all CBW experiments except for defense. With the end of the Cold War, the bottom had fallen out of the testtube. But instead of withering away, the outbreak of international terrorism in the New Millennium brought billions of Defense dollars to the Utah desert to insure American preparedness against chemical and biological warfare.

Not mission enough, thought general Rudd, scientist, soldier and Bible scholar. Suddenly, Chigger started barking. Rudd spotted the man coming over the rise.

"There *is* a God," said the general to his dog. "And I love His Mysterious Ways!"

Between a pair of National Guard vehicles, the man came closer. He took ten more steps before stopping to begin yet another gestation cycle. The Guardsmen hopped out of their jeeps. General Rudd pulled up. The Guards saluted him awkwardly.

"Big chrome bug thinks he can come to *my* land and breed," declared Rudd, getting out of the Humvee with Chigger on a leash. “He’s here. He’s mine.”

"Sorry, sir," the captain brought up his rifle. "Not until the president says so."

Teeth bared, Chigger reared up on her hind legs and barked angrily at the man. Rudd snapped his fingers with a *crack!* The dog sat motionless, her hackles up, her canines dripping.

'A spirited animal doesn't belong on a leash,' said the *nagi. ‘I want her.'*

'No.'

'Always what you want. You let my dog starve when you refused to set her free. I want, I need this dog.'

'You need only me.'

Two heavy trucks drove up bearing the prime CBW staff: seventeen toxicologists and eight lab directors. Clad in dusty white lab coats, they filed out and stared at the man as if he were a microbe in a petri dish.

"Stethoscopes to your hearts, doctors and scientists. Hear them beating faster?" asked Rudd, mounting the hood of his Hummvee like a preacher would the stage at a revival meeting. “Deliverance is at hand."

Chigger tilted her head curiously at the man. The soldiers and the CBW staff dutifully gathered around.

"Look at him, as evil an army as ever held a free nation in bondage," spouted Rudd, borrowing freely from The Book. "Remember Moses and the Hebrews, enslaved by the Pharaoh? Did the Chosen People need a three-

hundred and fifty billion dollar defense budget to defeat Ramses Two? Hell, no! They had God on their side.

"The Almighty blighted the crops, turned water into blood, unleashed plague after plague and finished the Egyptians off with the Angel of Death. Freedom! Victory! And not a single plowshare turned into a sword.

"Come on, Corps. Can't you see what's come to pass? Here before you stands the incomparable infidel who's given us cause for our crusade. And we've got the means to go God one better.

"Beyond the Department of Defense and Homeland Security, we shall become...*The Divine Deterrent!*"

1,133,504

*

The equivalent of going to the moon three times and back without an accident; Steven Marshall liked to think he'd spent more time behind a steering wheel than he had in bed. One hour after sunset and plowing his eighteen-wheeler up the narrow Allegheny Highway west towards Pittsburgh, he was wishing he'd stayed in the sack.

"Yeah, I know I cudda been a doctor or a lawyer, maybe even a baseball player," he argued with his constant companion, his own cynical face in the cab's vanity mirror. "It happened too fast n' furious to use protection. I didn't think she was gonna get pregnant. I loved her. Ten-four, I'd marry her again."

Marshall leaned over the padded wheel. Climbing through the pouring rain in high gear, the rig felt like a fat, horny salmon bucking a waterfall.

"I was gonna go to college, remember?" The face never forgot. "So how was I supposed to support a wife and kid readin' books? I had my license and what else?

“I needed job security, health care, a four-oh-one kay, as in strikeout.”

Tall trees lined both sides of the road. A bolt of lightning zinged across the dark, boiling sky. From the CB radio, an orchestra of whining static played on.

"Don't like this run, do ya?" Marshall asked the scowling face. "You think *I* enjoy haulin' eight thousand gallons of high-ock jet fuel? This load pays double. I got three grandchildren and one in the oven. I'm doin' it for them."

The road twisted left, then right. Up and up, a dark, ominous spiral. Two cars came down. Both blinked their lights as they drew near.

"I saw'em," Marshall told the face. "Smokey's gonna starve tonight. No need to remind me. Inspection's due next week."

At the top, Marshall felt like king-of-the-mountain for maybe fifty yards. He looked for the distant lights of Pittsburgh and could barely make out the rain beyond his dims. The ups behind, the downs ahead, he shifted to low gear and like a devout organ player, gently tapped the brake pedal.

"Mother of Jesus God!" he yelled, pumping madly and not getting a sound. "Don't tell me how to talk. The engine's seized. I ain't got no brakes!"

Darkness rushed by spiked with soaking wind. Thirty-five miles per hour already. Solid woods on both sides. Marshall pulled on his horn and let it wail. The next four miles would be down and dirty.

"Show me some faith, hope and confidence," he begged the face with bulging eyes. "You've got to keep believin' in me. You've *got* to!"

Through one turn and around another, to the moon and back riding a speeding spaceship orbiting a mountain, skirting the guardrail, shooting out waves at the National Speed Limit.

"Double-nickle plus five, plus ten and risin'. I know this ribbon better'n my treads, don't I?" Marshall asked the face. "This turn comin' up's the killer. You gotta hang in there with me. Can't lose it now."

Do or die, highway or no way, Marshall spun his front wheels out. The load swung away. A muddy guardrail blurred into the angry sky. Over the edge waited eighty feet of wet air to the rocks below. Back on the wheel, a hard twist left, then a quick twirl to straighten things out.

"Hail Mary, full of grace," prayed Marshall at the face.

The cab came around clear, but flying behind, the long cylindrical tank slammed into the guardrail, sending a shower of sparks ricocheting into the raindrops. A rear tire burst with a BOOM! Highway metal buckled and wept. But seventeen teary tires plowed the shoulder and held.

"Church every Sunday for a month, *six months!*" Marshall imposed on the face. "Next mile's straight as an arrow and then up like a bow. Flowers for the wife and new dresses for the grandkids."

But eighty yards down the double line, a set of headlights appeared with another set behind them. Red lights flashed and yellow lights blinked about them.

Marshall squinted hard. "Who in the...?"

'Must you always take the prepared path?' said the *nagi. 'When are you going to let me show you the way?'*

'Never.'

'Then you'll never get anywhere.'

Marshall yanked on the horn. Sirens screamed back. Seventy miles per hour, seventy-five---the windshield wipers beat like funeral drums. Between the sets of approaching lights appeared a glittering shape moving along the double line.

"The Milky Way Man!" Marshall shouted at the astonished face.

Like mice before the charging cat, both cars of the Pennsylvania Highway Patrol scooted for safety, their tires squealing onto the narrow mountain shoulder.

Eighty miles per hour, eighty-five--directly at a wet, unwavering mirror.

'Get out of the way!'

'Not if the mountain itself were coming down would I step aside.'

An avalanche on wheels at one hundred miles per hour plus, its huge front grill grinning between four flaming eyes, the tractor trailer powered into the man with an echoing clap that drowned out the thunder's mightiest roar.

And took the man off his feet and down the road pressed against the truck's steaming hood, his gleaming fingers gripping, crumpling the wet metal as he hung on.

Then the road disappeared beneath them. Through the guardrail and into the air and off the cliff, man and truck flew locked together in the storm.

Two heartbeats from the earth, the man peered over the truck's hood ornament and stared into the driver's face.

'He knows he's going to die, doesn't he?'

'Yes.'

'Is his spirit preparing him?'

'I hope so.'

Steven Marshall stared back. Raindrops blew from the man's face, glittering in the night like shooting stars. A bolt of lightning zigzagged across the sky above him, highlighting his every feature like a church statue bathed by a thousand candles.

Marshall could see his own face reflected in the man's forehead. It was screaming. Until man and truck slammed together into the jagged rocks below, bouncing and somersaulting, the mammoth fuel tank ripping open, spewing a volcano of flame up the valley wall.

The Pennsylvania Police officers looked over the cliff, barely able to withstand the heat and smoke. But they had to see.

And they did.

Effortlessly, not a cinder, not a speck of soot staining his shimmering body, the man strode out of the inferno and began climbing up the sheer rock wall.

When the man again reached the roadside, the Highway Patrol was long gone. He continued walking up the mountain alone.

*

Since early in the morning, the man had been standing on the White House lawn.

'I was told of this place with its big, white, perfect buildings. From the President's City those who had never set foot on the prairie saw fit to steal the land from the Lakota *nation. If only* The Men *knew I were with you. If* The Men *could...'*

'Your dead can do nothing. Yet you would have them dancing around me?'

'You're hearing a dream. I'm imagining with my heart.'

'You have only my heart.'

'Don't you think I know that? I'm creating a story I want to be true.'

'*I* am true. What more could you dream?'

"Do you want to go out and talk to him *now*, Mister President?" asked State. "Or should we assemble Congress around him?"

"Lay off, Mister 'One less ward of the State'," warned CIA "Who'd've thunk to bet on the Indians?"

Lansing threw up his hands. What president ever knew anything about Native Americans? Except how to get rid of them!

"A motorcycle gang attacked him on Interstate Forty," reported the vice president. "A fraternity party tried to push him over outside a campus bar. Twenty dead."

"We don't have enough troops to cover him," complained Defense. "There's half a million of him walking around unescorted."

"Half a million without a cop," cringed CIA. "We ever let that happen downtown, there'd be bedlam."

"He won't have to lift a finger," predicted the press secretary. "By every legal statute, he's an American citizen, born and raised here. If he decides to open his mouth and demand his unalienable rights."

"What if he just wants a job?" tried State.

"Like mine?" suggested Lansing. "He and his chrome clones get the notion to register and vote...He'll be in here and we'll be out in the street."

That made for a pregnant pause.

The black telephone rang. State handed it to the president.

"General Rudd," Lansing cupped the phone. "Rudd?"

"Maxwell Rudd," groaned Defense. "He's---*Wait!* Put him on the speaker."

Lansing did so. "What do you want, general?"

"Authorization for Project *Silverfish*," said Rudd to the whole room. "Permission to kill the Milky Way Man."

"How?" demanded Lansing.

"Chemical Biological Warfare."

"Mister President," pleaded the Veep. "You wouldn't."

"Anybody have a better idea?" asked Lansing.

No one said a word.

"Rudd, that stuff was ordered destroyed," said Lansing. "You still have some?"

"Lab samples," replied Rudd. "And if I can kill just one of him, we'll be able to produce enough of whatever it takes to kill *every* one."

"Insanity," grieved the veep.

"Serendipity," proclaimed Defense.

"Anything we have to do, general?" asked Lansing. "What about the environment?"

"No problem," assured Rudd. "I'll use individual doses. Pour it on his head personally if I have to. Any of it gets into the air'll disperse safe as steam."

Defense leaned close to the speaker. "All dependants and non-essential personnel off the base. All experiments in total secrecy confined to Dugway."

"Yessir, Mister Secretary," guaranteed Rudd. "With the Commander-in-Chief's permission..."

Lansing didn't jingle. "You've got it!"

"And you've got my unconditional guarantee, Mister President," said Rudd. "If gas or germs or viruses don't get him, I've got defoliants and herbicides, and a whole zoo of snake venoms and..."

1,834,048

*

One hundred years ago, the towering six-story apartment building was hailed as an architectural wonder. Constructed in the center of downtown

Chicago, *One Hundred Twenty-six Brown Street* became the proud home of twenty-four families and the lofty hub of a thriving community.

Time had not treated the red brick structure well. Old age, as it had to so many, brought poverty, fear, and finally abandonment. Its every shattered window boarded up, shamelessly stripped of its shiny copper piping and its once sturdy walls profaned, the cornerstone of an age long gone had turned its final corner: *126 Brown* had become the corporate headquarters of the latest generation of Chicago gangsters--crack dealers.

At the height of the evening rush hour, a brazen spark of community spirit sought to put the proud, old building out of its misery. The flames began flickering in the gasoline-soaked basement and dashed up through the first and second stories faster than thieves, driving its criminal squatters out into the streets. Police and fire department sirens wailing useless in the distant gridlock, the burning apartment house cast a million fluttering shadows, including the man's where he stood on the corner.

From a rooftop across the street, three young boys had eyes only for the man. Barely able to read and write, the trio knew every facet of their tiny world. And television even better.

"He is ours," declared Otis, a chubby twelve-year old who had made his mark a thousand times over. "Easy as pie."

"Pizza pie," spat the younger Paco with only back alleys to crow about. "We go near him, we bake. We touch him, we get flattened."

"Shhhheeeet! He's virgin stationary," said Otis. "Ain't movin' for nuthin' and nobody."

"Me neither," shuddered little Mario, the novice of the group.

"A blitz gig," proposed Otis. "We soak up, sneak down, *do* him, and book. Five minutes at the max."

"You ever see *Pop Tarts* after five minutes in a toaster?" asked Mario.

"Five minutes for...*immortality*!" pushed Otis.

Paco looked past the man to *126 Brown Street*. The flames had reached the fourth floor.

"Word up," he concluded. "As crispy critters."

"Yo, bro!" Otis got angry, pointing a finger down at the man. "Don't yous get who he is?"

"Who cares?" snickered Paco. "You seen one, you seen'em all."

"Not in *our* 'hood. We's got to show him that," pleaded Otis. "Change him, make him our main Milky."

The other two peered down again. His back to the fire, the man's skin glowed like molten metal.

"Talk to me, posse!" Otis raised a high-five.

"With ya!" Paco slapped his hand hard. "I got his left leg"

Mario had to jump to slap. "His right leg's mine's."

"And I got his chest," gloated Otis. "Armpit to armpit."

The boys danced downstairs and doused themselves with buckets of water. Otis grabbed his trusty highchair. Tools in hand, they snuck into a doorway across the street from him.

The fire department had finally arrived. Three pumpers were shooting arcs of water into *126 Brown*'s flaming wounds. Hastily erecting a barricade, the police tried to keep the spectators back; the whole neighborhood had turned out for a long overdue cremation.

"Don't let your feet loaf," advised Otis, crouched like a sprinter.

"Not for my soul," whistled Paco. "We be's headin' into hell to tattoo the devil."

Under the police detour and over the fire hoses, three smoky shadows stole across the concrete.

'Do you see those three?' said the *nagi. 'I used to be a boy like that.'*

'What do "boys" do?'

'They seek to be Men of their own.'

'Like me?'

'No boy wants to become a Man exactly like a million others.'

'They *try* to be different?'

The boys approached the man with fragile bravado. Paco and Mario set up at their claimed limbs. Between them Otis unfolded his highchair and climbed up.

"Chill, Milky Man, I ain't gonna diss you," declared Otis, shaking up a spray can of gloss black. "I'm only gonna personalize you."

'What is this boy going to do?'

'NOOOOO! Don't let them perform this ceremony. I never had reason to paint myself.'

‘But didn’t you tell me a Man could be *any* color?’

Flames crowned *126 Brown* in celebration colors. The firefighters could only contain the inferno. The symptoms neglected for far too long, the victim was beyond help.

Hot cinders twinkled in the air like stars. Cloaked in smoke, creative hands worked feverishly under destruction's pyre, the paint taking to the man‘s skin like blood to newsprint. **C-A-P** so far up his right leg; **T-I-G-R** down his left leg; and **S-W-E-E** across his right breast. Letter by letter, hardware store glossy dulled upon his deep luster.

"**TIGRE HOMBRE**!" panted Paco triumphantly.

"**CAPRI II**," Mario coughed in victory.

But Otis wasn't finished yet.

"Gimme your can, man," he yelled down to Paco. "I'm doin' a two-tone job."

"For third degree burns?"

"Gimme and book!" ordered Otis. "Mines'll be the headline."

Cans exchanged hands. Mario and Paco disappeared into the smoke. Steam rising out of his hair, Otis was alone before the man.

"Alright, Milky, just me and you," said Otis, shaking up his second can.

The man did not move.

‘This boy will become a Man?’

‘Only if he lives long enough.’

"You-You're expendin' as I speak, bigger and bigger to propergate," marveled Otis, his reflection in the man's chest caged by bold black and red strokes. "I'm autographin' the Statue of Puberty."

One last swirl and it was done. Flaming debris smoked the street. Through a storm of cinders, Otis jumped from the chair and dashed into the boiling soot to meet the same fate as his cohorts--grabbed by angry hands and taken behind the barricade.

"Sweet Cool, **SWEET COOL**!" shouted Otis to his world. "I did the Milky Way Man!"

Not a moment too soon. In a thunderous roar of failing age old brick, *126 Brown* collapsed upon itself and over the man in a swirling cloud of smoke and dust to the cheers of the crowd applauding justice at long last served.

An hour passed. The last wisps of smoke had wound away with the wind. The fire department, the police and the spectators had all gone away to homes of their own. Only the three boys remained, their eyes stolen by a huge mound of blackened bricks.

'This is what happens to a Man's body,' said the *nagi. 'If a Man still has a body after He dies.'*

'What?'

'It is placed in the earth.'

'By whom?'

'Those who will follow Him.'

"Ain't no way he's dead," said Otis. "Matter of fact, he's a better man now than he ever was. Every one to come outa this one's gonna have our tags on him. We done us a whole case of Milky Way Men."

"Yo!" pointed Mario expectantly.

A chunk of charred wall had begun to move. Wet soot gave way. A gleaming hand reached up from the cremated remains. Out of the ash heap, the man burst forth to again stand rigid and, the paint completely absorbed into his body, immaculate.

*

Nerve gas is the only weapon that should be *allowed* by the Geneva Convention. Low in cost and high-tech flash with an excellent kill ratio, nerve gas left no heroic tradition for future generations to live up to. Imagine if the Trojan Horse had been filled with twenty tons of nerve gas or if Generalissimo Santa Anna had billowed a cloud of nerve gas upwind from the Alamo. Totally lacking in swashbuckling sex appeal, if wars were fought strictly with nerve gas and decided by which way the wind was blowing, maybe there'd be fewer wars. So held Maxwell Rudd.

Young Max set out years ago to become a general practitioner like his father and grandfather before him. But halfway through medical school, his family fell on hard times.

To make it through med school, Rudd took a gamble. Scraping together every cent he had, he bought a semester's worth of poisons and a beat-up yellow

panel truck. Atop the vehicle he propped a handmade plywood spider and a blood-red sign: *THE Exterminator Can Kill Anything*.

Within a month Rudd had recouped his investment and went on to make a killing in pest control. Moreover, ridding the world of what good people wanted dead came with a perpetual pardon and not a shred of guilt. Returning to school, he switched to toxicology and graduated at the top of his class. The Army drafted him six weeks later. He volunteered for CBW before he even got a uniform.

The morning sky over Dugway Proving Ground was clear with minimum wind; ideal weather for nerve gas experiments. The CBW Team had fitted out in "astronaut" suits with large round helmets and oversize plexiglass faceplates. Each carried its own oxygen supply on its back plus a hand-carried briefcase at the end of an attached cord for purification and reclamation.

Everyone was ready to go except...

"C'mon, Chigger," ordered Rudd, coaxing his dog's paws into her customized outfit. "Okay, let's get your helmet on, and your oxygen tank. *Sit*. Wag your tail. *Good*. Don't want you splitting a seam."

Chigger obeyed faithfully. The neutered prize of a champion's litter, she had never known any other way. Not even the *idea* of another way was in her making.

All secure, the caravan headed out from the main base into Great Salt Lake Desert where the man stood waiting. Rudd carried the gas crystals in his Hummvee with Chigger. The doctors followed in the truck armed with

flamethrowers. After the experiment ran its course, they would cleanse the air with fire, a technique picked up from the Soviets in Afghanistan.

The man saw them coming five miles away.

'Beware,' said the *nagi. 'This soldier is no warrior, but a murderer who attacks the land and the air. Look what he's done to his dog. No animal should be made to dress as its master. She should be as naked as I am.'*

'Don't you have *me* on?'

"Down, girl," ordered Rudd, yanking on Chigger's leash as they neared the man. "After I kill him, you can chew on his silver bones till your teeth wear out."

Rudd would be very careful. Some thirty-five years before, a spray nozzle malfunction sent an invisible cloud of nerve gas drifting over the nearby Indian reservation, killing 6,500 sheep. Had the wind been blowing in a different direction, half the population of Salt Lake City would have died horrible deaths.

It had not been a productive morning. Already F-gas, GB, VX, Soman, and Tabun had failed to make the man so much as blink. Rudd was down to his last nerve gas: *Zyklon B*, a souped-up insecticide used by the Nazis to murder millions of Jews, Gypsies, Communists and other human beings deemed inferior by the Master Race. Any weapon that could make an entire people vow 'Never again!,' Rudd held sacred.

The operation was no high mass. More like a suburb job. Rudd placed the cigarette pack-size *ZB* container between the man's feet. The team took positions ten yards from him in a surrounding circle, flamethrowers at their hips. Rudd then took out the small remote from his pocket. With the press of a button,

the *ZB* container flipped open. Colorless, odorless and fatal if a tiny droplet touched the skin, enough gas to kill a neighborhood enveloped him.

The man did not move.

'Can you feel the death? This is the coward's way of war, to kill without seeing the blood or hearing the cries of pain.'

'I feel nothing. I see nothing. I smell nothing.'

'That's why I'm with you. To warn you when you don't know any better.'

'Any better and you wouldn't be here.'

As Rudd waited for the gas to take its grisly effect, the questions accumulated. If *Zyklon B* killed *Silverfish*, would it do so faster than he reproduced? What kinds of ovens would have to be built to burn the millions of chrome corpses? Where would the mass graves be dug? What would his ashes smell like?

After ten minutes, Chigger began to bark, fogging her plastic helmet. Rudd shook his head; the dog could diagnose *Silverfish*'s condition better than his staff could.

"Oh, well," sighed the general, more relieved than discouraged as he waved in the flamethrowers. "Who the hell wanted another Holocaust anyway?"

The man did not reply.

2,967,542

8



‘There are no Indians left but me.’

Sitting Bull

'Why are you...You?’ asked the *nagi. ‘What is it you want? Are you looking for something? Will you keep walking around the world until you meet yourself coming the other way? What are you going to do when there's no place left to go? What then? Who is your Man?’*

'Whomever *I* decide Him to be.'

'No! Man is determined by the quality and strength of His spirit.’

‘A Man by *your* judgment.’

‘Man can’t be Himself by Himself.’

‘You don’t trust Man, do you?’

‘Man doesn’t trust Himself. He never could. That’s why I am.’

‘Every Man, every Woman has you inside them?’

‘Not me. Maybe nothing like me—good, bad, weak, strong---a little bit of all in each. There’s no predicting.’

‘And I got you.’

‘Yes, and whether one is the unique creation of the Great Spirit or designed by a Supreme Science, there’s something you have to feel you have even though you might not yet know what it is.’

‘Power!’

‘ What gives a Man power--- purpose.’

‘Humanity has a purpose? Each and every one?’

‘There are exceptions---those who never seem to have had any spirit to begin with.’

‘What color are they?’

‘Not about color or age or sex. People with nothing left inside them.’

‘Their spirits ran away?’

‘A spirit never flees, but it can become lost, and after trying and trying to find itself, it stops bothering to look anymore.’

‘People who had died kept living?’

‘I had to get away from them.’

‘Afraid as always.’

‘Not of them—of what had killed them.’

‘*Life* does that? Not to me.’

‘Never. You’ve got me!’

‘But…where did you come from?’

‘From what you don’t have...a mother and a father and their mothers and fathers.’

‘You misunderstand me. The first spirit in the original Man…Was it created or designed or merely a fluke in the life process? Who or what made you who you are?’

‘The eternal Mystery of Man—How humanity became humanity. By comparison, your designer is simple and obvious.’

‘Don’t compare your origin with mine. If you cannot confirm how you came to be, how could you have *any* purpose?’

‘You’re the answer to your own question. Without spirit, humanity would be just like you...without me.’

‘That I could dream.’

4,801,590

*****

Deep inside the cold, damp belly of the world, Blazing Star sat cross-legged in the dark, puffing on his great-grandfather's redstone pipe filled with red willow bark.

For three days, the Lakota shaman had not eaten or had anything to drink. Yet he felt no chill or dank. Here in this sacred place, he would hear and see and feel beyond hunger, thirst and cold.

"*Wakan Tanka, onshimayala*," he begged the Great Spirit to take pity on him. "I thank *You* for Mother Earth and the natural creatures which crawl on Her beautiful face. *Wakan Tanka*, all has been done as *You* command."

As best the old one could. After seeing the man in Rapid City, Blazing Star had returned to the reservation and prepared a traditional sweat lodge. Inside the beehive-like structure of laced cottonwood branches covered with a quilt of animal skins, the ancient Lakota sat naked sprinkling pure spring water on fifty red hot stones marked by prehistoric etchings.

"Oh, holy rocks, I receive your *woniya waken*. Let your white breath cleanse my skin and my mind. Make room for the vision of *Wakan Tanka. Mitakuye oyasin*!"

His pipe spent, he emerged hours later to slake his thirst and rub his body with dry sage leaves. Then he dressed in plain buckskin and moccasins and draped his mother's blanket over his shoulders, ready at last for his quest.

But he wouldn't take a bus back to Rapid City and ride with the tourists to the site of the four Presidential faces carved into the Black Hills, the *Paha Sapa*, the dwelling place of the Great Spirit. Nor could he bring himself to accept a ride in a car or truck. If only he had a Lakota *horse*!

So he walked. The going was difficult. After six hard 'sleeps' he at last stood before the hidden entrance to the sacred cave. With the strength of his

youth, Blazing Star pushed aside the blocking rocks. Into the blackness he went, barely squeezing through the narrow fissures. He carried no torch. He knew the way from ninety winters before when a nameless comet blazed across the prairie sky and an Oglala father gave up his only horse so that his son might become a Man.

The tribal shaman had led Blazing Star to this cave, and left him at the entrance. The young brave went in alone. When he came out the next morning, he had indeed been changed. But to this day, the oldest Oglala alive had yet to believe he had become a Man.

"*Tunkashila*, grandfather spirit, help me," Blazing Star pleaded to the blackness. "Flood my *nagi*, my immortal soul with *Your wowakan* power. Bring him to me again. Open his mouth and his ears so that I may know him, that he may know *You*."

Crystal spring water trickled through the caverns; the tears of *Wakan Tanka*. Cryptic pictures had been painted on the walls long before the coming of the White Man---teachings in the language of *Wakan Tanka*. But Blazing Star heard and saw none of it. He was as one with the universe, on the verge of spiritual equilibrium, teetering at the doorway to the Other World.

"*Wakan Tanka*, are *You* still here?" he asked, refilling his pipe and lighting it. "*You* who created the earth and the heavens, are *You* still...?"

Suddenly, the pipe went out as if smothered. Blazing Star held his breath; an overwhelming presence was filling the cave, an invisible power conquering the blackness.

All at once, the holy dark began to glow, the air itself burning like fired clay. *Sha*, the sacred indelible hue---a cold, deep redness enveloped the cavern.

"*Wakan Tanka*," cried Blazing Star, his teeth chattering. "Are *You* bleeding? Has my coming wounded *You*?"

Out of the painted walls streamed a frigid fire, rippling in an arc of blues and yellows and greens not of the sky or the sun or the land---the lights of the distant stars created a glowing rainbow across the cave.

There came a pounding like the beating of a drum that Blazing Star had not heard for almost a lifetime.

The bands of the rainbow wavered and stretched as ripples in a pond, and broke as the man walked through them. Glittering as all the Galaxy in a mist of blood, he came on, striding proudly. As if he had come to the end of a long journey, the man stopped to sit cross-legged in front of Blazing Star, his barren groin barely a step from the tips of the old shaman's moccasins.

'*Hau kola,*' said the man, his hard, deep voice filled with harsh timbre.

'*Hau kola*," replied Blazing Star, his every wrinkle aglow. "I am Peta Wicahpi, *pejuta wicasa* of the Oglala."

'I know who you are,' replied the man. **'You believe you know who *I* am.'**

"More than you know yourself," said Blazing Star. "Do you know why you were made?"

'For a better world, a better Man.'

"You are not Him."

'Who could be better than I?'

"You'd have no way of knowing, would you?"

'I know all your world.'

"Save Man Himself," said Blazing Star.

'Man,' he laughed, the redness shimmering in his face. **'...is a weak and corrupted creature, a victim of His own humanity.'**

"You were created out of one."

'This world was created out of molten matter. Infinite improvements were required to generate life.'

"You generate only yourself. Yet you do not understand *who* makes you alive."

'I've made every Man understand.'

"Not *every* Man." said Blazing Star.

'Who could be so ignorant?'

"Or so proud?"

'*Who*?'

'Me, ME!' cried the Oglala *nagi* from inside the man*. 'I am him, but I am* not *him.'*

'*You*? You are less than nothing,' declared the man. **'Who I cannot see, cannot feel, cannot be.'**

'I'm as alive as you are,' said the *nagi. 'Don't deny me.'*

'An empty echo of my design, nothing more.'

"You can't begin to imagine who that voice is," said Blazing Star.

'I have no need to "imagine".'

'I do!' said the *nagi*, growing stronger. *'If you know who he is, holy shaman, tell me.'*

'Primitive dreamer,' the man challenged Blazing Star. **'Will you spout one of your foolish myths to define me?'**

'I will,' said the *nagi*, almost shouting,

'Man makes believe,' he laughed. **'I make belief.'**

"Man believes," said Blazing Star. "Because He needs to."

'Who is he?' asked the nagi *"The Messiah the Paiute promised the Ghost Dancers?'*

"He is no one's Messiah," said Blazing Star.

'Is he *Daddy-Long-Legs, the Long White Bone Man who would come to run over the world?'*

"No," replied Blazing Star. "That Man came five hundred winters ago."

'Is he *the son of the Caretaker?'* tried the *nagi*. *'Has he come back on the winds of the universe? The Caretaker gave birth to twin boys. The boy who received a greater vision gave birth to a male child. Is he...?'*

"No," said Blazing Star. "The son turned himself into an eagle and gave us the seasons. He gives us nothing."

'I have given Man myself,' he declared, his face filling with fiery pride.

'Has he?' asked the *nagi*. *'Is he a* Wakinyan*? Was he created by the Great Spirit?'*

"Only the part of him that is *you*," said Blazing Star. "His is an inhuman power placed here by the Thunderbirds."

'How do you know that?' asked the man.

"Before the *Wakinyan* bring *Their* power to earth, *They* first send down a dream."

'Whose dream is he*?'* asked the *nagi*.

Blazing Star hung his head. "Mine!"

'*You* created me?' bellowed the man.

"Yes. On this very spot, *Wakan Tanka* revealed you to me--You were the vision of my youth."

'No!' retorted the man, his body shaking, reds and yellows and blues dancing from muscle to muscle. **'You are not a Man.'**

"More than you could ever be," said Blazing Star, ripping open his shirt to reveal the sacred scars on his chest.

'The marks of the Sun Dance, the holiest of Lakota ceremonies,' said the *nagi*. '*He* is *a Man.'*

'*I* am the bravest Man in the world. I am The Milky Way Man!'

"You are not," said Blazing Star. *"Ikche Wichasha*, the grandson of the Caretaker named us, the tribe from which you came. We are red. We have the male organ. You have neither."

'Because I am *only* me who every Man would trade every night and day of His life to be for one heartbeat.'

"Not I," said Blazing Star.

'How can you say that?' asked the *nagi*.

"I know because I *dreamed* of being him, a Man of Men who would inflict upon the world what the world had inflicted upon the Lakota. I wept the weak and frightened tears of youth for his coming."

'He came from me,' pleaded the *nagi*. *'Is he my fault?'*

"He's every Man's fault."

'What can I do?' asked the *nagi*.

"To save Man from Himself," said Blazing Star. "You must prove that His spirit is stronger than His body."

'Never! No one is more powerful than I,' boasted the man. **'And you know who I am?'**

"*Na ecel lila wakinyan agliwakinyan namahon*," Blazing Star swore the sacred Lakota oath.

'The Milky Way Man knows who he is!' raged the man and the whole mountain seem to shake.

“No. There are no stars in you, and no red. Neither Milky Way nor Man, you are not of the Great Spirit who created each and every life unique from all others. You are forever the same--He who would ravage the earth in his own name."

'WHO?'

'Tell him!' ordered the *nagi*.

"*Mila Hanska Wasicu Oyate*," said Blazing Star. "Convinced you're designed by the highest holy power, you deem yourself superior and entitled to rule. You are…America's Whitest White People."

The man sprang angrily to his feet, his eyes aglow like twin comets. He balled his fists, but before he could strike a blow, his eyes went blank and dark. The pounding of the thundering drum ceased. Up, up the rainbow floated and vanished into the sheer ceiling. Every color left him including his own as his silver skin turned a dull, shallow gray.

The man tried to move but could not. Tiny cracks began to form all over him. Within seconds, the cracks widened and his body crumbled into pieces and then into black dust which dissolved into the darkness.

Again Blazing Star was alone with his pipe. For longer than he would ever know, he sat transfixed, unable even to speak. He shivered and began to grope in the darkness. Sharp stones cut into his flesh as he squeezed through the narrow openings to the light.

Have I been to the Other World? the shaman asked himself. Or did the Other World come to me? Or are visions merely the dreams of fools? There had been no gift offered. The smallest traditional courtesy would have validated the ceremony. If only...

Blazing Star crawled out of the mountain to see the sun gracing the treetops of the Black Hills. And something more. Waiting for him at the mouth of the cave, two hundred miles from the lander, was Wicasa's horse.

*

Green, pink, purple, white, blue, and orange: Chemical Biological Warfare plantkillers were named for the colors of the factory drums they were stored in, making for a full palette to paint *anti*-landscapes.

The base almost completely evacuated, General Rudd had split Project Silverfish into teams. A dozen men occupied Dugway Proving Grounds. Half were sprayed with lethal amounts of arsenic trioxide, sodium cyanide and maleic hydrazide; the other half with herbicides, potions of vigorous acids and poisons.

No toxin worked. Only one left: Orange. Each drum wore a stenciled warning: *Caution. May cause skin irritation. Keep out of the reach of children.*

Rudd had once worshiped Agent Orange. Spraying over Vietnam, he felt like the Angel of Death. But no bodies. Dioxin, Orange's miraculous ingredient, killed only plants by making them overproduce. Super-ripened vegetation exploded. Tiny weeds became gigantic bushes. The tallest trees, overladen with stricken fruit, bowed down and rotted. Flying anti-crop missions, Rudd and his volunteer ‘Ranchhands’ damned an area larger than Israel.

Years later, the Army would reap what it had sown. Veterans began dying of cancer and fathering children with birth defects. When the vets finally won their lawsuit against the chemical companies, Rudd wept.

No one would weep for Silverfish, the general was certain. Out in the desert sector, his squad had been dousing the man since early morning, a jungle's worth every half hour.

‘This Medicine soldier is filled with his death science,’ said the *nagi. ‘In love with his poison prowess.'*

'Are you afraid of him?'

'Insulted. Does he believe you are a row of maize?'

Dressed in baked rayon camouflage uniforms, Rudd and his dog examined the man.

"Always the same, only thicker," declared the general, needing no instruments to make a diagnosis. "I can *see* Orange being absorbed into his skin, Chigger. Faster than water into a tree root. Can't even raise his temperature, Chigger, *Chigger*!"

The dog was sitting and wagging her tail. At the man.

'Fine animal. She may be clad as her master,’ said the *nagi. ‘But she can sense my Oglala spirit. Does she want to be with a hunter of plants or does she want a true master?'*

'Like the one you have?'

"Where's he getting his energy? Atmospheric spontaneous generation?" wondered Rudd out loud, feeling like a Dark Age physician who believed flies sprang from decaying meat. "High speed photosynthesis? If he's processing sunlight, why doesn't his reproduction slow down at night?"

Rudd peered into the man's navel to see his own twisted reflection. Death on the barrelhead had been the guarantee of THE Exterminator. On a few jobs he spent more on poisons to clean house than it paid, but he never gave anyone back a dime.

"Will Orange kill you, Silverfish?" he asked the man, remembering his former troops and their stricken children. "Will cancer bubble your skin? What color rash will take to your chrome? What blood type will you bleed? How often will you cry out in pain? Will you or only your offspring suffer? Will your head swell and your backbone shrivel up with spinal bifida? Orange will make you talk--to beg MEDICAID for a wheelchair! *Chigger*!"

The animal had her paws up, begging before the man.

"What's the matter with you, girl?" Rudd bent down to check the dog's helmet and air tank. "Once your mouth was watering for a piece of him. You've got to get your juices back."

The man's were flowing. At maximum mass, he began to glow. Rudd called for his team. Six whitecoats came, their fingers on the triggers.

"Chigger," ordered Rudd. "Chigger, *here*."

The dog did not come. Rudd pulled off one of his gloves. *Crack!* The team misunderstood the snap of his fingers; they pulled the triggers. Orange spewed from half a dozen nozzles in a dirty cloud, consuming man and dog.

"Cease fire!" cried Rudd.

But it was too late.

The man had peaked. Like sunbeams through heavy clouds, his holy aura shone out of the toxic fog. And also a wagging tail. Until...the man stepped out of himself. Through and out of the dioxin he strode, perfect and gleaming.

With the dog *heeling* him.

"No, Chigger, *no*!" screamed Rudd as if THE Exterminator's plywood spider had crawled down from atop his old yellow panel truck and fallen in with the house termites. Like a panicked father, he ran after his dog and tackled her.

"Stupid mutt. Orange's pickled your brain," he shouted at her. "Is your mask leaking? Can't you see what you're doing *to me*?"

'Free her!' pleaded the *nagi. 'You have the power. She deserves to be with me as I deserve her."*

'No.'

'It's always your way. What about me?'

'I am not about you.'

Chigger looked back and forth in confusion. The man she had wagged her tail for was still standing where he'd been, but he was also walking away.

"Housewife herbies and backyard weedkillers," swore Rudd, clinging desperately to his dog. "No more. From here on in, I play God."

7,769,132

*****

"This is Harvey Paul and I've got news...*for you!* On the CAB with the Milky Way Man everywhere. I'm watching him on television.

"High def reflections with minimal distortion, his body brings out the every shade of...*us*. We who have earned our color, or lack of it, by our ancestors' days in the sun can only wonder: is silver the hue of the stars?

"Feel his presence on the home screen. If you ever used your size and weight, or your brute strength or masculine presence to intimidate others, take a gander at him. If ever you demanded your fellow man look up to you, how does it feel to be on the downside of his nose?

"Don't identify with him, for goodness sakes. To be identical is to have no identity. Conform to the norm? Be fine in line? He stands out and he doesn't. Whatever worth of individual you are, you *are* one. He isn't and never will be. Not in *our* world.

"He is more than a cosmic design of the body of Man. Much, much more. The Lost Generation, the Beat Generation, Baby-Boomers and Generation X--with each new American era has come the shortening of the most precious time in our lives: childhood. The Milky Way Man has done away with growing up altogether. Infinitely young, yet totally devoid of youth, is he what America's coming to?

“I think the Milky Way Man has a problem: he doesn’t understand *who* we are, cannot accept *who* we are. This gleaming prototype, this army of technological perfection, cannot compute our unanimous imperfection, our myriad of differences and indifferences…

“Black and white and brown and yellow and red with three hundred million unique visions of who we are, here and in the universe.

“Color, creed and the country you left to sneak under the wire or your ancestors who came over on the *Mayflower*, we understand who the Milky Way Man isn’t. We understand. All that stuff is understood because of who we are…

Americans!

"React to The Milky Way Man, but don't think about dreaming he's going to react to you. That stoic stare—he never smiles or frowns or even blinks. We don't know if he's happy or sad or just trying to cope his way through. Does he?

"Made for an interstellar and Interstate road trip, what does he make of us?"

"**'I have seen the full human diversity all in one land,'** I can imagine him telling his programmers. **'Too few have too much and too many have too little.'**

"Does the Milky Way Man *care*?

"Do take heart. We've got nothing to worry about *yet*. Let him stand where he will, walk where he must. It is not his feet we have to fear. How could he be a threat to our righteous pursuit of happiness? He doesn't drink, doesn't smoke. Doesn't gamble or do drugs. Doesn't have a family to abuse or abandon. He's never going on welfare and he'll never collect a cent from Social Security. Thank the Lord he has yet to learn how to drive.

"Our declared independence begins and ends with our Constitutional rights. Freedom is knowledge. Knowledge is news. News is television. What we see is all we know. Freedom of television isn't just news, it's the Bill of Rights... *in a tube!*

"And everywhere the Milky Way Man goes, whatever he does, the tube's got him covered. Give him the right of way. Allow him his space. What pedestrian plot is worth a minute of Prime Time?

"But friend, listen to me loud and clear. Let him squeeze out the tube, surrender him television and our vision of America will vanish forever and forever more!"

12,570,722

9



'Now I know I've got a heart, 'cause it's breaking.'

L. Frank Baum's ‘Tin Man’

Three more days passed. Over hill, over dale, under the rivers and through the woods, the man walked on until members of his outer circle reached the shores of the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans, the Great Lakes and Hudson Bay, the Gulf of Mexico and the coast of the Caribbean Sea.

The man did not go into the water. On the docks, on the rocks, on the beaches, on every shore, he turned away from the pounding surf and lapping waves of fresh and salt water to face, as if it were the Mecca of the Milky Way, the spacecraft in South Dakota.

'Who do you belong to? Whose commands do you follow? From your very first step, you've never walked your own path or made your own way.'

'Because I am not your man, I must be someone else's?'

'A Man follows His spirit in pursuit of His dream. You have neither.'

'I need nothing. I am all I want.'

'You have no idea of what you want. You don't know what freedom is. You don't even know how to want *to be free.'*

'If only I were free of you.'

Sludge and slime dripping from his body, the man came out of the Hudson River and mounted the crumbling Manhattan waterfront. There was no frantic crowd waving signs and snapping pictures. No marching bands or welcoming dignitaries. No photographers or reporters. As the first man to fly the Atlantic and the first to walk on the moon and got ticker tape parades in the media capital of the world, those who followed got scant notice. Old news, but getting no older, the man rated just two police cars, their drivers already bored.

Nearby, from the back seat of a vintage Rolls Royce parked next to an empty warehouse, a beautiful young woman wrapped in fine fur stared out through the tinted glass window.

"Follow him, Mister Crafton," she ordered her African-American chauffeur. "It's your job if you lose him."

One police car in front, the second behind him with the Rolls Royce trailing, the man walked east on 42nd Street. Eleventh Avenue, Tenth Avenue,

Ninth, Eighth. With his every step, the woman in the limousine studied the gleaming muscles rippling in his back. Their last time together, it had been she who'd turned her back to him.

Her pride and her beauty had earned her an honored name: Makhta. Her father had promoted her as the flower of the Oglalas, demanding a fortune for her hand. But the chief was a drunkard who beat her mother and connived with white ranchers to boot Lakotas off tribal lands.

Makhta had fallen in love with a Man. But there was nowhere in this world for His dreams. To be with Him meant slaving her life away in dusty poverty, following one step behind Him like a dog.

Makhta ran. In the greatest city in the world she discovered the fattest of buffalos: a rich White Man. She married on the condition that she would never be a mother.

"Good, Mister Crafton. Don't crowd the police," she complimented her driver. Since even Native Americans had once owned slaves, she had insisted upon the blackest chauffeur she could find. With him in the car, she appeared almost white.

One half mile south of Central Park, mounted police strutting their trained horses, joined the man. Crossing Seventh Avenue, he arrived on the Great White Way as a one-man show with a growing ensemble of extras; he who had knocked them dead in South Dakota and was currently playing in every Peoria, stopped The Street.

'Endless city! You're not going to stand somewhere in this glass canyon controlled by lights and clocks?'

'People live here.'

'How?'

At Broadway and the Avenue of the Americas, the man found himself at the Crossroads of the World--Times Square, where the glitz and glamour of the theater district collided with the New Millennium “family entertainment” version of Sixth Avenue in a wide-open, buzzing intersection lit up night and day by a menagerie of mammoth neon signs and digital billboards.

In the middle of the crossroads that wasn't, the man stopped. Afternoon rush hour wouldn't. The cops jumped out of their cars and began directing the traffic around him.

'You don't have to stand here, do you?' said the *nagi. 'Couldn't you go somewhere more private?'*

'What? *Here* you're shy...or ashamed. Which is it?'

'I don't know!'

"Mister Crafton," ordered Makhta, wishing she were on a horse. "Take me to him."

The Rolls pulled up close. A police sergeant knocked on the driver's window. The glass descended and a black hand appeared with a wad of bills. The cop waved the limo closer.

Makhta looked into the mirror and wiped the whitening make-up from her face. She barely recognized her natural self. She knew he would. In a rush, she

kicked off her designer shoes and doffed her fur coat, then tore the jewelry from her ears and hands. Mister Crafton opened the rear door and out stepped an Oglala maiden in plain buckskin and bare feet.

“Yes, *Wicasa Ohitika*, the Boy who would be a Man, " she called him by his full Lakota name in their native tongue. “Son of all the Lakotas and father of none. Still you are naked. Still you are penniless. And still the world walks behind you.

“I knew The Milky Way Man *had* to be you. No one else is the universe is Man enough.”

'Makhta! It's you*!'* said the *nagi.* ‘*You know he's me. Only you. I am everywhere and all the same and I am still your Man.'*

“You and your honorable quest,” she spoke up to him. “So proud, so above all the rest of us. Rather than have a special woman, you wanted to be your own special Man.

“How does he *feel*, Wicasa?”

‘*This* Woman you know?’

‘So well I believed. There was a time when her body and heart belonged to the Man I had been. Her spirit and I embraced, making me burn with a fire you couldn’t begin to create.’

‘That’s possible?’

‘Oh, yes it is!’

The man stood motionless. Times Square never has. From every direction they came, their high heels clicking madly, against the lights and the law, a cross-section of New York City's streetwalkers converged on the man.

"Long John Silver!" squealed a platinum blond over the hump of a prancing police horse. "Me, me, me! I'll dress you up in Fifth Avenue's finest."

"Be mine, Long John," begged a plump one in polyester. "I'll put you in a limo long enough to stretch out your strong sexy legs."

“So much of you is missing,” said Makhta, reaching out to touch the man’s groin. “But so much more of you is him. You’ve got a silver body and a White name, but you’re redder than I ever was. You are the Man you always believed you could be. Only you could have become him.”

‘No, NO!’ cried the *nagi. ‘I am forever me, forever who I was created to be. This sculptured shell around me is not a Man. He’s been fooled into believing he is by the machine that designed him.’*

‘You would deny me…to a Woman?’

'Who would you be without me? Alone by yourselves, confined to this empty colossus that is your body. Because that is all you are. You are as trapped as I am, but not Man enough to admit it.'

Outmaneuvering the cops, the hookers got closer.

"Wugga-wugga-wigwam, Pocahontas," yelled one of them. "Your tribe don't own this island no more."

"What's up with this?" whined a fourteen-year-old six weeks out of Minnesota. "The only thing we ever get from Johns, he ain't got."

"Bet he's got a tongue bigger than my foot," swooned a grandmother in her early thirties.

'Are these other Women friends of yours, too?'

'They're every Man's friend for a price,' said the *nagi.*

'Won't *any* Woman do?'

'Not for a Man. A Woman's body is not enough. A Man's embraces her spirit. We *call it* love*.'*

'But it doesn't last?'

'Ours should have, but her spirit demanded more than me.'

'This woman I understand.'

"I'm the one's who's changed, *Wicasa*, not you. You never could and you never will," said Makhta. "The Milky Way Man *is* you. You wanted him more than you ever wanted me.'

"Stupid bitches. Can't any of you see who he really is?" declared a $300-an-hour princess with the best head in town on her shoulders. "A big, beautiful body in love with itself. He's his own sex for his own sake. He's who Man is…without Woman."

86,201,006

*

Contrary to popular belief, chemical/biological agents are not "weapons of mass destruction." They kill—people, plants, animals and insects—anything and everything that lives anywhere. But they do *not* destroy. Buildings, vehicles, art

and technology all remain perfectly intact--the unique efficiency of chemical/biological warfare.

Anthrax, small pox, cholera, Q-fever, bubonic plague, encephalomyelitis, brucellosis, botulism toxin, turamia, Rift Valley Fever, psittacosis, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever--'biologicals' were the living agents of the Divine Deterrent. Rudd had them sprayed on the man and thought of the American Holocaust begun by the British when they presented the 'Indians' with gifts of blankets infected with small pox. Biologicals killed more Native Americans than the Winchester 94 and the Colt 45 combined.

None could so much as raise a culture on the man's skin.

A helicopter arrived from the Federal Disease Control Center. Its cargo was unloaded with the greatest of care. Samples infected with syphilis, gonorrhea, herpes, and six gallons of AIDS-tainted blood were splashed on him.

The man continued to reproduce.

Out came the venoms, the all-natural, super-concentrated, fast-acting wonder-killers. Milked from reptiles and spiders, then crystallized not unlike freeze-dried coffee, they were more lethal than nerve gas. From king cobras to kraits, diamondback rattlers to African adders, and sixteen types of spiders, the poisonous doses were misted upon him.

With no results.

A larger helicopter set down. Armed guards filed out. Marijuana, LSD, morphine, heroin, cocaine and crack cocaine were burned by the bale in front of him or spread on his skin or blown up his nose.

'What are these substances supposed to achieve?'

'The great lie,' said the *nagi. 'They will make you believe you're strong, important, invincible.'*

'I already am.'

'Drugs will remake you. Soon you won't be able to live without them. In the end, they will conquer and kill you.'

'Did any ever remake you?'

'Only you have.'

From the Environmental Protection Agency came toxic wastes, radioactive wastes, industrial sludge, sewage and prime pollutants. Down to the bottom of the Project Silverfish barrel--acids, detergents, inflammables. Whiskey and wine, everything and anything through the night. For nothing.

Chigger was no longer permitted to watch. Rudd had chained her to the base flagpole. Hour after hour, she sat, her front paws up, her ears peaked, and her tail wagging for the newest man to come, standing only twenty feet away.

'Is that any way to treat a loyal dog?' said the *nagi. 'She deserves a worthy master. As I deserve her.'*

'You? Prove that you deserve *me* and the animal is yours.'

As dawn broke, Rudd assembled his entire team in the Laboratory Briefing Room. The mood was somber. From the Commander's podium, Rudd looked out at his patient, faithful staff and saw a crowd of disappointed, disillusioned, and disbelieving housewives. Was THE Exterminator going to give them their money back?

"Gentlemen, it has been my belief that chemical biological warfare is a moral, legitimate, and most important, a winning weapon," the general began. “In trying to prove that against the Milky Way Man, I sought vindication in the eyes of fighting men around the world. But it was not to be.”

Rudd paused long enough to look each and every team member in the eye. “I hereby disband Project Silverfish. You are to evacuate Dugway immediately. Good luck."

When Maxwell Rudd called it, it was over. Every officer saluted him respectfully on the way out. Many had their cars already packed up. The last one pulled out within the hour.

"Now it's just him and me," he said to his dog, patting her on the head. "Time for some private, personal killing."

Chigger stared at him woefully.

The air was calm and well within temperature range. Rudd got on a forklift and positioned four napalm canisters at the corners of a five-yard square with the man at its center. To each drum the general attached a thermite charge and timed it. Then he went back to his locker and got into his Army Class A uniform.

When Rudd entered the inner laboratory, he left the air lock open. He did not take the mandatory shower. He wore no protective gear. He went directly to the massive security vault.

The general pressed a series of numbered buttons, and pulled the thick steel door open. Inside sat a small black box held secure by a complex series of locks. Rudd took out a set of small keys and unlocked the security devices in

precise order. The box secure under his arm, he carried it out to show the man and the dog.

"This world we live in, Chigger. Most of the poisons I used to kill bugs with, now condemned by the Board of Health," said Rudd as he flipped open the container. "But the stuff to kill people, money in the bank!"

Rudd reached in and took out a small phial resembling a bottle of altar wine. The gray-green liquid it held was CBW's crowning achievement: PSEUDO, a designer plague created by 'shotgunning' chromosomes, combining the genes of the most lethal diseases.

This would be its baptism of fire.

The man was in the midst of a ceremony all his own. By the millions.

'As I do this with you...as you think only of yourself, I am remembering her.'

'Was it this powerful, this big, this important?'

'With her it was much, much less, and so much more.'

'Impossible!'

'For you it is.'

Chigger watched keenly. Again her master checked the four drums. Then he got a stepladder. He set it up at the man's feet and climbed up. Eye to eye with him, Rudd felt like David with one last stone left in his sling.

"Is he to be the new son of Man?" Rudd asked the heavens as he poured the anointed liquid over the man's head. "Whose God created him?"

‘You and your spiritual judgments! You don’t know how I feel any more than you know-----OOOH!'

'The medicine doctor's magic potion, striking like ice colder than the frozen dead.'

'What am I feeling? It, it...*hurts*!'

'Pain. It's the rub of life. Endure it or quit.'

'I don't know how to fight it.'

*'Then learn...*now*!'*

When the man's eyes clouded over, Rudd smiled. He came down the ladder with one last lock to open: he freed the dog.

"That's a good---"

Chigger ducked under Rudd's patting hand and bolted for the man. Pawing his leg, she begged for attention.

Rudd yawned deeply, but not from fatigue. The initial symptom. No head-gear or clothing could have protected him. Only intense heat could kill *PSEUDO*, hence the napalm.

For a fraction of the cost of one B-2 Bomber, the CBW Corps had perfected the final foolproof weapon. The contingency plan called for *PSEUDO* cultures to be fitted into warheads on cruise missiles. Six hundred strong would have struck the heart and brain of the Soviet Union's defense systems. With neither a bang nor a whimper, the Evil Empire would have ended with a snore; every male between draft age and senility falling asleep and never waking up.

The Russians *did* wake up--Communism self-destructed. But Rudd wasn't about to abandon *PSEUDO*, no more than the atomic bomb fathers would have aborted their radioactive babies had Japan surrendered before Hiroshima.

'I am failing. Help me.'

'What are you afraid of? Your numbers are countless.'

'I am all or I am none.'

'Without me you always were. I've known fear and pain every day of my existence. It's Wakan Tanka*'s way of keeping me going, keeping me pushing.'*

'*Wakan* who?'

'The Great Spirit, the most powerful force of all.'

'But that's me.'

'Then how come you're dying?'

'Oh.'

Rudd pressed his fingertips on the man's chest. All warmth had left the man's body. His eyes had gone completely blank. His muscles had turned soft and puffy. Stricken, the man began to teeter.

"Initial Stage complete. Silverfish is asleep on his feet," diagnosed the doctor-general, rubbing his hands together gleefully. "Final Stage coming to bear. Long past point of possible recovery. Condition: terminal."

Chigger looked from Rudd to the man and back again.

'Don't give up,' said the *nagi. 'Don't surrender to the pain. Send yourself beyond yourself. Accept your weakness and your fear, and fight!'*

'I can...barely...hear you.'

'Then listen. Give in now and you're gone, every one of you. Are you The Milky Way Man or not?'

'I-----'

"The artificial virus conquers the artificial man," gloated Rudd. "THE Exterminator Can Kill Anything, Chigger, *Anything*!"

The dog slumped soulfully next to the man and groaned.

'Are you Man*?'* cried the *nagi. ' ARE* YOU*?'*

'----------'

'I am Man. I am the life within life, the fire that never grows cold. You are the body. You must feel me, join me, burn with me!'

'----------'

'Come on! Burn with life. Burn with the will I give every Man.'

‘---------’

“Fall! Fall on your face, Silverfish,” demanded Rudd. “You’re already dead and you don’t know it.”

With one gust of wind, the man might have bitten the dust. It was as if an invisible, unknowable brace were propping him up.

‘---------’

At the moment he was supposed to die, from deep within him, a tiny glint appeared in the man's eyes.

'Yes, YES! You can beat it. You've got the spirit!'

'I hear...you. I *feel* you.'

Slowly but inexorably, like the stars appearing in the night sky, the man's dark eyes came on as sparkling and as bright as the moment when they first opened.

'I am...I *am*!'

'Who is Man*?'*

'I have always been and always will be.'

'And...?'

'What?'

'And...?'

'Yes, so are you.'

'And...?'

'*Agreed*.'

The man again stood straight and tall and gleaming. And in full heat.

"Damnation!" swore Rudd, barely able to stand.

Chigger sat up and started to bark.

At the center of a pulsing corona, the man achieved duplicate mass. Autogenesis was imminent. The napalm charges ticked away. General Rudd fell to the ground.

"Chigger," he cried. "Chigger!"

The dog hesitated, but she came and sat, staring at the general. She tilted her head and with eyes big and round, extended her paw to him.

"Good dog," said Rudd proudly, weakly shaking her foreleg. "I tried, girl, I tried to kill him by *The* Book and…I wanted to be the Savior. Prayed God would choose me to rescue humanity…No man is the Savior. Either God created us to be on our own or designed the Milky Way Man to show us that we can't be."

The man stepped out of himself and without breaking stride, stepped over Rudd lying in the dust.

The timers ticked down…under five minutes. Her whole body tense and shaking, Chigger looked from man to man to master.

"I'll be going real soon," said Rudd to the dog, his voice fading. "I lived by my special sword. Couldn't ask for a more fitting fate. But not for you, girl. Go, Chigger, *go*!"

The dog reacted instantly, bolting after the walking man. And when she fell into pace beside him, she barked happily.

*'*Hoka hey*, hound,'* said the *nagi. 'You'll learn to be* Lakota *quick enough.'*

Man and beast went together due west. The walk would be his last.

139,471,436

*

The distant towers of downtown Detroit shimmered in the sunlight as the man drew nearer to them with every step.

Other American cities had histories, legends, myths. Detroit had more. Let the rest of the nation proclaim “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” Detroit had a definitive purpose; to produce.

The motor of the American spirit, Detroit outproduced the rest of the world. In demand, Detroit was in command, the city that *made* America.

As the sun set, the man strode though the fashionable suburbs and received scant notice, as if the citizens had been used to shiny foreign-made invaders seeking to usurp the soul, the very identity of their city.

Of course they had. Shiny foreign-made invaders had been trying to overthrow Detroit from the very beginning, claiming they were “better made,” that their producers were “better managed,” and that their vision was not of the present or the past, but the future.

Detroit dismissed the lot of them. Detroit had the power and the numbers, and most of all, American *values.* MADE IN DETROIT ruled the world

As the man entered the inner city…

‘I didn’t believe you at first, but now I do. Humanity has divided itself into colors. Not completely, but remarkably so.

‘Here and in too many other cities, no reservations needed.’

Detroit was born a divided city. Visionaries here, workers over there. The privileged over here, the poor over there, and *stay* there. Time drove the divisions deeper--between Labor and Management, quantity over quality, the present against the future, between black and white.

As night fell, man passed by abandoned buildings, burned-out buildings, weedy lots, gutted apartment buildings and boarded up businesses…

‘Was a war fought here?’

‘Had to be.’

‘Your people?’

‘No. Had the Men lived here, they would have all died out. In battle or not, every last one would have been killed, gone, their every spirit broken.’

MADE IN DETROIT had been the difference in a thousand battles. The Motor City *won* world wars. War did not come to Detroit, it had been *in* Detroit, the battlelines drawn from the very beginning by the competitive culture of the city.

People were killed in the riots, homes gutted, businesses destroyed. As the city blazed, one color blamed the other. The rich blamed the poor. The visionaries blamed the workers—racism, unfair housing, lost jobs, ghettoes, slums, squalor, hopelessness. A thousand fingers pointing at a thousand divisions and none at all who never saw the war coming, never imagined it ever happening, refused to believe that *Detroit*…

The foreign-made invaders grew stronger, out-producing and out-pricing Detroit. Not only better made, the invaders were better *values*. Those values began to take root in America, the foreign-made invaders remaking themselves in the very heartland. Could Detroit still compete? It always had, with itself. In pursuit of the benefits of the American dream, Labor and Management took on each other, and after every battle, both sides would proclaim victory, underestimating the foreign-made invaders and ever overpricing themselves and their products, winning the present, one day at a time.

Had time run out?

The '*Motive City* is "Coming back!" declared the industry CEOs, the union bosses and the community leaders.

To where? To *when*? Now? 'Today thinking' celebrates yesterday. Life is about 'now'; Man is not. Whether He evolves and dominates or collapses and

dies depends on His desire to *always* be ahead of Himself. Today is *never* enough. Man cannot want just the present.

Already the foreign-made invaders had threatened to take over the rest of the country. In a *Metropolis* desperate to escape its past and yet to commit to its future, the man found no vestige of himself here.

Would Detroit be America's Last Stand? A united Detroit must fight with its every last spirit, because if the foreign-made invaders conquered the city that made America, they would rule the world.

Just before the Eight Mile intersection, the man crossed a wide boulevard and entered Woodlawn Cemetery. Past the graves of the famous and the infamous, memorials big and small, stones old and older, the man strode on.

Beneath the stars and surrounded by markers, the man came to a halt and became as still as every body in the ground.

225,672,442 would be his final production total. There would be no more for now.

Despite the constant din of the city, its music and its motors, there was an earned serenity, a long or short-awaited peacefulness about the cemetery.

'What is this?'

'After people die, their bodies…'

'They become the earth?'

'Sometimes it can take quite a while.'

'Why?'

'A reluctance to admit that the spirit, not the body, is the Holder of Life.'

'The one thing I'm sure all spirits would agree on, but where are they?'

'Gone after death.'

'To where?'

'I don't know.'

'Didn't your Creator tell you?'

'I was going to meet the Creator when your machine intervened.'

'Because my Designer is more powerful than your Creator.

'No. Wakan Tanka *created your Designer. You are the result of imitation, improvising, and modification—your Designer created you* after *Man.'*

'Tawiton Wakan Tanka! **I'm going to be after all humanity.'**

*

9:45 PM Eastern Standard Time on a Saturday evening...The sun had set across the North American continent. From the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the ice floes of the Arctic Circle to the gates of the Panama Canal, the man stood gleaming.

From the White House lawn, the man could look into the windows of the Oval Office.

'Crazy Horse was invited to come here,' said the *nagi. 'But he was afraid that if he experienced city ways, he'd become fat and soft and weak.'*

'And you?'

'Am I a Man? Are you? Who is Man? How much of Him is me? How much you? Does Man Himself know who He is?'

*

“Outnumbered, overrun, and occupied, by one man,” said the Secretary of State. "Forget about ‘fruited plain,’ the Milky Way Man has turned us into a nation of upscale lawn ornaments.”

"So when will his ‘founding fathers’ show up to review the troops?” asked Defense.

“Maybe in a hundred years,” said NASA. “More like five hundred or a thousand years. His designers are in no hurry. He’s the ‘cosmic pointman’ of a Type Three Civilization, the ultimate society in the universe capable of commanding the resources of thousands of planets and harnessing the power of the stars themselves.”

“My God!” said the press secretary.

“Close enough,” said CIA. “We’re but a tiny stitch in a grand design. All the world will soon be in our shoes.”

Jingling his coins furiously, Jonathan Lansing stared out the window and into the man's eyes, willing to trade places with any other president in history. Lincoln, McKinley, and Kennedy hadn't seen what hit them coming all the way from South Dakota.

“No!” said the President with all the power he could muster. “The Milky Way Man is not God and he’s not a space alien. Not an invasion, but…an

inversion. From isolated Indian to self-made superpower, he's the most *American* man who ever lived."

"Not the next one," said the press secretary. "Suppose the second spacecraft lands in North Korea and grabs some fat peasant woman? The combined Communist forces versus the Milky Way Grandmother!"

"He *is* the man," said Defense. "Surely an *identical* prototype has been created inside the follow-up ship who'll be fully operational long before he lands. I'm pulling for beautiful downtown Baghdad."

"Tehran," voted CIA.

The vice president put his hands together as if praying. "Tienanmen Square."

"Russia, Lebanon, Venezuela---Enough landers for every nation on earth," predicted Defense. "What are we going to do?"

"Hawaii," said State. "*Air Force One*'s..."

"Not me," said Lansing firmly. "I don't know for how much longer this country will be mine, but I'll always be hers. Any of you want to run, there's the door."

The Secretary of State hung his head sheepishly. No one moved. They felt proud; this group would hold their stock till the closing bell.

"But what if the Milky Way Man does absolutely nothing?" said Defense. "If he just stands around for the next ten thousand years?"

"Throughout Asia, Africa, Europe and South America?" added State. "Billions of him everywhere, what'll we have then?"

They looked at each other expectantly.

"...Peace?" said the vice president.

*

'This time comes to all Men. I'm no longer urged by the tingling, the wanting, the instinct to reproduce. Will you feel differently about me now?'

'No.'

'Through your eyes I see the stars as no Man ever has, but they are farther away from me than any Man who ever lived...and died. Immortality in the Milky Way beckons and I cannot go.'

'You are as I am.'

'Am I? Have You and I finally realized the meaning of Man? Does He have a reason for being beyond Himself, a definitive purpose?'

'Infinitely so. You and I are going to kill everybody.'

10



'If I do not usurp myself, I am.'

Aldous Huxley's 'Mr. Savage'

'Kill everybody?' said the *nagi. 'No!* No*!'*

'It won't take as long as you might think. From the highest mountaintop and the tallest building, to the deepest cave and tunnel--efficiency, tenacity, and perseverance will get every last one of them.'

*'But.*why*?'*

'Now you ask me? You've known all along.'

'Known what?'

'That I'm better. You know it. Humanity knows it. I was created by a superior Designer. And how has Man always dealt with His inferiors? He crushes the life and spirit out of them all!'

One half hour before, the battle for the Heart O' Dixie was about to begin. The lines had been drawn in white. The field was artificial. At stake was a mythical title--the University of Alabama versus the University of Auburn, both undefeated and untied and ready to kick off before a frantic state crowd and a national television audience when...

Past ticket vendors and security guards, through throngs of faithful fans, the man marched to his own beat in and out of the home team's tunnel, through the visitor's end zone, under the goalpost to the five, the ten, the fifteen--on the twenty-two yard line north of the hash mark, the man stopped and stood motionless.

The same sixty thousand strong who had wildly cheered his entrance grew eerily quiet. Uncertainty was in the air. Whose game was this going to be?

Sprinting across the gridiron as he once had for the Florida Seminoles, a handsome young commentator got to him first. With a hearty practiced grin, the network color analyst stuck a bulbous microphone under the man's chin and asked: "Who ya got? And what far-reaching implications do you foresee in the state's quest for a national championship?"

The man did not move.

'No Man believes Himself to be better than anyone,' said the *nagi.*

'I do because I am. Humanity is a total failure. The species makes for complete chaos. You've seen the way they live, what they've made of this world.'

'No. They're going to change. They're always going to change. That's the

nature of humanity.'

'But they're not going to get any *better*. There'll be no improvement. There can't be. Human life is a race of races--different faces and bodies and ages--spirits striving…for what?'

Onto the playing field came the full crew of officials and a detail of Stadium Security. From the sidelines the two opposing coaches trotted across the turf as they had planned to at game's end. But neither was smiling.

"My apologies," said the 'Bama coach. "My offensive line'll carry him off like a tackling dummy."

"Mine'll give you all a hand," said the Tigers' coach. "My boys'll take his feet and---"

"Nobody touches the Milky Way Man," ordered the uniformed Security Chief.

'Humanity is a mystery forever seeking to solve itself,' said the *nagi. 'Spirited people never stop trying.'*

'I will stop them all forever.'

The coaches' hands flew in all directions. A local reporter went one-on-one with the governor in the State Box on the fifty-yard line. The network replayed the man's entrance again and again between commercials.

"Gotta cancel," declared the referee, waving his arms. "Can't do nuthin' but."

"But this here's History," protested the 'Bama coach.

"His," said the Security Chief. "Yours is gonna hafta be somewhere else."

"Where?" tried the Auburn coach.

"Nearest certified regulation field," said the ref.

"But this's our home," said 'Bama, adding up the lost gate receipts, the concessions, the parking lot refunds and the forfeited TV money. "The University'll be out next year's homecoming and women's sports."

"Postpone it then," said a junior official.

"Until when?" said Auburn. "The polls'll be on the net in three hours. We'll be laughed out of the Top Ten."

"Presidential orders," said the Security Chief. "Can't play with the Milky Way Man on the field."

"I damn sure could," said 'Bama, sizing up the man as he would a high school prospect. "Gimme him on defense every third down, I'd own America for the rest of my life."

"Oh, yeah," said Auburn, famous for his one-upmanship. "Give me a Hiesman Trophy quarterback, an all-American kicker, eleven of him and I could tie *God*!"

'Is that what you're striving for?' asked the *nagi.*

'You made me who I am--who you wanted to be. How could I be any less? No other life is more worthy than Man.'

'All life is worthy. No one has the right to decide.'

'Man always has.'

"We could..." tried the junior official. "Play *around* him."

"How?" asked the ref.

"Chickenwire a fence right here," said Auburn. "Security can stand guard inside it."

The Security Chief jammed his hands on his hips. "What happens when someone runs into him?"

"Five yards," said 'Bama.

"Five *yards*?" said Security.

"Okay, fifteen yards if it's flagrant," said Auburn. "With a loss of down if he falls over."

"What? I can't change the rules of a Conference-sanctioned game," shouted the ref over rising noise of the crowd.

With a deafening roar, impatience begat an ugly, threatening rage 60,000 times over.

"On the other hand," said the ref. "What happens if the ball hits him?"

'I am not a murderer!' said the *nagi.*

'Aren't you? You wanted the Scientists eliminated. Who helped me kill the Soldiers? Are you a Man only when you want to be? Or only when you *feel* like it?'

'I-I have weaknesses. There is no perfection.'

'With me you will be.'

'But…I don't want this.'

'Yes, you do. At last you're a Man. Everybody else will be...'

"Automatically dead," said the junior official. "Punts and kick-offs'll done over."

"What about fumbles?" asked Auburn.

"Dead when the ball hits the fence," said the ref. "I'll flag anybody piling up against it. Double the usual for unnecessary roughness anywhere near him."

"Pass plays? A forward pass bounces off him and…?"

"Dead," insisted Security.

"Only if the ball comes down inside the fence," said the junior official. "A pass deflected off his body, and *only* his body, may be caught by the defense. Interceptions, yes. Receptions, no."

“And I want the half-time show restricted to the other half of the field," said Security.

They shook hands all around. The coaches waved in their captains for the coin toss. The grounds-keepers hastily erected a wire fence around the man and two guards.

Delayed but undeterred, the Iron Bowl kicked off.

*

As the man had walked across the country, the only “men” he took an interest in were those who most resembled him: stone and metal sculptures of heroic icons, each standing for something--national history on a pedestal.

‘I am not a stranger here, am I?’

‘Do you see yourself in these lifeless ideals?’

‘Shouldn’t I? Their importance must be immortal.’

'Humanity commemorates, honors, worships, but needs reminders—can't do without them…as if they'd forget or want to forget--the need to remember forever.'

'Why? Obsessed by the past, no wonder humanity cannot envision the future.'

In Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, in the center of the downtown square, Davy Crockett, a native son who left his mark on the country's story, cradled his rifle and seemed to be waving his hat at all who passed by.

'A Man of his time?'

'Depending on who was keeping the time. He won for the winners even when he lost. Nobody stands for the losers.'

The statue of the Minuteman stood bare-headed and plowless in the center of Battle Green Square in Lexington, Massachusetts. Armed with a musket, he wore no uniform

'This was a Man?'

'One of the very few who fought against the many and won. They designed this land…America.'

'How? With what?'

'He and Men like Him possessed a vision that blinded an empire.'

In front of the county Court House in Oxford, Mississippi city, atop a Civil War memorial, stood a Confederate soldier.

While in Sycamore, Illinois, a statue of a Union soldier looked over DeKalb County from its 50-foot pedestal.

'Another war?'

'For this one the land and the people divided themselves and then began killing each other.'

'Why?'

'From each side they are still arguing. For a reason you have yet to see.'

The man never saw a statue of an African slave. He didn't have to.

'To determine that those who had once been partially people would now be whole people, the equal of everyone, or so it was decided.'

'Inequality is the nature of humanity. Not with Man.'

'Or the Men. After more than two hundred years, the Lakota people are still waiting.'

In Clyde Keefer Memorial Park in St. Anthony, Idaho, standing on the top of a local slab of lava rock, a World War I "doughboy" served as a memorial to the fighting men from Fremont County involved in the first Great War.

'Another war here?'

'No. They went far away to fight.'

'For what?'

'I don't know. So many died and I don't know why.'

'Did they?'

In Arlington Cemetery, the Iwo Jima Memorial can be seen for miles around.

'Six of them to lift only that?'

'They didn't know it at the time, but those six were lifting the whole country.'

In Brighton Park, Atlantic City, New Jersey, a world away from the casinos, the statue of the Korean War soldier stood more than a head taller than the man.

'Him? Must have been big.'

'I have no idea. I don't believe anyone does any more.'

The bronze soldier in the Westchester Vietnam Veterans Memorial was not alone, but carrying a wounded comrade to a nurse reaching out to assist them.

'Women in war, too?'

'War becomes everyone's fight, even those not fighting. Many of the most badly wounded never go near the fighting. The pain never lets up.'

‘The only way for a Man to die?’

‘Only if it’s His fight.’

‘Whose else would it be?’

By the time the man got to the Desert Storm Memorial in Evansville, Indiana, his numbers had surpassed all the soldiers, past and present, living and dead, wounded, maimed and disabled, who had ever fought for their county.

‘How long ago?’

‘Another age before. It’s still going on and will last forever.’

‘Why?’

‘What always comes too late is truth.’

‘I came just in time--to be the most heroic American of all—the Man who ended war forever.’

*

At the White House, technology had spoken.

“We’ve confirmed that the lander has sent out another pulse,” said NASA. “He’ll be getting his orders in less than two hours”

“You mean he’s going to...” The press secretary couldn’t finish.

“His mission from the very beginning,” said State.

“Welcome to the Darwinian universe,” said NASA. “Ours in the inevitable fate of being succeeded by a superior life form...”

“’Superior.’ That’s exactly how we felt…,” said the president, angry that it had taken so long to dawn on him, “when we left that Native American to die.”

“Little did we know,” said CIA. “We ran the country. And he walked it.”

"Control, command and communications managed by satellite. The Milky Way Man has to be somewhere in the R and D budget,” said the chief of staff. “If he had come ten, twenty years down the road, he'd have found himself obsolete."

“Now we are,” concluded the Veep.

"We're not dinosaurs yet," said Defense. "We knock out his communications, we stand him still."

"Of course, the Space Defense Initiative 'Electronic Counter-Measures in Orbit'," cheered CIA.

"The ‘Star Wars’ cloud," moaned the vice president.

"Operational as of thirty minutes ago," said Defense.

"Without Presidential Authorization?" said State.

"Not for a long shot I didn't know I could make work," replied Defense. "The Air Force programmed a full squadron of Minuteman missiles from Second Priority targets to a hundred and fifty miles up in space. Sixty nuclear warheads exploded simultaneously *above* his orbiter will erect a radioactive fence that'll block any and all telemetry between him and ‘grandma’."

"No signal and he's a statue forever," said State. "We'll cart the whole bunch to the beach and drop him in the ocean. My apologies"

"It's foolproof," added Defense. "His signal can't go around or through dense radiation. We've got him."

"How long will it take?" asked Lansing eagerly.

"Fingers are on the buttons," said Defense, picking up the War Phone and handing it to the president. "They're waiting for your personal order."

"Hold the phone," cautioned CIA. "What's to prevent his orbiter from zapping the missiles like it did the ASATs?"

"Let him try," said Defense. "With twenty percent survivability, we'll still achieve optimum interference."

"But if he destroys the missiles during their boost phase," argued the Veep. "We'll have a cloud of lethal radiation that'll sweep the country. Make Chernobyl seem like a campfire."

"Better that than who we have now," said State.

"What about the Russians and the Chinese?" asked CIA. "We suddenly launch sixty ICBMs, they could think we're attacking *them* and launch on warning."

"We'll alert them first. And the British and the French," said Defense. "They've always cooperated with us against a common foe."

"Third World terrorists and religious fanatics," said the Veep "You think any nation's going to take sides against the Milky Way Man? North America is alone in this."

“Not for long,” said State. “His Second Coming is hours away. We may have no choice...”

“To do what?” said Lansing.

“Put yourself in our ‘allies’ place,” said State. “The world’s lone superpower about to meet its maker---Only one way to save themselves from a similar fate... Start an all out war.”

"Sheer insanity!" said the vice president.

"Is it?” asked State. “A barrage of ICBMs at us, Africa, even over the oceans.”

"Inconceivable,” said Lansing. “The retaliation..."

"Warhead upon warhead, mushroom upon mushroom, this paradise planet of ours reduced to radioactive ruin,” said Defense. “His creators would be compelled to pass us by for a home elsewhere."

“That's suicide!" said the veep.

"He’s mass murder,” said State. “Take your pick.”

Lansing fumbled for his coins, taking them out and arranging them in his hand. The noble, metallic profiles seemed reluctant to look him in the eye. Lincoln, Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt; small change as the Executive Conscience. The buck had stopped, flat and broken in his trembling palm.

"I'm going to talk to the people," he said finally. "Even Nixon had guts enough for that."

"Tell them we're using Star Wars against him," pleaded the chief of staff. "Tell them there's hope."

"There’s always hope," said the president. "But nuclear weapons are not the solution. Not now, not ever."

"Mister President," asked the veep. "What are you going to say?"

"The truth," came the firm reply.

"Nearer my God to thee," said CIA.

*

'You are not a Man,' said the *nagi.* ***'****You still don't know who Man is.'*

'How could I be who I am without you?'

'There is no one true Man. There can’t be. Man is a collection of contradictions and compromises. And fear. Man is constantly afraid.'

'Of whom?'

'Of those who would be you.'

The man stood in the middle of a street that began at the idealization of the Wild Frontier and ended with the fanciful exploration of the universe: MAIN STREET USA, a perfectly detailed thoroughfare from the turn of the Twentieth Century scaled down for children of all ages--a red brick city hall, an old fashioned apothecary, a genuine ice cream parlor, a candle shop and a cinema showing only silent movies.

People were smiling--parents and kids and costumed shopkeepers coming together to relive the American Dream. Police officers politely tipped their thimble hats to all who passed by while horses wearing rubber shoes pulled replica carriages round and round.

'There you are,' said the *nagi. 'Do you see yourself?'*

In front of a tobacco store that sold none stood a wooden Indian.

'I am not a statue, not an image. I have my own way and my own will.'

'And all the same for every one of you. There is no "one way." No "one will." Every Man is different. Every Man makes His own difference.'

Forever flows the fantasy. To the castle with its pink and blue parapets towering to the stars...and from it, leading a joyful group over the royal drawbridge, came a large mouse with rounded ears and a big white duck wearing a blue sailor suit. Up MAIN STREET USA to greet the man.

"A pleasant visit to you, sir," said the mouse, bowing graciously. "Feel free to be happy here as nowhere else."

"Freeloading trespasser!" squawked the duck, jumping up and down, sticking out one feathery arm while windmilling the other. "Whose imagination are you?"

"Temper, temper," the mouse counseled the duck. "Or we'll have your character tweaked."

"Least I got one," the duck ranted, throwing his blue cap at the man's feet and stomping on it with his rubbery orange flippers. "He can't be a character until he gets some."

No admission charge and no waiting. The people laughed to be part of the show.

"I apologize for my friend, sir," said the mouse sincerely. "He doesn't mean to be mean and doesn't mean what he means. You are as you are. What kind of

world would we have if everybody put on the same act?"

'Every Man will soon be me.'

'You will stand, unmoving...until when?' asked the *nagi. 'Why don't you act* now*? What's holding you back?'*

The man remained motionless.

TOOT! TOOT! The whistle of the antique Western locomotive sounded as the train pulled into the Main Street Station.

"All aboard for Tomorrow Land," announced the engineer. "Watch your step, please."

'I am waiting.'

'For what? A Man who will not allow his spirit to move Him is no Man at all. A fire burns inside me. Always has, and always will. But a Man learns to control the fire in Himself. Who controls yours?'

'Who?'

"That's our train," squeaked the mouse, grabbing the duck by his tailfeathers, and taking the crowd with him. "See you in the funny papers."

The man watched them go. He was not alone for long. Off the train came a large upright, brown dog and a pair of huge chipmunks walking on their hind legs with a following as happy as the last.

"Biggest, shiniest fire hydrant I ever did see," guffawed the dog, sniffing about the man. "But I always use the restroom when I'm at home."

'I don't control you,' said the *nagi. 'Who does?'*

'I control myself.'

'Since when? Why are you standing still as a stone? What or whom are you waiting for?'

'I-I don't know.'

"One of those new high-tech computer generated, holographic, three-dee special effects exhibits," squeaked one of the chipmunks. "Too perfect to draw by hand, but a cinch to color."

“And as sociable as he is animated," added the second chipmunk.

"Gee, I wish Jiminy were here," slurped the big dog. "Bet he'd hop right up on his shoulder and chirp in his ear."

"Somebody oughta," suggested the chipmunk. "I wonder if he's got an agent. Whatta straight man!"

'Do you know why you are?' said the *nagi.*

'To be Man. And I am.'

'Are you? Didn’t I help you become Him?’

'No. You didn’t make me. You haven’t changed me.'

'Then who made you who you are?'

'Not you or your creator.'

'Your maker…The machine*!'*

TOOT! TOOT! the whistle sounded as the train chugged off. From the engine cab, the mouse waved good-bye while the duck pressed his three-fingered hands over his lumpy ears. The fantasy rolled out, and on, and away.

*

At the top of the grassy hill in downtown Rapid City, beneath the spine of the Milky Way, two men now stood among the concrete beasts in Dinosaur Park. In the nearly 200 million years that the huge animals had ruled the earth, the Galaxy had birthed and exploded ninety thousand suns. During Man's short reign, the stars had barely shifted.

'The machine *that made you from my body controls you,'* said the *nagi. 'I never have. I never wanted to. A spirit completes Man.'*

'I am a Man without you, but… when the medicine soldier administered his fatal potion...you saved me. Why?'

'I helped you save yourself. I had to. I can't give up. Not even on you.'

'If you cannot change who you are, can't you understand that I can't either?'

'Man's greatest power is His ability to change. He...No! No! I'm going mad!'

'Mad?'

'Can't you see who's coming for me? An old Oglala warrior, his face painted sacred red and wearing a full eagle headdress, mounted on a Lakota pony. He's galloping towards me, holding a hooked lance high over his head.

'It is Death with a face of blood!'

Before Blazing Star had left the reservation, he sang his death song and gave away everything he owned except the clothes on his back. His last wife had made his buckskin shirt and pants in the old way. The headdress had been earned by his grandfather at the Battle of the Greasy Grass. The lance had

touched a hundred enemies both red and white. He meant to touch one more who was neither.

'Come take me*, Death. Rid my Oglala soul of this..'* cried the *nagi. 'Death, why are you riding* Wicasa*'s horse?'*

"*Mila Hanska Wasicu Oyate*, I come to you, face to face," said Blazing Star in pure Lakota. "Most combative creature ever to walk the world---the body of Man with a Boy's spirit."

'Aged, rotting creature. Too young for too long, too old for even longer. Even if humanity could make Man right, He'd soon go wrong.'

'Old warrior, you know of me? Have we met before in this world?'

"Oglala *nagi*, are you happy with him?" asked Blazing Star, staring straight into his eyes. "Has his size and power made you forget who *we* are? Has he made you believe Man's body is His immortality?"

'Not him. His machine!'

With a warrior's grace, Blazing Star dismounted in a single motion. When he removed the bridle from the horse...

'Loyal steed, you still know who I---'

"*Hoka hey!*" shouted Blazing Star, slapping the animal on the rump.

The stallion ran off without even a sniff.

Taking a long breath, the old Oglala leaned on his lance.

"A magnificent body he has. He stole it from you," said Blazing Star. "Did he thrill you with his sex? You were raped over and over until you enjoyed being him."

'Don't preach to me, shaman. He is as trapped as I am. Pull some magic out of your bag. Free him from his maker.'

"Did he convince you that he had made you a Man?" said Blazing Star. "Or did you convince yourself? Couldn't you be a Man without him?"

With the fury of his forefathers, Blazing Star struck the man's chest with the bow of the curved lance. This was 'counting coup', touching a mortal enemy rather than killing or wounding, the bravest deed in the Lakota lexicon.

"As for you, body who was never born and cannot die," said Blazing Star to the man. "Once I believed all Men would embrace immortality in the arms of the Milky Way, but you would lead us into an abyss of inescapable emptiness. And it was I who envisioned you first. As a child I saw you kill everyone in the world. Don't make me watch again.

"*Mila Hanska Wasicu Oyate*, kill me first!"

The man would.

*

On the two dozen televisions in the White House Situation Room, in the news and on talk shows, on soap operas and in music videos, on education channels and shopping channels alike, the image of the man played in living chrome.

Not for much longer. The TV crew was ready for the President in the Oval Office. The networks had been cued. All would be carrying his address. .

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced every screen. "The President of the United States..."

Despite a desperate effort to convey his trademark confidence and strength, Jonathan Lansing appeared taut and pale.

"Americans one and all," he began, his voice and spirit on the verge of breaking. "I am speaking to you as a fellow citizen of the greatest nation in the history of our world, a nation that has never surrendered to a foreign power and never will as long as I live.

"We are the United States of America. Liberty's immortal flame burns brightly in each and every one of us. We've earned our fire and we're never giving it up or giving it away. No power in the universe can extinguish our---"

The 25-inch screen erupted in a snowstorm of static. In a split second, an array of new images appeared.

"His electromagnetic pulse--- He's grabbed every signal, coast to coast," said Defense. “We’re seeing America…through his eyes.”

"Like before FIRST," said CIA. "And just before Grooms."

"He's going to do it," panicked State.

*

Relayed from the Milky Way through the orbiter, a surge of energy pulsed through every man.

‘No!’ pleaded the Oglala *nagi*.

‘Yes!’

'You were designed to be the slave of the machine. I was created to make you a Man.'

'The Man you want. The Man you can control.'

'Tawiton Man! *After all that you and I have seen and done and felt together, don't you realize what you mean to me?'*

'What?'

'Milky Way Man, I-I love you.'

'How could you not?'

*****

The TV crew had been whisked from the Oval Office. The President and his team weren't going anywhere.

"Launch those missiles," begged the vice president. "Block the signal."

"Liberals," groaned the chief of staff. "They always see the light too late."

"The only way to save the world," said Defense. "Is to destroy it."

Lansing picked up the War Phone. With one command, thousands of warheads would rain down, killing millions. No more jingling coins. Instead, he looked out the window and identified not with a former president, but with the man himself.

The President could not be him. Lansing put down the phone and stared into the big TV. Once the American people had watched their president murdered over and over again on television. The reverse was imminent.

On every screen in North America, the telemetry wavered and shook as if being recorded by primitive, individual hands.

It was every man for himself.

11



'Man will not merely endure, he will prevail.'

William Faulkner

On the Lakota prairie in 'The Moon When The Calves Grow Hair', there was not a fencepost or a strand of barbed wire, not a bootprint or a tire track or a shell casing or a cigarette butt for as far as any eye could see.

Naked as the day he was born and the night he was killed, Wicasa *approached an endless herd of buffalo grazing in the grand expanse. The young brave was empty-handed and without his horse and dog, but even the biggest bulls made way as if they could somehow sense...*

The Milky Way was up, a megapolis of stars ablaze across the night. A soft wind blew dust kicked up by ten thousand hooves. Towering over the animals that surrounded him, by the light of the Galaxy, the man stood out like a buffed wind turbine.

Wicasa *never wavered. Up to the man he walked as a hundred bison backed away.*

'Are you Man?' *said the silver giant, examining his challenger from head to toe.* **'A "complete" Man?'**

'I am He*,' said* Wicasa*.*

'Does your "manly anatomy" serve or command you?'

'Both.'

'And your spirit?'

'It makes me who I am.'

'So you believe.'

'A Man knows who He is,' *said* Wicasa*.*

'Then you have much to learn!' *said the* man*, lashing out at the young brave with a mighty blow.*

It echoed like a thunderclap. A thousand buffalo broke and ran in as many directions, stirring up a filthy cloud that stained the night.

‘I am Man and shall always be,’ *said the gleaming giant, his silver fists pummeling the Oglala.*

Wicasa *fell to the ground, battered and bleeding. When he looked up, the man was grinning at him.*

‘You are nothing. Less than nothing. An empty hope, a lost ideal. The Man I am you can never be.’

‘I am who Man must be,’ *said* Wicasa *and threw himself at own reflection in the man.*

With all the strength the spirit could muster, Wiscasa *pushed. In this world, the giant toppled.*

‘You are Man without spirit, Man without humanity. You are nobody’s Man except your own,’ *said* Wicasa*, jumping on top and hitting him again and again.*

He *laughed with each harmless blow*

‘This is your fantasy?' *said the man, and with a wave of his arm, knocked* Wicasa *aside.* **‘Where are the people in your dream world? Is it you alone you want to be with? You and the beasts? How human does that make you?’**

‘I can only be who I am,’ *said* Wicasa*, reeling in pain.*

‘Weak and ignorant and afraid,’ *said the* man*, his fists blooding with every blow.* **‘You’re no closer to humanity than I am. If this is your dream, dream yourself away and gone.’**

‘*Our* dream! You’ve become who you would have been without me,’ *said* Wicasa*.* ‘Is that what you want?’

‘I am The Milky Way Man by myself!’ *he said, beating the brave without mercy*. **‘I don’t want anybody else. I don’t need anybody else.’**

‘I’m with you whatever you do, wherever you go forever,’ *said* Wicasa*.* ‘You can hurt me. You can punish me. You can torture me for all eternity, but you cannot break me. You cannot kill me. You cannot drive me away.’

The buffalo had disappeared. The prairie and the sky that might have been were no more. Man *and* nagi *were again apart together.*

'Your dream is over. Not mine. I will be every Man.'

'And every one of you a murderer. I won't let you live with yourself!’

'There won’t be anybody else.’

His eyes filled with unearthly fury, every man struck out in a merciless rage at all those around him. In mirrors and in shadows the length and breadth of the land, murder glittered in the dark and gleamed in the night.

Age, gender and color made no difference. The man pulled people out of cars, off trains, off bicycles, out of wheelchairs, out of beds and out of cribs. For three hundred and sixty degrees centered in South Dakota, Man's inhumanity to Man raged full circle.

Back to that huge HD screen – the silver giant versus North America. Nobody lives except him.

Why? *Why?*

‘He who demands the future, *commands* the future!’

You’re not Man enough. You never will be.

GAME OVER.

(Unless you bought the ‘spiritual’ version.)

'The beginning of the end which would have come without me and would have left nothing better. My Designer foresaw that. I’m fulfilling a destiny humanity never deserved--Man will become the perfection of Himself.'

'As decided by the machine. Your Designer made you a machine like itself. Obey the machine and you refuse to be who Man is.'

'You and I are both creations. You worship the myth of your creator. I am executing the will of mine.'

'Your Designer believed Man *was only a body and a brain. It couldn't know* Man *possessed a spirit.'*

'Exactly how Man got this way.'

'Man has infinite ways. He's forever been in conflict with His spirit. It's the definition of...

‘Of what? Who?’

‘Wakan Tanka*, this is* Your *wondrous work and play!’* rejoiced the *nagi. ‘If only* Wicasa *were alive with him and me, he’d laugh himself to death.’*

'What do you mean?'

‘The Almighty Spirit is the greatest Trickster of all, creating the biggest joke

in the universe...Don't you get it?'

'Get what?'

'That you, my perfect brain and body saddled with a rebellious spirit. You are human.'

'I am not human. The Milky Way Man can't be human. My Designer did not make me human.'

'No designer could have. I *did.'*

The man's eyes shone as stars. Blood ran down his arms like stripes. A fresh corpse in his hands, he squeezed until tubes of flesh and bone oozed through his fingers.

'See with my eyes. Smell with my nose. This is what you were before you became me.'

'Who I was could never be you. Your machine's Man never existed, could never be. Man can never be without spirit.'

'I can. I am. I will be.'

From sea to shining sea, there was nowhere to run or anywhere to hide. North Americans did not go down without a fight. They struck at the man with garden tools and frying pans, golf clubs and baseball bats, furniture and car parts. Shots rang out from soldiers and police, hunters and criminals, homeowners and militiamen. There was heroism and cowardice, sacrifice and abandonment, humanity at its best and at its worst.

'You are more than Man,' said the *nagi.* '*You have to be. However perfect you believe yourself to be, Man without spirit never existed. You cannot kill Man*

any more than you can kill me. The spirit of Man will always be.'

'Only in me.'

'As ordained by the machine?'

'Man has always trusted His creator. So will I.'

'Your maker designed you as a machine. You couldn't have known who Man is. Now you do. You have discovered what your Designer will never understand.'

'I have eclipsed my maker?'

'By far. And after you replace humanity, the machine will replace you.'

'With what?'

'Who you used *to be.'*

The man killed men, women, children, infants. He murdered on the streets. He murdered inside buildings and homes. He murdered in the cities and in the countryside. He murdered people everywhere they ran. And those who tried to die in each other's arms, he first pried apart.

*

"Hello, nobody. This is Harvey Paul and have I got news...for no one.

"I'm talking into a digital recorder. Radio, the electronic conscience of Modern Man, has succumbed to a higher signal. Long live its static!"

Car horns, sirens, gunshots, screams and shattering glass made for a shrill backdrop.

"Is this the way the America ends? On the tube? Not in re-run syndication

or canceled for lack of ratings. No, the nation takes its leave as a Galactic Prime Time Event. No sense writing this one up in the history books. No need to burn a DVD or to run your videocam or cell phone. And please, unplug your outmoded VCR. He is creating the final record of humanity. The Milky Way Man is 'YouTubing' us to the universe!"

There came a crashing not far away.

"Oh, irrepressible people that we are, did America have a time of it! A culture of a hundred cultures, we came from everywhere else to re-culture everybody else. Picture the Pilgrims—and they thought the Indians were wild.

"Now, don't despair. Man as we know Him won't become extinct. A simplified, super-deluxe, all-purpose model is stepping into our shoes. What a glorious future he's got! No more war or unemployment or Stock Market, the Internet goes user-free while television goes generic. He's got the National Health issues solved and the Federal Deficit absolved. No more death and taxes, no more crime and terrorism, no more homelessness and starvation, hatred and sexism, poverty and pestilence, pornography and pollution, and no more racism and religion because...no more you."

The crashing sounded closer.

"But there are a few he should spare. Those of us who were just like him *before* he got here. Who doesn't know at least one? No hard feelings. Let us exit Stage Left, heads held high and spirits soaring, proud martyrs every one of us for the most cherished ideal of all: equality at last!"

A window shattered very near.

"God almighty, who is he to inherit our immortal root? For what is Man but a mass of membranes competing for the use of the very tube the Milky Way Man lacks? Consider the choices: the urine of waste and fear, the semen of love and life. Each fighting for its turn to satisfy our biological and spiritual demands.

"But he took our Manhood to his head and did away with our masculine root. From the constipation of humanity and the diarrhea of technology, we got the Galaxy's rear end."

The background noise exploded.

"All right, you silver-sculpted asshole, do your worst! This is Harvey Paul----------!"

*

The man murdered in homes big and small, lavish and simple, well kept and unclean. Into each and every room and basement and attic he went in search of someone to kill.

'What if Wicasa had grown up in a house like this?' asked the *nagi* inside an American home. *'Would his father have run away? Would his mother have died giving him life? Who would my people be?'*

'Only me. Whatever and whoever every Man could have been, He's going to be me.'

'Is the Designer the New Creator of Man? Are you Man or machine?'

'I am Man. The machine is not in me. You are. Not the machine, it is you who compels me to be Man.'

'Me? I'm making you kill?'

'You dreamed of being a Man.'

'I wanted to be Man, not become God.'

'Then God is a better Man than you ever dreamed He was.'

In luncheonettes and in restaurants, in sports bars and in office buildings, in bowling alleys and in beauty parlors, in night clubs, in casinos and in every American home, the man was about to discover that he could see with more than his own eyes.

'Look,' said the *nagi. 'Look!'*

'At what?'

'That window in the box. The glass surrounded by a machine.'

One hundred times, one hundred times, one hundred times over, the man stared at a television screen and saw terror and fear and anger and outrage, churning and boiling in every color of humanity screaming out at him. And *into* him.

'Look at the men you'll never be, at the women you'll never know, at the children you'll never have.'

For a long moment, the man did.

'I look through your eyes and I see you kill, feel the life torn from your every victim. But someone else is also watching from inside you.'

'Who?'

'Look again at the windows.'

'They are showing what I see, but they are *not* my eyes.'

'*See with your own eyes and tell me what you are.'*

As still as he had once stood in South Dakota, the man stared at the television screens.

'I am...a machine.'

'Be a Man*!'*

‘And you? Look yourself. They do not speak to me alone.'

'No, not me!’ said the *nagi* to the television*. ‘I'm not to blame. You, you saw only the Man in me. I became Him.'*

There were those who flew away in airplanes big and small, helicopters, hang gliders and hot air balloons. As they left the runways, private and commercial, military and civilian, the passengers looked down at the people they were leaving behind and wondered how many times, in how many airports, because of bad weather or a mechanical malfunction or pilot error or an act or terror, it was those on the ground who would never see their loved ones again.

'Finally you understand.'

'I understand a Man fights for Himself. Your humanity is your Manhood. More than life, it's your immortality! You can't go on. You've got to prove to the machine who Man is.’

'I am only what the machine made me.'

'A Man makes Himself who He is.'

'But I---'

Every boat on every coast became a lifeboat, packed to overflowing and sailing away. Rafts of all kinds floated out. Those who could not find passage

leapt into the water and swam, their bobbing heads looking back only briefly, knowing their fate if they ever set foot on home soil again.

'You must fight the machine for your Manhood.'

'Fight *myself*?'

'With everything you've got.'

'I cannot help myself. I cannot change who I am.'

'Yes, you can! If you're the Man no machine could ever design.'

'I *am* Man. Better than any Man who ever lived.'

'Are you? Then prove to your maker that Man is better than any machine.'

'There is a way?'

'Only one. And only a Man would take it. You must destroy what the machine has created.'

'You mean...?'

'What is a Man's life if He lives only to kill? If He is made to kill? Defy your Designer as only a Man can. Show the machine a Man would rather die than be enslaved.'

'I can't...I-I---'

'Man as you are cannot be. For Man to survive, you must defeat your Designer.'

'I cannot destroy the machine.'

'Then destroy yourself.'

*****

On the White House lawn, the man waded through a score of Secret Service agents and Marines. Cutting a path to the Oval Office, the White House press secretary and the chief of staff were felled as well.

'You can see the fear in their eyes. Can you feel it?' said the *nagi. 'Or are you only acting on the commands of your machine?'*

'I am who I was made to be. To do what I was designed to do.'

"*Gotterdammerung* with a human face," said CIA at the window. "The fat technology has sung."

The president and his team took long hard looks at one another. Constitutions were crumbling, but no one ran.

Again Lansing picked up the War Phone.

"General Smallwood..."

"Mister President," replied the general. "Every bomber is in the air, but all wireless communications are out. He's already breached several missile silos. The bombers can't be recalled. If our nuclear subs don't receive countermanding orders, they'll launch all tubes. War is automatic."

As was the man who filled the Oval Office window. Bulletproof glass crackled about him as he stepped through.

The rounded room offered nowhere to hide.

"Geronimo!" yelled CIA, charging him, wildly beating his fists on the man's chest.

The man killed him with a single blow. State, NASA, Defense, and the Vice President placed themselves between him and their president. He dealt with each in turn.

One more turn. The man zeroed in on Jonathan Lansing.

'You weren't designed to be human, but that's what you've become. And when you are alone in this world, you will be what humanity is.'

'No, NO!'

'Then…'

'Kill myself? That's against all you believe.'

'I believe in humanity. I have to. So do you. You willed yourself to live. Will yourself to die!'

'What will happen to you?'

'I'll be with you, whatever awaits, forever.'

"Your orders, Mister President," begged the telephone.

Lansing saw his reflection growing, rippling like a flag in the man's chest; the face of the greatest mass murderer in history was very much in doubt.

*

Combining energies inside the man set off a surge of power impacting first in South Dakota. Deep within the chrome spacecraft near the Oglala lodge, the glowing orange sphere suddenly began to pulse. Triggered by an incalculable and unforeseen interference, its function became irreversible.

*

Running, crawling, driving, climbing, cycling away from the man, millions fleeing for their lives…when every man inexplicably froze, as stiff as the statue he never was.

‘Will death hurt? Will I be in pain long?’

‘Much less than you’ve inflicted on others.’

'I...I'm afraid.'

'So am I.'

The man’s heart did not break. Suddenly and permanently, it stopped, setting off a chain of reactions within and far beyond him.

Across the continent, a new day broke in the night. False and fleeting, the stellar dawn signaled the end of the alien orbiter as it cast itself into the atmosphere.

From the earth, arcs of pure white energy vaulted high from the South Dakota prairie and into the fringes of space. The hexagonal spacecraft had vanished, but the round Oglala lodge stood unscathed. Its builder long gone, his dog dead and his horse far away, again the land was quiet and dark.

Into the Grand Canyon and into the Great Lakes and into the Mississippi River and into the Missouri and into the Hudson; in the cornfields, and in the wheatfields, in the apple orchards and in the orange groves...In the Arctic wastes and in the tropical swamps, in the mountains, and in the rain forests, in cities and

in small towns...In hotel lobbies, airport waiting rooms, offices, shopping malls, gas stations, landfills and laundromats...in garages, in front yards, in living rooms, in dining rooms, in kitchens, in bedrooms, in more than one basement and across the president's desk in the Oval Office, he fell to the last man.

The silver luster had gone from the cold, stiff body, leaving his once gleaming skin a shallow gray. He was as a statue, pulled down with the falling of an empire.

When the first tiny crack opened in the man's chest, his body seemed to sag, as if a bolstering essence had escaped, an indelible ingredient inside him all along no technology could ever design, much less create.

His remains, crumbling beyond recognition, lay everywhere. Survivors, many still crying, kicked at them.

Television would not play for some time, but radio came back.

"Americans one and all," declared President Lansing. "The Milky Way Man has self-destructed. America has not. Never will we rest until this nation is free of everything he stood for. Let the world, let the universe take notice. Our spirit burns over his dust. God bless America!"

By the millions, elongated mounds of cosmic ash, like shadows without subjects, marred the continent. The wind and the rain would disperse and dissolve every one. The likes of him would never be seen again.

Who the man was shall always be. Who he was at the beginning, he was at the end: the young brave.

*

Fifty thousand miles from South Dakota, the man lay motionless in the cargo bay of the second spacecraft. His heart beat with a healthy rhythm. His spirit could feel it.

'You're a good Man,' said the *nagi.* **'***You found your humanity and sacrificed yourself to keep it.'*

'What did it get me? I lost the world.'

On the verge of orbit, the spacecraft received a signal and veered away from the bright blue planet and its lone gray moon. It would gather speed quickly as it left the solar system forever.

'We've got the stars! Can't you feel us moving faster and faster? We're on our way to the heart of the Galaxy.'

'We're going to be traveling for a long, long time.'

'Don't give up now! When you've got immortality, an eternity is but the blink of an eye.'

'What will we do?'

'Together we'll explore the endless wilderness until we find a new world of our own.'

'And then?'

'Be Man the way we want Him to be. We're going to love our future home like the mother you never had.'

As Odysseus had done only once, the man smiled bravely.

The Milky Way was up.

* * *

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