

THE ROAD TO MORE  
an already-out-of-date techno-farcical Picaresque  
by Rachel West  
(First Edition)  
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Dedicated to my aunt Susan who this character is not modeled after, and to Aaron, and to my family, who are incredibly interesting and wonderful people. This is just a silly book but it's all I have. I love you.

Lincoln, Nebraska, USA  
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CHAPTER ONE  
Susan's Life Falls Apart

Susan was looking through her Mitchell And Gene catalogue for the fifth time that morning. Christmas was coming. Just three months away. "Fuck!" suddenly echoed out into the tidy office space where she spent her days. Donny the paper man was late again! "If I'm going to stay in here I can't have clutter. Fresh everything, every day." It was the only way. It all fell apart if there was a weak link in the chain, and lately the Donny link had been looking pretty unreliable. She got her food from Vinnie's, her water from Caligula Bottlers, Incorporated (she drank a lot) and her paper goods were usually brought around by Donny, a young man from the Office Buster to whom she had designated the task the day she set up her new way of life. Donny had also helped her find the best deal on bulk felt-tips. Office Buster could handle the stationery; toilet paper, too; cleaning supplies; everything. Susan was a one-woman corporation, regular in her habits and she did her best to make it easy for herself and for all her suppliers. Hadn't she been good to Donny?

Susan opened the catalogue again. It soothed her. She had been thinking about getting presents for her delivery people, but a fruit-of-the-month club was really only for people whose homes you knew about. Susan had no idea where or how they lived. She had no one else to send gifts to so it was odd that she'd been thinking about Christmas. The change in the weather always triggered diffuse anxieties, anxieties which had probably contributed to her decision to live this way in the first place.

It had been a sudden realization, the day she decided to change her life. It was the snow. The snow was a danger and a beautiful thing, too. She'd stared out her window and watched it pile up. She thought about the certainty of weather getting worse as the years passed; that's what they were constantly predicting, anyway. This was the worst winter yet, and it was only going to worsen. So there's that. Look at those cars swerving all over the road, desperately trying to get to their jobs, or to the store, or to friends' houses. Nonsense. Susan had plenty of what she needed right here; she lived alone, and she knew exactly how much she would use. She'd laid in supplies before the storm. Why not just stay in the house, forever? Why not just keep going? It was so very comfortable here. Her house and everything in it were precisely measured to her specifications, and getting better all the time.

Money at least wasn't an issue, being as careful as she was, as adept as she was at virtually everything the modern world valued, at least in the business sense. She lacked the ability to acquire for herself the subtler pleasures of life, but it had turned out she was excellent (to put it mildly) at making money. So now here she was, in a world of her own making. The continued reliance upon others was becoming more and more of a nuisance. At first it had added color to her day, knowing who would arrive and when, waiting for them, humoring them, sometimes even giving them things to eat and drink, entertaining them with profoundest generosity and grace, hardly something you'd expect

from a shut-in, but Susan was competent. Competence was everything! Competence and predictability, Donny!

She started eyeing her collected set of Mitchell And Gene back-catalogues, neatly piled and filed in a wicker hamper. She wouldn't like using them as toilet paper. And what about the fresh box of felt-tips she was waiting for? Her bleached white printer paper? There were only a few sheets left. He knew that! He had been here just a week ago and they'd discussed it with much gentility. Over tea. Office Buster had tea, too. It wasn't the best but it was good enough to warm the brain, and it was vital not to have too many deliverymen coming. Efficiency. Anyway you just couldn't seem to get the monstrous quantities of cheap tea that Office Buster offered by shopping at a regular grocery store. Vinnie's was far too fancy for all that. Tea. Tea was dry like paper. Meat had to be fresh and top quality. In fact, oh lord what if Donny and the meat man arrived at the same time? It would be chaos.

She put the kettle on again; it had been ready, of course, but had cooled. She wouldn't pour until he arrived but it was no use steaming away all that Caligula water, either. God what a pain.

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She went to bed that night with no fresh delivery of paper goods. She went to bed haunted by the nearly-dry felt-tip on her desk, by the three remaining rolls of toilet paper, by the fast-dwindling ream of bleached white printer paper. For god's sake. Was she going to have to build an addition to her house at last? Somewhere to safely store all her stuff so it wouldn't be underfoot, so she wouldn't end up urine-soaked and crazy and crushed by piles of things, even though she could no longer trust her deliverymen to deliver her from this trouble? How can you win at this game? She was in bed, but she couldn't sleep. Donny had also robbed her of her hour of gentility and conversation, which Susan had of course spent the preceding days psyching herself up for. He had to realize... Or maybe she had fooled him too thoroughly with her ease of manners. It was all a trick! A studied trick! Like a gymnast on the uneven bars, Susan carefully negotiated the twists, turns and leaps of conversation with a person. It was not a natural thing. She'd learned, with study and patience, the same way she'd learned everything else. And today, no audience had shown up for her scheduled performance.

Oh well, one bad day doesn't mean the whole concept's ruined, does it? she asked herself as she lay there, the thought of Donny throbbing behind her sad face.

It does mean that.

She began to cry. She sobbed into her pillow. But she couldn't lie to herself. This was a sign she couldn't ignore. This suffering. This pain she had gone to such lengths to shut out of her human experience. It had failed. The plan had failed.

The only question now was whether to try to contact Donny, to let him know what had happened, what was happening. Something was going to have to change. The idea of wiping her ass with Mitchell And Gene catalogues when she should be thinking generous and contented thoughts was too much. The center could not hold. But how to go about finding Donny? The idea of returning to Office Buster in person after all this time, making a scene... How would that play out? Better to leave it all for tomorrow, she thought. She'd do her best to quiet her mind and get to sleep. It wouldn't be easy. Nothing would be easy from here on out.

Her dreams were filled with angry Mitchell And Gene fruit, visions of hopes dashed and defiled. Anything could happen now, her fevered brain considered, leaving her tossing frantically all night on an ocean of unwelcome possibility.

CHAPTER TWO  
A Time Of Decision

In the morning she ought to have woken up like any other morning, in total control of her life, a wonderful spread of tasks before her, but after just a moment of dazed uncertainty it all came back. The devastation.

She rose from her bed, went about her morning routine feeling grave and sorrowful. After she'd washed and brushed she went to her attic and took down her old brown suitcase with the big brass latches. She filled it with her three remaining rolls of toilet paper, her printer paper, her felt tip pens, and several zip lock bags full of her own private emergency rations (to call this recipe, which she'd developed herself, "granola" would be to utterly fail to understand its nutritional completeness). Caligula Bottlers didn't provide single-serving water so she could only fill a canteen from the remaining ration of cooler water that lingered in her kitchen. She regarded her kitchen sadly. As if for the last time.

First stop: Donny. She'd given it some thought and however grand her plans, however desperate her future, she couldn't embark without easing her mind on the subject of Donny. Donny had to know. There was something else, too, but Susan kept her mind as neat as her home; everything had its compartment. Now, bundled up with warm clothing and baggage, she walked. Her coat, sweaters and scarves all in layers formed for her a sort of second house, sheltering her, and her suitcase was itself a miniature representation of the house, containing what the house had contained, locked fast and portable. So it was really not so bad or so lonely out here. The brisk and stench-filled air only touched the exposed area around her eyes; perhaps when she arrived somewhere she'd purchase some sort of transparent mask. The noises were frightful, though. Women screaming at their children, car horns... Even the most innocuous action of cars was horrifically noisy, just the way they went about, roaring past as she innocently trundled along. The succession of cars was relentless.

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Whenever Susan became intolerably nervous she did sums in her head. This was part of what made her so successful. A normal person with her abilities would truly be a king, but for Susan everything was a worry and the shelter in her head, with its massive interior dimensions, was barely enough to keep the intolerable world at bay. She did her sums now. The further she walked the more complicated they became. By the time she finally reached the Office Buster she had nearly bested herself. She breathed a small sigh of relief when she passed through the sliding doors. At least she was away from traffic. But this place had its own problems. This was the place where she had finally decided how to limit her intake of life to only the sensible things. Donny had made the cut. Donny and his felt-tip pens. How could she make him understand how much he had



let her down? And how would she find him? This place, all places of the sort categorized as "stores" were mighty bad on Susan's nerves. Too many things. No order at all. She could barely take a step without stumbling over clutter and imperative. And she couldn't talk to just anybody. God, no.

I am filled with the light of my higher self. My higher self can do anything. Except deal with that fat bozo, she chanted inwardly as she failed to resist making eye contact with a shelf stocker. She hurried to get away from him before her emotions broke out. "Donny!!!" she finally cried out into the whirring rustling hush of the paper and wind shop. Its smells, its towering vacancy had overpowered her. It was all she could do not to fall to her knees.

"Donny's not here," said the bozo, still standing motionless a few yards away from her near a pile of neon card stock. The bozo had never know what it was like to be principled, so how could he be expected to understand a principled person, one as sensitive as Susan? She forgave him mentally. But was it true, what he said?

She'd have to inquire further, however distasteful was the notion of conferring with him. "Donny?" She asked pointedly. "Yeah, he doesn't come in on Saturdays. I thought you were stalking him; shouldn't you know his schedule?" One such as Susan, congenitally unable to truly take an interest in others, considered it high affrontery and something resembling flattery, to be called a stalker. For the moment she was baffled. She decided to take the bozo's meme of information and leave while she was ahead. She left Office Buster and stood outside, lost. Where to now? The street was intolerable, her home was understocked... What if Donny was there now? Impossible, no, he wouldn't be delivering toilet paper on his day off, she reassured herself. So she was right to have given up on Donny's delivery; it could be days before he was back on duty. Something must be very wrong for him to neglect her with such careless finality. She stood there with her belongings, unable to move. Now she had to contend with the fact that was holding her back, the fact that could no longer be ignored: Donny was the love of her life.

CHAPTER THREE  
Birds Suddenly Appear

Images were also strong in Susan's mind, though they couldn't always be relied upon for their veracity. She was now recalling with blinding clarity the first time she'd seen Donny. She'd been in distress, naturally; being in a store always distressed her. On this day she'd met with nothing but hostility in her search for stationery. She was particularly anxious to find the simplest and most economical felt-tip pens it might be possible to buy. The pricing schemes and the layout of the store were impossible even for Susan's mind to decode, since she had no knack for recognizing deceptions and manipulations, especially in text form. Too many choices. Too many lies. And the numbers, usually so familiar and graceful, had a languid hostility to them here. She was barely containing her desperation when finally... Yes, she heard him before she saw him. His voice penetrated straight to her nerve centers via the undefended gateway of her keen sense of hearing. It went straight to her brain, her pleasure centers, her "heart."

"Can I help you?"

And she'd turned, and seen him. There, in that pen aisle, black hair, long nose, slightly stooped posture, the listless eyes of a lamb stuffed with dewy morning clover as it lolls on a celestial hillside. All this had made its instantaneous and irrevocable impression on Susan's impressionable psyche. Perhaps in those times to come she had retreated from the cruel influences of the world in order to be alone with that heavenly moment in her memory. She'd cherished it and others, too: all the times they'd spoken on the phone over the following days and weeks, setting up her future. It was like building her marriage house, where she would live in love with her memory of Donny.

Now she did crumble to her knees, on the sidewalk outside the Office Buster, realizing for the first time what she had truly lost, and the immensity of her grief. Please don't let them call the cops yet, she prayed to herself as she fought for control over her poor suffering soul, embodied in the shape of what surely resembled a hapless bag lady. Little could anyone know the true power Susan wielded, her immense stores of money and influence that had profited her nothing, nothing! All her careful work had not yielded happiness. She was cast out of her home and robbed of the one thing that mattered. Sheer carelessness had done this. Donny's carelessness. Now she was in the unenviable situation of making enemies with what she most loved. Donny had taken her trust in Donny away. Her whole being cried out VENGEANCE!

She'd briefly considered running away to somewhere like Nepal; now this city alone was a scope too grand. One man, in the whole world, the location of all her dreams? She had to get up. Sums. One. ONE. One step at a time. First, get up from the pavement. Take stock.

Was this truly her priority, her last and only objective? Well, then she'd do it. She was Susan. All she needed was an internet connection. Going home was impossible. She

took her suitcase and her shattered wits and began to walk. This time she kept to the residential streets, crisp with leaves. That, at least, was an inoffensive sound. She had a reliable destination in mind. It was not far, but she couldn't spend any more time on the main road so she followed a circuitous route that added thirty minutes to her walk. That was all right. The rhythmic simplicity of her steps was comforting. She felt encouraged to make the number of steps larger, enjoying the sensation of ever more meaningful and interconnected numbers. She knew it would help her limber her mind for the task ahead. At last she arrived: the Village Den on O street. The coffee here had a pleasant sterility to it and no one ever bothered you at a Village Den. She ordered coffee and set up her laptop. She cracked her knuckles and opened a console window. DONNY. Soon the calculations started flowing, the search terms and command strings unifying themselves, gradually constructing and assembling the reality of all Donny's probabilities. She only had a few snippets of information to start from but with a mind like Susan's you could do anything. You could be the world's most brilliant shut-in, and you could certainly find the location of a common office supply salesman. These two things she soon knew for sure, because she had accomplished them. She knew where Donny was. Oddly enough, he was in another Village Den, across town. But he would only be there for seven to twenty more minutes. Susan decided to summon a cab. First, she finished her pot of coffee and paid her bill, leaving her three most-laundered dollars on the table as a tip.

Would this trip even be worthwhile? she asked herself as she climbed into a cab. She could sort of predict how Donny would react to seeing her. She didn't want to consciously know it but she did. He would react the way people always reacted when Susan appeared. Suspicion. Dread. Boredom. Confusion. Could she bear to see the expression of an enemy upon his beautiful bespeckled face? What would she say? "Driver," she said suddenly, "Take me out of town. Take me to the wilderness, please. At once."

CHAPTER FOUR  
An Unexpected Reunion

There, Donny, she thought. I won't use my powers against you. I have you, but I will leave you to your own devices, your own conscience. Perhaps she'd write him a letter. Except she had no envelopes and her felt tip pens... What if she couldn't finish the letter before the ink ran out? How fitting.

The sun was starting to fade as her cabbie, glad to be rid of her, drove off with his generous tip, the last of her cash, leaving Susan on her own at the edge of town. At last it was almost quiet. She could think here. She wondered if she'd be caught and arrested if she bedded down in the narrow strip of woods that existed around the edges of the highways. Arrested or worse. She supposed it was a risk but she quickly calculated that she didn't mind the odds. She hardly needed to avoid notice; people-not-wishing-to-deal-with-her had been one of her many super powers since she was young.

She found a secluded spot and sat down on her suitcase to think. The spinning thoughts soon dissolved back into comforting and instructive sums. She was ready to sleep. She wished she could pack herself into that suitcase.

My feelings are overwhelming me.

She laid herself down, head on a rolled up scarf, arms wrapped around her suitcase. She woke up a while later, her left arm numb. Opening her eyes, she saw another pair of eyes gleaming at her in the darkness. She started up but controlled her fear. No Wasted Effort. "Hello," said the stranger. As her eyes adjusted she made him out more clearly. He was a bearded man with curious, intense black eyes. He was dressed somewhat like her, in fact. Then he said her name. "Susan," he said, "It's me. Peter." Susan tilted her head. The calculations went mad. Words, phrases, memories, probabilities collided; rising over the din was one truth: it was Peter, her brother.

"Peter! I thought you were in San Francisco!" she gasped.

"I'm back," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I don't know yet," said Susan. Peter had never really understood things in numbers the way she did, so she had never been able to explain things to his satisfaction. Peter wasn't verbal, either; he was physical. Perhaps if Susan had been a better dancer she could have communicated with him; a dancer, or a fighter. She hadn't seen Peter since they were teenagers, and the last time they'd met he had given her a black eye. She didn't hold it against him, though. It was a miscommunication. That, and Peter was a man of constant frustration. That much Susan could understand.

She hadn't thought to ask him what he was doing here, in what she considered to be the wilderness. She now continued not asking. "How can I help you, Susan?" he asked in

the meantime. Susan didn't understand. She tried to remember what had brought her here, tried to even begin to imagine what could have caused Peter to appear at this moment from out of the mists of the forest and of time. There was no answer. "Peter, what is a vision quest?" she said finally. Peter's face did not change, but he did not answer. More words. Susan wondered once again whether she and Peter could really be related. The only thing they'd ever had in common was the way others thought of them: valuable for a limited purpose, but otherwise exasperating. Susan didn't have to be an interpersonal genius to observe that. Peter had been a football star in high school but he'd ruined it by being weird and unpredictable, and for finally having too much difficulty comprehending abstracts. He had no patience for anything he regarded as stupid, or inefficient, or compromising. Susan knew this because he had never had any patience for her, and because she had once looked at her own face in a mirror and recognized an expression she'd seen on him. So it wasn't that Peter didn't understand her right now, he just thought she was being foolish. Perhaps she was. But she was here to make a start. She was confused about Donny, therefore she was unworthy of Donny. Donny, she thought, I will make myself worthy of you.

As for Peter, all she had to do was ask the right question, make the real-enough gesture. She searched her feelings, shuffled them into and out of order of relevance. Finally, a surge of energy and truth burst through her. She leapt at Peter, screaming, fists flailing. She gave it everything she had, assuming he was as strong, at least in comparison to her, as he had been as a youth. In those days it had always taken all her strength to contest him. Tonight, however, he fell down beneath her, panting and gasping, making sad little noises. "Susan," he said. "I'm sorry I hurt you in the past."

Susan stopped her assault. "You won't fight?"

"Beat me if you have to. I know I deserve it," he said.

Susan was confused. It would have been anathema to Peter to admit to deserving anything from anyone. She was also surprised she thought that. Susan rarely stored such thoughts about people. But Peter had hurt her enough times to make it worthwhile to get to know him.

Yes, she supposed that was it.

"Susan, why are you here?"

"I have to change my life," Susan said. "Peter, can we stay together a while? Will I ever know what happened to you? To us?" She said this knowing the only answer would come in the form of What Happens Next, And Keeps Happening. Keeping her eyes on him, she lay back down. His expression told her nothing but perhaps he was preparing himself to stand guard. It was no use fearing. She closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

Her sleep was filled with numbers, and with the things which composed her old life. Reams of paper, rolls of paper, bottles of water, computer screens, sterile silences arranging themselves in perfect, inexpressible order. The dream wasn't happy. She was searching for her heart, searching for an answer for Peter, for Donny. Where was Donny in this land of paper? Where was she? Peter was present in the dream, a huge, judging presence, contours out of alignment with all her objects. Such a horrible profusion of objects. She had tried so hard not to have too much of anything. Was there such a thing as too much minimalism? "NO!" Susan woke up screaming.

"We've got to do something about that aural sensitivity of yours. I've got it too," Peter said. "I couldn't deal with San Francisco, or any of the other places I stopped. At least you can get used to the sound of a train. And the feeling is wonderful, Susan. Like being rocked to sleep by a giant metal snake."

That wasn't an image Susan cared to process too vividly so she dispersed it by talking. "San Francisco. Boston. New York. Milan. Portland. Portland, Maine. Is there a Portland, Maine? You'll take me there, Peter! Take me on the train!"



CHAPTER FIVE  
They don't go to Portland

"I grieved every thought that couldn't be expressed, every feeling," Peter was saying, in rhythmic time with the swaying and clacking of the freight train. "Why was everyone looking at me? What were they seeing, what were they wanting? Everywhere I went, I couldn't escape the confusion. The utter confusion of it all." Susan knew well enough what he meant. Sometimes it was impossible to tell whether the confusion was coming from without or within. "What's hurting us, Peter?" she asked. Peter was silent now. She'd hoped maybe he'd finally have some wisdom to impart but she'd already reached the end of his attention span. At least he seemed to have learned to keep his frustration in check. He was quiet, calm. Susan decided to be silent, to wait and see. This part of the journey would be a wait-and-see sort of thing. No more theory. She was free of theories now that she was with Peter, for he would discuss nothing nor ask her for proofs. He couldn't stop her from thinking, however. She lay back and let her eyes relax, going inward to entertain some hypotheses about Peter's possible paths in life. She'd gathered a few bits of data from his speech and attire, and she knew him perhaps better than she knew anyone else. It was little more than an amusing game, however. Just looking at him threw doubt on everything, scattered it the way a prism scatters light.

"What's in your suitcase?" Peter asked suddenly. Susan frowned and clutched her case. Was that an answer to her previous question, or was he hoping for something in particular? She hadn't really paused to think of his material needs. Maybe he was hungry, thirsty. She didn't want to share, but familial obligation was easier to deal with than the full ethical round-up. She opened her case and handed him a serving of her rations. For the first time she saw his face crease with anger, but it cleared quickly and he began to eat. Probably he thought it was disgusting. He'd hoped for better. Like a cookie or some beef jerky.

Susan wondered what else Peter would be expecting of her. The rocking of the train was not so comforting now that she had to contend with the notion of feeding both of them, guarding her suitcase from a man who was not known for respecting boundaries. Though he seemed to have changed, it was unclear in what way.

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Lawrence, Kansas. Susan had walloped Peter with her suitcase and jumped off the train a few miles out of town. He hadn't pursued her, and she was somewhat disgusted to think of him still in that boxcar, whimpering pacifistically to himself instead of raging after her like the old Peter would have done. He had changed, all right, but what good had it done him? Susan vowed never to end up like Peter, silent and passive, having given up on fighting his battles, riding his life like a funeral boat. Peter the flaming viking. In her mind one of her false memories began to form, that she had actually left him on a boat,

not a train; she had escaped by firing a flaming arrow, turned her back and ran while he frantically tried to bail water into his boat. She felt less guilty than she would have expected. She walked into town, the weight of her suitcase a nuisance to her left shoulder. Fortunately she soon came to a hardware store. It was a quiet, depressed neighborhood, the best kind for shopping. She knew it was time to make some modifications. She'd had this suitcase all her life and it pained her to alter it, but it would be a simple matter to graft onto its exterior a pair of wheels removed from an economically-priced dolly or cart. She soon did so and was pleased with the outcome: a leather strap looped to one corner, two wheels on the other, and it could now be dragged along fairly easily. She figured she'd get more ideas as she went along and necessities presented themselves. She sat in a park and consumed some of her rations and water.

Where to get more water? she wondered. Surely in the heart of Lawrence there would be competitive choices. She bundled up her stuff and hurried off before her wealth could attract the attention of the other transients wandering the alleyways of the area. She headed in the presumed direction of Downtown, walking downhill and hoping for the best. She seemed to recall her mother telling her about Lawrence. Perhaps her mother had been born there, or educated there. Before long Susan found herself in a scholarly-looking neighborhood. Storefronts offered distasteful custom-printed t-shirts here, pastries there, coffee, donuts, food of all sorts. Suddenly the office of a healing practitioner caught her eye. On the glass front of the building was advertised 'Miracle Water: molecularly perfect hydration!' This, then, was the answer. But it was a Sunday and the office was closed. Susan's canteen was nearly empty and this was the opportunity she couldn't pass up. She wielded her hard suitcase with the full courage of her convictions and shattered the glass of the front door. She rushed in and quickly found the device for storing this miraculous water. It was a tank, with a hose, and colorful buttons. No difficulty there. She decoded the workings of the device and immediately dispensed the proper amount into her canteen. She then paused briefly to use the well-appointed restroom this office of healing also boasted, as she calculated the quickest police response would easily allow her time to do this. She then fled the premises and got back on her way. She knew this was the end for her as far as Lawrence was concerned. There was a natural strain of criminality in her family but she was loath to commit more than one audacious offense per week, per town.

She called a cab and had herself dropped off on the opposite edge of town and started walking again. She wondered if there had been many witnesses. She now planned to find a smaller community hopefully within an hour or two on foot, hopefully with a Village Den and a decent night's lodging. While she walked she considered and calculated her options, pausing her discursive thought process every now and then to revert to her sums. They bore no immediate relevance to her situation, but through this relaxing and indirect method she frequently came upon possibilities she could never have reasoned her way to.

She had to wonder what was happening to her house (hardly to be called "home" now). She'd left it unguarded, but she owned it outright; it'd be there, forever, as long as it

stood, and it was an old house so it was well built. She received no mail, no papers, she'd cancelled all scheduled deliveries, all her bills were automatically withdrawn, from a bottomless fund. If she never came back, maybe the neighbors would eventually complain about the yard. Maybe the utility companies would notice a drop in usage. Susan still had numerous computers running there, performing their automated tasks, mostly just servers. She'd set in motion a ghost version of herself that would never die. With a little work she could probably have had the toilet flushing itself at appropriate intervals, lights turning on, every semblance of life could have been programmed. If she'd known this were coming (and she should have known) it might have been comforting to have such a ghost to leave behind. Or maybe she was the real ghost, she herself now, the one wandering the earth while her computers lived on, not needing her. Such were her thoughts as she walked, along highways and bike paths and horse trails, until she finally came to a settlement meeting her criteria. It was quite late in the day by now and as much as she hated to trust her material comfort to a corporate lodging chain, the thought of a night's sleep in any kind of bed was sweet enough.

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But first, she entered the local Village Den and fired up her laptop. Where are you, Donny? Only a few moments' consideration and calculation and then: inspiration. Within twenty minutes Susan had opened her first online dating account. Within thirty, she had found Donny's profile. Her heart pounded. It was obviously him in the picture: the black hair, the sloped shoulders, the dazed expression. She clicked: his username was "Defile." The profile had very little information. The office supply store was not mentioned. Several photos were included, however, all pretty much the same. Susan lingered over the pictures, filled with emotion. Finally she opened a chat window. The user was online. What would she say? To start with she merely cut and pasted a few lines out of a file she had compiled from randomly sampled chat sessions she'd programmed her computer to eavesdrop on. It had been a simple matter, simpler than actually learning to use such speech. She chose almost at random. It was more like selecting from a fishing tackle box than a lexicon. The look, the effect of the thing was all; she sheltered her consciousness from any sense of identification with the meaning of those insipid words. "Oh, Donny," she sighed. "I'm sorry." And sorry she was, too. For though she knew that what she felt was love, that love could never motivate actions a man such as Donny would recognize. Having read his profile she now knew this to be true. He was altogether a different order of being; he would expect from a woman things like coy flirtation, or gentle kindness, jokes, diffidence, prettiness... Susan's love, on the other hand, motivated her to do what she was now doing: to study him and stalk him and present something completely artificial. Was there really a difference between actual human flirtation, and what she was about to do, namely: programming a mating display on a computer and running it automatically? Was there any difference any more? And Donny would be so much better off if he chose her, with a woman of her powers and her emotions, rather than the thing she was pretending to be: an ordinary person.

At first there was no response. She could easily have gotten around to the back end of the site and seen what he was doing, who he was looking at, who he was talking to and what he was saying, but she didn't want to know. This was already too much. Just as she was preparing to close the browser and turn her back on the nasty experiment, he responded. Or, someone using his account responded. That was the one thing she couldn't easily tell, she reminded herself, short of remotely activating his webcam. "Nice pic" the user had said. Susan had of course not used actual photos of herself when she set up her fake-out profile. She wondered if he would have recognized her if she had. She sent a reply. He answered again: "what u up to this weekend?" It wasn't so bad. But she had to process this as it was a question. "Windsurfing," she answered.

"Cool."

What am I doing? she asked herself. She looked out the window of the Village Den to the Super Six Motel across the parking lot. She'd have to scrub the bathtub herself before she'd feel comfortable taking a bath, and she needed a bath. And here was Donny's avatar waiting to hear more about windsurfing, something Susan had obviously never done. She couldn't get answers from him this way, but it was worth keeping the channel open. She sent a few more empty, random phrases then excused herself. She packed up her things, paid the bill for her modest dinner and left. An hour or two later she was in a cramped bathtub in the unpleasantly-lit bathroom of her Super Six suite.

After about twenty minutes she got out of the tub, got re-dressed and went to buy some unscented candles and a selection of fresh clothes to wear under her coats and scarves. Oh, winter. Cruel winter. But once she was back in her freshly-drawn warm bath, now surrounded by candlelight instead of humming fluorescence, she felt better. Maybe a timeline would be useful. After her bath she went back online to access some predicted weather patterns. She'd have to get herself out of the Midwest and into a more temperate climate before too long, but that all depended. On What? On finding a new way of life. Finding Donny. Getting over Donny. Getting over Home. How could this be accomplished? She called for more towels. All the walking had given her a chill. She took the towels to the laundry room and warmed them in the dryer. When she was little, Susan had often gotten in trouble for getting into the freshly-cleaned laundry, taking it out of the dryer and making herself an igloo of warmth out of her family's clothes. Towels were the best. Things with zippers and metal snaps were a bugaboo. Susan wondered if her mother was still living in Mako.

CHAPTER SIX  
Windsurfing in the Great Plains

The next day, realizing she wasn't sure what town she was in anymore, Susan wandered through a residential neighborhood, dragging her suitcase with its modified wheels. She felt a little too warm in all her wraps. The good news was that as she used up her supplies her load would be lighter, and there'd be more room in the suitcase. What a strange realization. Maybe that was the purpose of this journey: to stop fretting about running out of things, and just run out. To learn to love it, to wish for it. As she walked she noticed a strange light coming from a garage off one of the houses. It looked like the kind of light given off by a welding torch. She couldn't help being intrigued. She left the main road and approached the garage. She peeked through the window. It was a young woman with a welding torch, indeed; Susan quickly saw what she was doing.

"Excuse me," Susan heard herself say, suddenly standing at the door of the garage, "but I don't believe that's seaworthy." The young woman jumped and whirled around, her torch burning in her hand. She lifted her mask and turned her fierce eyes on Susan.

"Get out of here! Are you nuts? Come any closer and I'll turn this torch on you!" Susan wondered why she ever bothered talking to anyone. But she couldn't help seeing what she saw. "Is that for windsurfing?" Susan asked. She knew full well that it was, but had to allow for a margin of error. Besides, people seemed to like it when she pretended not to know what they were doing.

"Yes."

"But the geometry is wrong," Susan pointed out.

"Sure. You think it is. But it's not. I know what I'm doing. It's something new." The girl was defiant. Was she mistaking Susan for an authority figure? She must be getting old. Of course, this young woman would realize soon enough that Susan was just a crazy person. Crazy, and old.

"What's it to you, anyway?" the girl went on. "Don't you know this is private property?" The girl still stood with her torch in hand, as if she were preparing to defend herself and her project.

"I'm interested, that's all," Susan said. "When do you plan to test it?"

"None of your business! Get out before I call the police!"

"Do you know who I am?" Susan asked, finally. This only made the girl angrier, though Susan knew the question would provoke curiosity. Susan had used it before, to get

people to stop talking. "I am the creator of SoapBoxDerby.com. Perhaps you've heard of it."

She had. Everyone had.

"No shit!" the girl exclaimed, but then dubiousness returned to her face. "Bull shit." She wanted to believe; they always did. And it was true, but that didn't matter in this day and age. "This is an age of faith," Susan said softly, almost to herself. The girl's face was now displaying awe.

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The next day the two of them were in a flatbed truck speeding towards a national park. The girl, Sharon, was driving. They didn't speak, though the girl's fidgeting betrayed that she was full of questions. Susan wasn't here to talk. She just wanted to see the flying machine. This girl was a completely ordinary computer user, but a genius of the material world. This girl could build things. Susan knew Sharon had to be a genius, because Susan couldn't understand what Sharon was building. At least, she was willing to admit the possibility that she didn't understand. What she saw appeared to be a failure in the making, utter nonsense, but Sharon's confidence was strangely contagious. Susan knew better than to ignore that.

And windsurfing, of all things. Was windsurfing the lie of the century, the lie everyone was telling?

After a long silence Sharon gave in and spoke. "So you're, like, rich, right?"

"I guess."

"But you look homeless."

"I am."

The girl laughed. "So you're like one of those crazy millionaires that invents something super profitable but doesn't care about money, and ends up living in a penthouse and never coming out, or dying under a bridge or something. Like an idiot savant." Susan supposed that was true enough, but she didn't respond. In fact Susan cared a lot about money. Money functioned reliably in ways nothing else did. And Susan understood it the way she understood little else. Money was numbers brought to life. Numbers turning into things. Or, numbers remaining numbers, if you preferred them to. Susan's money was mostly still numbers. She liked it that way. She could move it at will, more easily than any objects could be moved. She could work magic with it; and the more she had the more immediate the results. Yes, Susan loved money. Few people understood this,



though, so she didn't bring it up with Sharon. Susan just wanted to see things work or not work, and Sharon had a hypothesis. That was as far as Susan's interest extended.

"You just don't seem like the sort of person I pictured when I thought of Susan Trumptree. Susan Trumptree was supposed to be... dynamic. Entrepreneurial. Someone who'd wear jeans and a suit jacket." In fact, an actress had been hired to pose as the creator of Susan's site, once it gained traction. Susan had been fully in favor of this. Trumptree wasn't even Susan's real name. Originally Susan had wanted the actress to actually manage the front end of the business, to appear at conventions and give speeches and go to meetings and whatnot, and just leave Susan herself to do the coding, analysis and improvements. Meanwhile Susan insisted, of course, on being paid the equivalent of a team of developers, because that was what she was, on her own. And she slept seven hours a night. Susan wasn't in the business of depriving herself of things in order to get ahead; she got ahead by being fully herself. There were limits, though; hence, the actress.

Susan had met her once. Her name was Lily. But she was only interested in posing for a few photographs and collecting her paycheck. Susan Trumptree would have to remain reclusive, though at least she would be 'attractive.' The illusion as well as the finer points of marketing were managed by a small, somewhat undermotivated team of executives. The site ran itself, sold itself, thanks to Susan. There was really very little for anyone else to add to it. Except for the users.

Susan had signed a confidentiality agreement for the marketing men, but it was hardly necessary. She had no desire to share any significant information. She could even, like now, tell the truth to a few isolated individuals, and it never mattered. They'd forget about it, or become convinced she was a liar. Susan was unusual, therefore unreliable and easily dismissed. Her position was very easy to maintain.

At last they reached the lake. Susan helped Sharon lift the contraption out of the truck bed. "It's got to be an unmanned flight today," Sharon said. The device was meant to start out on the surface of the water, to utilize the temperature differentials between the water and the air to create lift. There was no knowing how much lift. Sharon believed it could be a lot. The board was made of a lightweight foamy material and its tiny chambers contained what amounted to an array of tiny wind turbines which would generate power from even the smallest air currents, so that the lift came both from this "fuel-less rocket power," and the natural air currents themselves acting upon the lightweight shape. The board also had a sail, but eventually this would be mainly for stability, and for looks. All this Sharon had explained the previous night. Susan had returned to her Super Six and immediately informed them that she would be staying another two days at least. Of course Susan would have liked to consider moving elsewhere but Super Six at least had the advantage of familiarity by now.

"Does it have an on switch?" Susan asked.

"Nope. If the concept works the power generated and the presence of water molecules should activate the power cells. I'm not so sure yet if that's a good idea, but there's no way to store this kind of energy so it's all or nothing. Stop or go. Don't put it on the water if you don't want to fly." The girl smiled the smile of a visionary. Clearly her hopes were high.

"What keeps it from detecting air humidity and starting to fly?"

"The conditions are very tightly defined. I've stopped it from becoming active when I don't want it to."

"So you've seen it become active?"

"Lots of times. But this is the first time putting it out on a big body of water like this lake. I'm going to bungee-cord a big rock to the board to simulate a little bodyweight. Obviously it's not calibrated for passengers yet."

Sharon proceeded to do this, selecting a large mossy rock from the lake's edge. Mossy and grimy with the dirty, infectious foam of a poorly maintained lake. Susan didn't fancy going in but Sharon was already rolling up her jeans. "It's too cold for this," Susan couldn't keep from protesting. The girl ignored her. She was slipping into the late phases of the average person's relationship with Susan: annoyance and disillusionment. Ejection would follow. Fortunately Susan felt no need of this person and there would be no difficulty in getting away ahead of schedule. She only needed to witness the experiment.

Sharon was putting the craft in the water even now. At first nothing happened. Then there was a piercing, high whine. It was emanating from the device. The sound echoed across the expanse of lake and trees; suddenly a wind came up and took the sail. Sharon, apparently unperturbed, released the craft.

"Wherever it goes, it's designed to return to me. As long as it doesn't leave the area of the water."

Susan was still not understanding, which might as well mean that something wonderful was about to happen.

The craft sailed for a few moments, not fast, still emitting a series of shrieks and whines and grinding noises of a surprising resonance. Suddenly, moving in ways that made no sense, it shot straight upward and began to careen around the perimeter of the lake, about twenty feet in the air. It circled seven times at high speed, then darted out to hover somewhere near the center of the lake. Then it shot straight up yet again and silently exploded high above them.

A moment later the stone that had been bungeed to the board was seen hurtling down onto the beach on the other side of the lake, glowing a dull red as it fell. It seemed

nothing else was left of the craft. But then Sharon pulled from her pocket what appeared to be a large green magnet. She held it at arm's length for a few moments, examined it, then showed it to Susan. To her amazement, Susan saw the turbines, tiny as iron filings but clearly turbines, still turning, clinging to the surface of the magnet. "At least I got these back," Sharon said, a little sad but apparently undaunted.

"Was that what you expected?" Sharon asked, her mind blank except for that question in all its complexities.

"Well, I find it's best to expect nothing, to know that anything can happen," Sharon answered. "As a scientist I have to be equally interested in every outcome. Of course it will take some time to rebuild, and I'm out of money from my Summer job so it may have to wait quite a while." Sharon turned and headed back toward her truck without another word. Susan wanted to go look for the stone so they drove around to the other side of the lake. They searched wordlessly for about twenty minutes then finally found it embedded several inches into the soft earth. It now had a burnt crust of what had been moss and grime. It was slightly shiny. "I wouldn't touch it," was all Sharon said.

They headed back to town. Susan had herself dropped off at her motel and said goodbye to Sharon, who didn't even ask for a business card. Susan was a little surprised. A fourteen-year-old inventor with only corn detasselling to pay for her research ought to be pressing the flesh a bit. The girl was thrifty, Susan supposed. All in all it had been an impressive display, but most inconclusive. Susan scrubbed her bath and then got into it for a candlelit evening, chasing the chill and the doubt from her body. The flying machine had been a pleasant distraction, duly noted, and now she felt ready to move on. After her bath, however, she began to draw up plans for a project on commission to present to Sharon later, when the time felt right.

Susan lay in bed at the end of the day and thought about all that had brought her here, just a few miles from home but clearly blessed with the necessary magic of an open mind. She'd found her brother, contacted Donny and met a genius. The miracle water she'd stolen in Lawrence had apparently had no special properties, however. She refilled her canteen from the tap.

CHAPTER SEVEN  
Autobahn, Arizona

Susan paid her bill for lodging the next day, using her credit card: the pink one she used for irritating things (it was best to have everything pre-sorted that way when it came time to file her statements). She resolved to find herself a serviceable tent and sleep in the open from now on. Accordingly she adjusted her course and headed South, to where the warm air would be found.

She was considering other means of transport now, but walking allowed her time. The increasing cold allowed her a subject for contemplation, a slate upon which to work her sums. Why worry? Even death was something of a solution; it solved everything, in fact. Of course it would deprive her of everything as well. Simple, elegant, free for the taking. How could life be sad as long as it had its companion, death? She resolved to be cheerful. Late that afternoon she strayed too close to the highway and someone thought she was hitchhiking. She tried to wave them on (it was a car full of German tourists) but they seemed concerned and intrigued. Perhaps this was what they had come to America to find. "Not enough crazies in Europe?" she felt like saying, but instead she finally accepted the ride, stuffed her case in the trunk and crawled into the back seat, into a great crush of high quality knit fabrics.

"Too cold for walking!" the driver said. Susan wondered where they meant to take her and what they meant to do, but they just seemed to keep driving and driving. Susan never told them where she was going or asked to get out as they laughingly cruised along at speeds in excess of 90 mph. They were probably unaware of the concept of a speed limit, Susan thought ironically, though she of all people should be immune to prejudice, with all the facts at hand, gathered from an internationally popular website like hers. Susan eventually fell asleep, leaning on the shoulder of the dark-haired woman to her left. It was a soft and sizeable shoulder, hard to avoid sleeping on. No one objected. As the sun rose Susan started to long for solitude and the shelter of a Village Den. She asked to be let out at the next town that had one.

The Germans misunderstood this, however, and left her in the tiny town of Crenstonst, which turned out to be in Northern Arizona. She was in Arizona. Incredible. Though there were many inns and hovels in the village there was no Village Den immediately apparent. She found her way to a public library instead. There she bought a bottle of water from a grimy vending machine and found herself a place to sit.

CHAPTER EIGHT  
The Fateful Library

Yes, here she could regroup. The place was empty, and the depressed librarian didn't even look up when she came in. Susan would help herself to all of their bandwidth. Meeting with Sharon had given Susan a few ideas for SoapBoxDerby.com, some too large to implement from here. But she could access her server and insert a few new features. Should she issue a press release? A newsletter? A manifesto? Should she consult her management team? No to all of that. Within the hour her main task was done anyway, and she liked it. It was the start of a powerful new tool for the expression of mechanical ideas. It was not just about philosophical or social issues anymore. Susan knew her project, her main project, which is what the site had started out to be, would never be "complete," and much of her heart had already drifted away from it.

But there was never-ending excitement about SoapBoxDerby.com that kept it alive in the world, and it was still a good platform for possibilities. Working on it was a sentimental thing for Susan now, and Susan was in a sentimental mood. But enough of that. Creativity, like criminality, had to be spread around. But it got Susan to thinking. Long after she'd shut down her laptop and drained her bottle of water and opened a book on life-drawing just to remain inconspicuous, she dreamed. She really had no project, in the usual sense of the word, to supersede her old one, to take up the slack, to keep her moving onward and upward professionally. As SoapBoxDerby.com had taken on a life of its own, Susan had languished without realizing it. Her work in this world was over... Except, at last, to live?

And who would know if she was a success in this? No one even knew where she was right now. And if she died on the road all that she had created would go on without her. Susan wasn't bothered by the notion, just intrigued. How long had she been like this, mindlessly tinkering, killing time, resting on her laurels as it were?

Susan looked around at the empty Crenstonst library. "Excuse me," she said, attempting to make eye contact with the librarian. "What is the population of this settlement?" The woman appeared not to hear. "Do you know where I could stay tonight?" she tried. At a conference once she'd met a man who had been co-founder of a website, much more useful than her own despite what everyone said. Its purpose was to help travelers find free lodging with strangers. As part of her conversation with the man she'd allowed herself to be set up with an account, though she'd neither hosted nor visited anyone in all the intervening years. She logged on to the site now. This was tricky; if she wanted to find future housing she'd have to have a destination in mind, and as for this particular locality there were no hosts within walking distance. "Excuse me," she said again, and this time she got up and walked towards the librarian, trying her best to assume an unthreatening posture. She even went so far as to unwind the scarf from her head and to remove her hat. "I had made arrangements, or so I thought, to stay with someone here in the town and I haven't been able to get ahold of them." The librarian looked at her sadly, with a hint of terror. Susan gave up on this line of questioning.

"Do you know a good restaurant?"

The woman was apparently catatonic. Susan wasn't used to judging other people's social behavior negatively in comparison with her own, but in this case it was inevitable. She even felt a little angry. But then she remembered how she looked and how she behaved. Maybe she should start dressing like a rich person, so she could watch her social fortunes change. People would be lining up to give her things.

She turned away from the librarian's desk and began to ponder fiercely. If she were to choose a destination, there could be any number of possibilities that could follow from that. She could have things delivered and waiting for her when she arrived. She could actually decide how she wanted her body to feel and make preparations for that. Instead of stumbling from park to park like a transient which in fact she was, she could make this transience her own.

Did she want that? Was there any reason not to want that? It was time to be dynamic, inventive, original. What else did she have? "Windsurfing." There it was: she'd head for the coast and make her lie to Donny true. Northern California. Somewhere really fucking expensive. That'd show them. She'd never lived as one with money, except in the sense that she never went without anything and could have her every wish fulfilled the moment she dared...

Hard as it was to get excited about all this it was a pleasing notion not to be cold any more. What she really wanted, however, was to be clean, and nobody could give her that.

Part of her wished there was a way to get in touch with Peter, but she knew in her heart he was useless anyway. As shocking as it had been to encounter him out of the blue after all these years it seemed to mean nothing. If she tried to meet up with him on purpose, all they would share was more silence and more ancient resentment. That, and the quiet. It was worth something, she supposed. She'd never really know how much, it was so cluttered and tarnished. Perhaps someday she'd set up some sort of refuge, for herself, for Peter, for people like them? But rich as she was, she couldn't buy her own planet, and that meant there was never any assured safety. In a way that was a relief.

Money couldn't change her essential nature, which was not godlike. Technology couldn't save her from death! It didn't matter what she did, she was safe from unalterable change. She would proceed as she was always going to: the way every one else did. She was unified with the whole. She could always stop fearing her difference, at that point.

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She sat back down; she'd been gazing for some time at the rack of romance novels, pretending to browse, unintentionally absorbing images she now regretted. Back at her laptop Susan began to make her plans. It would take time for the operatives concerned to put things in place, especially if her imagination was up to this task of grandeur. As for tonight, she could sleep under a bridge for all anyone cared. And that prospect was almost equivalent to spending another night in a Super Six, an unfamiliar one at that. Susan required either exciting novelty or pleasant predictability; crappy motels offered neither of these.

The man she chose as her functionary in the town of Honorado looked like the devil himself. This was hardly subconscious symbolism on Susan's part. She picked him from a binder which an assistant had given her some years back, when she'd had an assistant and had asked for names of trustworthy people who could be counted on to see to her comfort in the event she decided to travel. Back then they were on her to write a book about earning her first millions. She'd never done it, of course, though she had considered it for a moment or two. It would be full of incomprehensible and unteachable truths, of course. Nobody would like it.

They'd offered to ghostwrite it for her, and maybe they had done it in the end. She'd lost track of the project. This was the first time she'd wondered about it in years. Susan Trumtree Strikes Again, it could be called. In her head, that was what it was called. Susan Trumtree haunted her at every turn. Yet she could not regret creating her. Susan Trumtree brought sense and reassurance to millions. As for the devil man, his name was Wilson Jersey. And he'd responded to her initial query via email in minutes. Yes, he was good. He informed her that he was already setting wheels in motion. Susan had put her requests to him in no uncertain terms, though of course she was far from certain that the terms would bring her satisfaction. It didn't matter. Sleeping on the streets, sleeping on four-poster beds, both were distasteful in their own way, and she was not allowed to go home.

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She now had firm plans to begin her new life, brief though it may turn out to be, in Honorado. She would begin the next phase of existence with the coming weekend. That left a few days more of indigence, but at any moment she could, after all, assert her position. Even Peter must have known at some point, on some level, that he could at any moment call for help from his wealthy sister and be saved, instantly lifted up. Or maybe he didn't know. Maybe he'd never found out what had become of her, when she'd grown up, even though everyone else in the world knew. Susan was pleased to finally isolate a real question for him, even if it was vain, and far too late. She supposed she could locate him again, but that would be difficult even for her. Peter had an algorithm all his own and it would take some considerable time to express it. She would have to expect to be dead wrong, in the end. Really it was Donny she most wanted to

conjure up now. Susan wanted to tell Donny everything, everything she'd done, ostensibly for him. She wanted to hear him tell her what it meant, she wanted to see him changed by it. Who could not be changed by the knowledge that they were nothing more than numbers and concepts in some ineffable, frustrating reality, operating in chaos, inspiring still more vague, impulsive and calculable reactions in her, Susan? And then the reaction she inspired in return for what she experienced as true love and understanding, would almost certainly be revulsion, horror, anathema. Donny. What is the point of you? Why must I have you?

She would indeed stay in another Super Six that night. The walk from the library was dark but not cold. She'd have to decide what to do with her extra clothes when she reached Honorado. Throw them away, she supposed, or donate them to some unsuspecting person or organization.

She wondered if she should just go home and wait it out, wait out the end of days without trying anymore. Why surround herself with these questions, these red flashing lights, these cars, this grit, these terrible and identical little towns? And what was the alternative she expected to be shown? Ugliness of a different color awaited her in Honorado. Perhaps she was too realistic.

What would happen if, just once, she allowed herself to live in a dream, rather than knowing at all times exactly what was necessary and what was likely? Was it even something she could do?

"Good evening," said the woman at the front desk. It was a fairly nice lobby; Susan decided to spend some time there later. She liked to look at paisley carpets while she thought about math.

"Good. Evening," Susan said in return, tripping herself up in her struggle not to imitate the woman's intonation. "I'm here to check in. I made reservations about half an hour ago, and I was assured that a room could be made ready."

"Yes, of course," the woman answered. She wore a white button-up shirt and a navy blue vest. Susan wondered why the last Super Six had been so slack in its appointments compared to this one. How odd. Already the poshness was trailing in.

"Is there a bookstore nearby?" Susan inquired as the woman (her name tag said Lauryn) handed over the keycard.

"I'm afraid not," was Lauryn's only answer.

All those hours in a library, Susan thought, and I didn't even think to search for my autobiography. Oh well, something to do tomorrow. Maybe they'd have a different librarian on duty. It'd be interesting to read the book, even if she couldn't own it. Why didn't they send her one in the first place? Or maybe they had. If she'd failed to sign off

on anything as inconsequential as a fake autobiography, surely one of her market men would have seen to it. Still within the realm of possibility.

Susan hauled herself to her room, dropped her suitcase, shed a few layers of clothes and tucked in to what remained of her rations. She emailed Wilson Jersey and instructed him to get her access to a good kitchen. She could whip up a mega-batch there and continue not relying on the cooking of her fellow humans.

For a while she lay back in her stiff bed and contemplated the possibilities that awaited her. She turned on the weather channel. Everything looked good. She listened to the numbers, the forecasts, the soothing music. She looked around her room. It was exactly like the last, but cleaner.

After a while she made good on her promise to herself to sit in the lobby for a while. When she got there she inquired of Lauryn whether she might be served tea. Lauryn hesitated, then smiled and went away from her post for a few minutes. She returned with a styrofoam cup full of steaming water, with a tea bag hanging out of it. "I sometimes get into the breakfast stuff if someone asks, and if it's nice and quiet like tonight," Lauryn smiled, clearly pleased to give Susan this tea.

Susan took a sip of the tea and realized, with a dizzy, thrumming panic, that this was the first time she'd been even close to feeling happy, in a very long time. The realization was a shock and quickly strove to defeat itself: what did it mean? What had been so wrong before? Should she thank or repay Lauryn somehow? But no. No. The only way to honor happiness like this was to experience it. Lauryn's face smiled and she seemed to nod in agreement. Susan closed her eyes. She breathed in the aroma of the watery tea, felt its warmth and moisture in her nostrils. "I will remember this moment," she said, hoping it wouldn't alarm the poor woman who'd been so kind. Susan smiled as benignly and authentically as she could, for Lauryn. Then she retired to a seat near the television, which was turned off. Now she gazed at the clean, pert carpet with its vibrant yet soothing color scheme, and let her word-thoughts fade into the background.

"A person can lose their sense of time on these night shifts," came Lauryn's voice from across the room. Susan looked in her direction. Was she trying to strike up a conversation? Susan looked away, back at the carpet. Lauryn said nothing more between then and the time Susan went back to her room, about thirty minutes later. Just treasure the moment, the good moment, Susan told herself. In the morning when she went out again Lauryn was gone, and a young man with the name tag marked Carl was in her place. He was playing with an iPhone and his uniform was messy.

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The town looked handsome in the morning light. Either it had rained or someone had sprayed the streets with something, for they looked shiny and puddles of water reflected

the bright morning sun. The sky was stuffed with hazy clouds, making the light cheerful but not too intense. Susan wondered if she was just looking forward to the end of her ascetic poverty, or whether the world really was just a little more beautiful today. She headed for the library first. In her hand she held another foam cup, the same type Lauryn had given her the night before, but the tea in it was less delicious. She should have just gotten coffee. But there was no reason for regret today. Susan felt she was being rewarded, proved right. Her choices thus far had led her to this unimportant town which now hosted her elated feelings. It was good to be outside! And the climate in this high desert was much less cold than where she'd come from. If nothing else she'd made a "green" decision in coming this way. So much walking, so little air conditioning or heating required. Of course back home everything had to be kept stable for the sake of the machines, so she reckoned her total carbon footprint had only increased now, with the addition of overnight domiciles and travel hours, cabs, bathtubs, etc. She determined to add to Sharon's assignment the creation of a wind generator for a laptop. How pleasant it would be to do her work from a grassy hill near the ocean somewhere. How long before every inch of America was fully wi-fi connective?

Susan arrived at the library and found it in almost the exact same state as she'd left it, right down to the look of sadness on the librarian's face. Susan avoided the woman and went to the catalogue computer. She didn't know what to search for, exactly; she entered the name Susan Trumptree. Eight results! Susan stared at the screen in disbelief. The model. Lily. The smirking face of Lily stamped all over book after book, a veritable franchise built on a false name related to Susan's.

Who Wants To Be An E-Billionaire?

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And more. Madness. Susan located the books on the shelf, loaded them straight into her suitcase and dashed out of the building. No alarm went off and the dazed librarian didn't even look up. Nevertheless Susan's good mood was gone and she definitely no longer felt like remaining in Crentonst. She returned to the motel and hurriedly checked out, then hit the road. There were only dead-end streets in this town so she found herself quickly back on the highway, stumbling over the rocks along the side of the road. She knew this was not an appropriate way to travel but she was fed up and wanted only to get some distance from that damned library.

The next time she had cell phone reception she called Wilson Jersey. She demanded to have a limo sent for her and gave her GPS coordinates as her phone listed them. "I'll continue moving along this road. Have them meet me at the next town. I'm sure that'll allow you enough time to get someone there."

"Ma'am, are you sure you're safe? If you wait where you are, or find a rest stop, we can find you."

"I intend to keep moving. That will be all." She ended the call and put her phone back in her voluminous coat pocket. He was right, though; it was getting uncomfortably warm out here and the cars were a nuisance. She persisted, hoping in spite of herself that it wouldn't be far. She resented the possibility that a man as clever and resourceful as Wilson Jersey would even now be pinpointing her location and debating whether to send for her, perhaps by air, with a helicopter from the nearest hospital. The assistant of so long ago who had selected Wilson assured Susan that he could be relied upon. That meant he was capable of anything. So much for her freedom. Nothing could buy that; the more you owned the more people concerned themselves with your business. You were important. You couldn't be allowed to wander about. Susan had broken cover. She'd broken it the moment she left her house. Retribution would come.

This was all Donny's fault! He'd brought her into the corporeal world. With his beauty, with his withholding, he'd precipitated this desperation... Yet however much she wanted to blame him she knew it was erroneous. The man, the boy, was absolutely ignorant, and even if he were not, no one can really be responsible for the feelings they seem to incite in others. Susan knew she had to hold herself completely responsible for these feelings, for these foolish choices of hers. We should all know better. She tried to calm herself as she walked. It was useless to be angry at anyone, even herself. Was it really so bad? The sun was shining just as pleasantly as it had been moments ago...

She unwound her scarf and threw it on the ground. She dropped her hat. She pulled a penknife from her pocket and cut the sweater off her body, leaving it in colorful shreds along the road for a quarter of a mile. She now wore only her flowing coat and the cheap tank top she'd bought at the drug store days ago, and the same pair of pants; in a while she even stopped and cut these short at the knee. Suddenly she felt a cool, refreshing joy as the air touched her, even blowing her hair loose around her temples. Free! She strode free of her extra clothes, free of material concerns, ready to step up into her role as One For Whom Others Will Do Anything. What could such a one as her do with practicality, with such silly details as warm clothes? In the desert, of all places! Where had her cleverness gotten her? Wearing a sweater in the desert. Well, then, bring on the limo.

CHAPTER NINE  
The Road To Honorado

Susan didn't even know yet how she felt about the unauthorized books. Maybe someone had told her about them, after all. She was notorious for not caring about books and for not listening to things that didn't concern her in the moment. But one thing she truly resented was the feeling of being exposed. The code for that site had its DNA in her head, it was the product of the most secret and private processes of her life. Her ideas were the only property she cared for, therefore all she truly had. She dreaded to think what was in these books that purported to "demystify" her site, its purpose, its workings. How could anyone truly understand, and without even interviewing her? Something was wrong, very wrong. She had money and her abilities were unmatched, but someone wily was behind this and she didn't want to have to go head to head with a real villain. Someone she had trusted had let her down.

Maybe if she read the books she would find they were nonsense, misleading the public but not touching the truth of her work. Nothing wrong with that. She didn't begrudge any of her men making a little money, telling a few lies. She couldn't care less about merchandising and monetizing once she got her fees and royalties, couldn't care less about Lily's false face and false name. And she thought she'd understood everything she'd signed. Well, she'd have to give her contract another read too. Was there someone she could pay to do that?

Soon enough a truck stop came in sight. Thank God. She went inside to purchase some dramamine and water for the coming automobile torments. She reassured herself that she'd sort this out. She decided to allow Wilson Jersey to find her here. This parking lot was as good a place as any to say goodbye forever to the outdoors. She had bigger things to think about than the earth and sky.

Soon she was in the car, feeling more like she was in a tiny plane speeding along at ground level, strangely silent, strangely smooth. It hadn't taken long for the limo to arrive. It had been sent at great expense from the nearest town that boasted the latest models, and the driver was instructed to violate the speed limit. Now here she was, safe, scooped up from the truck stop and restored to sanity. No one was in the limo but her and the driver.

Silent. Serene. Surreal. The desert landscape rushed by outside her window, like a dream. She felt she must have been so small out there, moving so slowly. This speed and comfort befitted her station. Everything around her conspired to reassure her of that. And yet she was still the same haggard, road-worn Susan, the same person who'd stolen eight nonfiction books from a small town library in Arizona just hours before. No one would ever know of that. Already they were speeding towards the state line, on their way, her way, to Honorado, California, where a place had been prepared for her.

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A small red light on what appeared to be a telephone handset was blinking. Susan looked at it uncomprehendingly. The driver spoke over his shoulder: "A call for you from Mister Jersey, if you'd care to take it." Susan scooted towards the handset and lifted it to her ear. "Miss Trumtree--"

"My name's not Trumtree, as you well know. Just call me Susan."

"Susan, it's a pleasure to talk to you. I'm glad to find that the limo driver had no difficulty ascertaining your location. I trust he has made you comfortable and apprised you of where things stand vis a vis your requests?"

"I asked him not to talk. Mister Jersey, I'd prefer to wait until I arrive in Honorado to receive my briefing. Better yet, just don't say anything at all. I have every confidence that I will find everything to my liking, and I know what I asked for so I should have no trouble in finding what I expect to find, will I?"

There was a slight pause. "Of course," he said. "Enjoy your journey. Don't hesitate to ask Arthur for anything you need, or phone me if necessary. Just hit pound and then one on your handset and my office will be automatically dialed. I can also connect you to any other services you might need. See you in Honorado! You'll like what we have planned for you. I'm sure of it. Goodbye."

Having completed his speech he hung up immediately. Susan liked that. She pulled the dossier out of her suitcase and looked again at his picture. He did have a pointy black beard, no way around it. She wondered if he would shave it off if she asked him to. She put the file aside, looked away from the fast-moving landscape and concentrated on the quiet black shine of the minifridge that was placed next to the telephone. She wasn't interested in its contents, just its surface, its steadiness. It was the perfect thing to gaze at while working her sums. Even better than the soft paisley carpet of the Super Six, where Lauryn had given her tea. Susan let herself disappear into the black of the minifridge.

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When she arrived at her hotel a black curtain awning had been erected between the parking lot and the hotel doors. Arthur the limo driver pulled up precisely, aligning Susan's passenger-side door with the velvet entryway that rippled in the breeze, welcoming her into cool, dark anonymity. Of course nothing could be more ostentatious, more visible, but it had the desired effect for Susan. She felt absolutely sheltered as she bustled out of the limo and into the hotel. No one looked up as she entered and the



lobby was empty. To her right as the tunnel of fabric ended, there was a pedestal that came to the height of her waist upon which a golden key had been placed. It bore a golden tag with the number 2200 engraved on it. This was the key to the penthouse. She plucked it up without stopping and proceeded to the elevators which were already in sight as she entered the lobby. Their doors glowed with a gentle also-golden patina and a black track of carpet led her eye in a graceful curve through the lobby directly to them. Her fragile senses didn't even have to take in the details of the lobby if she didn't wish to; she passed through it with speed and ease as if she knew it well. The golden doors slid open at her approach and closed behind her, and immediately began carrying her upwards. After it had risen a few floors the rear wall enclosing the glass elevator seemed to drop away, revealing a view of the hotel grounds below, its outdoor pools and patios, its numerous mezzanines and open fire hibachis, and the empty lands beyond, bounded only by the immense ocean, more blue than she could ever have imagined. It could hardly be more perfect. Susan was nauseous.

The doors opened again, straight into her suite. She'd ordered it sparsely furnished for her arrival, but more things would be added in days to come, once she'd settled in. She wasn't here to punish herself with overstimulation right off the bat. She must descend slowly.

She smirked to herself when she reflected how much Donny, or any regular shmoe who worked in an office supply store, would love this place. He would have wanted to linger in the lobby, test out its sofas, order some drinks to be charged to the room. She'd be paying for everything. He'd be so happy. But how hollow it would quickly become. He'd be demanding, petulant, constantly unsatisfied. She understood why. She could feel it already.

She went into her bedroom, drew the blinds and created a mild darkness. She plugged in her laptop and went to the online dating site. She just wanted something real.

"how was windsurfing"

Susan shuddered with pleasure. He remembered her! "Good i gues"

Susan thought back to "windsurfing" with Sharon. No one would believe the things she'd seen. For now she must hold herself to understatement.

"Cool"

"How was ur weekend?" she asked him in return.

"pretty cool i guess, not much to do around here haha"

I burn for you, Donny. "haha," she echoed.

At Susan's request, an itinerary soon arrived, flawlessly printed on crisp high-grade paper (Susan knew good paper when she saw it), detailing for easy reference where and when she might choose to go and what she might choose to enjoy during her stay,

in accordance with her previous specifications. It was handy to have it written out. It had been so long since Susan had been near a printer. It was thrilling. It gave a wonderful illusion of stability. Every illusion could be provided here, with the help of her devil man. Susan held the paper lightly in her hand and lay back in the overly-cushioned bed. She opened the drawer on the nightstand and found the box of chocolates she'd ordered, a brand she had not allowed herself to buy in years. Her favorite. She'd eaten many a bar and truffle of Rengarde's Supreme while making her site, her magnum opus.

But when she'd ordered these sentimental chocolates she'd had no idea yet about the unauthorized books that were to come, that were to be her thanks for making everyone so rich and happy. Remembering this took away a bit of the savor. Perhaps she should make an effort to seek resolution right now. After all, she wasn't really on vacation here. This was serious business. This was her life.

"Manuel," she said sternly into her cell phone, mouth full of chocolate. "I've found out about the books. Do you have an explanation?"

"The books?" he sputtered as if struggling to retrieve a line of thought that had been long ago discarded. "Susan, you signed off on every one of the books we printed."

"So you know the ones I mean. The ones that purport to explain SoapBox in layman's terms."

"It's all smoke and mirrors, Susan."

"I don't believe I signed off on anything of the sort. I'm deeply offended by their existence and I want to be assured that none of the content of those books violates the one provision I insisted be included in my contract: that my secrets would never be revealed. I am to have absolute power over my secrets."

"That is not legal language, Susan."

"And you suck, Manuel." Chocolate spit sprayed over the white sheets of her bed. "You quite simply suck. How could you allow this to happen?" It was hard to maintain her moral high ground when she knew and Manuel knew that Susan had not in fact read the books, and when they also both knew it was always possible that she had given the permission he claimed she had given, somewhere along the line, in some sneaky way. Words. Infernal documents. Manuel knew her weaknesses. "You know I have my finger on the red button, Manuel. Everything stops when I say it does. The money stops, the site stops, and your career? It definitely stops."

"Where are you?"

"I'm in Honorado, taking a holiday."

"Well, that's something, anyway." He coughed. "But I don't understand why you're taking this tone with me after all these years, why you've suddenly decided it's not okay for us to do the job we do here. We haven't even heard word one from you in I don't know how long, and suddenly..." He sighed, seemed or pretended to choke up. "You know how seriously I take you as a client, Susan. If a line's been crossed here I'll see to it. But I maintain that those books are completely on the up and up."

"I don't like them, and it's my prerogative not to."

"I agree, but they're still good books."

"I want to know what's in them. I want a report."

"Do you have copies?"

"I hope you're not suggesting--"

"Of course my people can do a write-up for you. What is your concern?"

"For instance: I don't want the code discussed or revealed. Not one slash of it. I don't want my methods discussed or revealed. I don't want any of my personally identifiable information given out. You can do whatever you want with the Trumptree phantom. Leave me out of it. Sell what you can, lap it up, you have my blessing. But leave me my secrets."

"I don't know your secrets. How am I supposed to know if they're in the books or not?"

Susan hung up. That had solved nothing, but it had felt good. Just like these pillows she was splayed upon. It had indeed been a number of years since she had called the offices of Ortiz, Johnson and Olderbach and yelled at someone there. It was another of the luxuries she'd deemed unhealthy for her higher self.

Susan soon found herself downstairs in the four-star salon, relaxing in a partly reclined chair while a woman with her breasts close to Susan's face shampooed Susan's hair with the finest oils and cleansers. My first ordeal, Susan thought to herself, as waves of pleasure rippled over her body, from her scalp all through her spine and ribcage and loins. The woman was massaging her now, working the bubbly unction into Susan's dry and stressed head. Susan had not been touched by another human being in ages. Technically that German tourist who'd been smashed up against her had counted as a touch, but Susan had been bundled up and uncomfortable. There was nothing sensual about it. This massage, on the other hand, was enough to bring tears to her eyes. She decided to go ahead and have a weeping fit. All the people who were to serve her on this trip had been instructed to notice nothing strange in Susan's behavior. The woman would surely maintain a professional demeanor, and above all not stop rubbing Susan's head no matter how loudly she screamed.

When at last she was ratcheted up to look in a mirror and see her new face and hair, it was a grotesque sight to Susan's eyes. Susan's eyes themselves were now lined, in tawny brown, faintly shimmering, age-appropriate, autumnal yet deserty colors. She'd asked for blue (the vast nihilistic ocean had to be included in this new persona) so she got that too, in subtle hints of shade sculpted around the contours of her natural bone structure. All these strange caked colors only highlighted the sadness and the aging; her ridiculous, affected hairstyle was every bit the mockery she expected it to be. She looked handsome, to be sure, as much as Susan ever could. But it was not her, not true. A joke. She was not even any closer to resembling Susan Trumptree. Perhaps she should arrange a meeting with Lily the actress now, while she, Susan, had her warpaint on. Susan planned to be painstakingly recaked with makeup each day, even if she would only retire to her penthouse and wash it off an hour later.

Today, however, she was being taken out on the town. She'd decided to get dressed up in full regalia and take up a whole night of The Devil's time. He didn't know this yet, but Susan was fairly certain he'd be appropriately obliged to drop whatever he was doing in order to accommodate her. She'd love to see him try not to. After her makeover she had racks of expensive clothes brought up to her penthouse; some she sent back simply for being late. In the end it was down to just her and a woman named Beth, plus a pair of Beth's assistants, picking out clothes from some designer or other, who had nothing particularly suitable for Susan. "I gathered your aesthetic was more minimalist," Beth was saying sadly as Susan expressed disappointment that there weren't "more sequins" on a particular full-length figure-hugging gown the collection featured.

"You don't understand what I'm trying to do here," Susan said. Her soul battled to reveal itself but she held back. "The truth is I have a very important meeting this evening and I'm tired of looking like a bum. If you'd seen me yesterday, Beth, you'd understand. Minimalism is... Minimalism sucks, Beth. Can't you have more sequins put on?"

"This is couture, ma'am, it's all hand-worked. It would be impossible to modify it in the time frame you're giving us."

"Oh, fine." The worst of it was that Susan actually wanted the gown. It was beautiful, as it was, like nothing she'd ever seen before. She couldn't wear it now, really; she'd go on all day finding fault with these clothes if it would cancel out the pain, the fact that beauty existed in this world. Monstrous. Monstrous. Susan sighed and sat down. "You've brought very nice things. I'm sorry. Will you just look at my face and hair and tell me what someone like this ought to wear?"

Soon Beth had Susan dressed in a pair of creamy cotton slacks and a flowing blouse of deep purple silk. I'm old, Susan thought. The fabrics were, of course, exquisite, the color palette was apparently "new" and "daring" and the combinations seemed plausible enough. She looked at herself in the mirror and tried to find a single instance of the golden ratio. Then she tipped Beth handsomely and sent her away.

"Mister Jersey. It's Susan."

"How can I help you?"

"I'd like you to take me to dinner."

The slightest of pauses. "Of course. Did you have any particular form of cuisine in mind?"

"I trust your choice will please me."

"Of course. May I ask at this juncture if all the arrangements have been made to your liking?"

"I have no complaints." She said this as if it were a complaint. Jersey continued unabated.

"I'll send your limo at eight. Susan, what a pleasure this is! Frankly, I'm surprised."

"Eight, then." Susan hung up. Would anyone balk for even a moment? She missed Lauryn Super Six. She would always miss Lauryn Super Six. Looking in the mirror, she missed herself, too.

I'd better save a little money for Sharon, for my retreat and all that, Susan thought. She did mean to go back some day; back, at least, to a life she could be proud of, with or without Donny. With or without her web site. She had plenty; it was the kind of money that multiplied exponentially. Magic money. Much of it royalties from people wanting to use SoapBoxDerby's ratings system to make their products and projects look good. Even the U.S. Government utilized the findings of Susan's supercomputers, combined with the added power of "crowd-sourcing," as they called it now. Susan believed she had invented it. Was that in any of those damn books?

She wondered if and when Manuel would contact her. She had given him an impossible task, but people were far more creative than computers. She was sure she'd get something out of him. Something in her truly dreaded having to read those books herself. The hours that would be spent interpreting those impenetrable walls of text and lies... Even purest cant was bafflingly complex to Susan. And she was about to get a heaping portion of it with her dinner, she knew. Maybe after all this was over she'd put the question to the SoapBox. It never failed to turn up the truth. Come to think of it, had she ever tried SoapBoxDerby.com herself?

Wilson Jersey sat with his legs crossed in the back of her limo, a martini glass firmly but elegantly nested in his hand. He was shortish, as expected, and dressed impeccably. He still managed to resemble a middle-aged gigolo. A man built to please. Susan let

herself slide into the limo with him, wondering whether her appearance had faded in the hours left to herself, with no one to arrange or touch up her delicately designed veneer. Probably by now it looked a bit askew on her. Jersey was unflappable even in the presence of Susan's sad and petulant face. He lounged graciously across from her while she slouched silently eyeing the minifridge. "Shall I offer you a drink?" She said nothing so he signaled to the driver, Arthur, to get them on the move. "I think you'll like this place," he said. "It's a favorite of my wife."

"I see she's not with us tonight," Susan muttered.

"I don't remember you asking to have dinner with my wife." Did he wink? Had that bastard winked at her?

As they pulled up outside the restaurant, Susan found she was having trouble keeping her mind off the books. It was in many ways a welcome distraction from the situation she'd initiated with Jersey. How did she want to play this? Where could it go? How far? Who would write about it later and sell it with Lily on the cover making a naughty face?

"I didn't know if you wanted the awning again, or any special reservations, so I used my own judgment. I thought it best you get a real feel for the atmosphere here, and then you can decide if you care to offer your patronage again at a later date. Changes can of course be made."

What did he mean by that? Was he offering to alter his favorite restaurant for her? Perhaps she could buy it. Buy it and change it completely, leave a lasting scar on the night life of Honorado, and the life of Wilson Jersey himself. By god she could close every restaurant he liked... Though property values were probably quite high here. Susan's mind was starting to drift towards things potentially more important and more interesting than what Wilson Jersey had to offer, emotionally or materially.

Jersey escorted her into the restaurant. The atmosphere was subdued, a kind of genteel quiet that is the opposite of the quiet at a public library. A quiet produced by carpeting that is regularly cleaned and replaced, by wood that is polished. There was a lot of red. Susan shuddered and felt claustrophobic. Jersey nodded to the maitre d' and proceeded to a table in a private corner, apparently his usual table. At least that was the impression he seemed to want to give. He pulled out the chair for her. They were officially on a date.

"Do you care for wine?" he asked, sitting down across from her and preparing to summon a waiter.

"I don't drink," Susan said fiercely, planning to demand a drink later.

"Very well," said Jersey, smoothly. "In actuality they have a very innovative drink menu here, non-alcoholic as well. Do you avoid sugar? Caffeine? I hope it's not a personal question, I'm just curious. I'd love to recommend something."

"Show me the menu and I'll choose for myself."

"Of course! I'll have them tell us about the specials."

"Nevermind the specials. I'll have the porterhouse."

Jersey signaled the waiter, who was a young woman, elegantly thin, elegantly tired, her hair up in a golden bun at least five inches thick. "The lady will have the porterhouse, I'll have the salmon with lemon curd."

"Can I bring anything special to drink?" the woman asked. "Water," said Jersey, a sudden sharpness in his voice. The waiter hushed and retreated with a submissive nod.

So they sat across from each other, the pair of monsters. Susan could think of nothing to say to him and was content to make him uncomfortable. He did his best to entertain her with food, which was brought out in seemingly endless courses of complements du chef, all intensely delightful and unfamiliar. Susan was worried her brain would come to associate the distasteful likeness of Wilson Jersey and everything he represented with the very good taste of the food she was eating. She'd built a trap and fallen into it herself. Midway through the evening she got her glass of wine (glass the size of a punch bowl; wine enough to fill a thimble; the waiter returned every 5 minutes to refresh it) but it hardly felt like a triumph now. Jersey was triumphing. Everything she allowed herself to enjoy was a triumph of the devil.

She thought of Peter. Would he be ashamed of her, or just hungry? "You know," she said, interrupting Jersey in the middle of something undoubtedly erudite, "my brother is completely homeless. He's a hobo. Do they have voting rights, do you know?"

Jersey took a sip of his wine. "Is your brother interested in politics?"

"Only in so far as he would prefer to be a sovereign nation of one."

Jersey laughed. She looked at him as if she were quite serious. "Well," Jersey sputtered in his wine, "wouldn't we all? Fortunately," he said, recovering himself, "some of us have the privilege of designing our lives with some liberality in mind."

"Indeed. You understand, don't you, Mister Jersey? Yes, I think you do."

He smiled. He took another drink.

Susan knew this night could end one of two ways. She hadn't admitted it in her head, exactly, but it was obvious, had been from the start. She could still turn back. Dessert

was being ordered. God. Once she had her mouth full of chocolate and cream fluff it would all be over, she'd be his slave. Her heart pounded as the waiter once again slunk away, leaving her with Jersey's insinuating face. Her own face felt filthy now under the grease and dust of hours-old makeup; her hair floated around her head like something artificial, like an artificial bird flopping on her head. The plate of dessert came. Susan pushed herself away from the table as if the plate had a snake on it instead of a wedge of fifty dollar pie. For an instant she searched the table for something to throw, but she decided to simply leave gracefully. This meant running. All she took with her was a napkin which she used to savagely smear the makeup from her damp face. She left it on the sidewalk outside the restaurant. She left her shoes as well. She walked a few paces then got out her phone to call Anthony. He had been waiting in the parking lot at a discreet distance and pulled up before she could finish dialing.

Finally in the silence and safety of the limo, Susan breathed a sigh of relief to feel her face lightened of its load. This wasn't how she meant the evening to go but it had been too much. She began to cry. She had planned to make Jersey sleep with her. Who was this Jersey, anyway? Just an agent. She'd picked him. What had he ever done? What had she ever done? She decided to keep the pants. The blouse she tore off by the buttons and flung it out the window of the limo. Someone on the street hooted. Anthony, for his part, had not responded to any of her behavior. Soon they arrived back at her hotel. "May I borrow your jacket, Anthony?" she asked. He rolled down the privacy window and handed it back to her. "I will return it." She made this promise to herself also.

She walked into the lobby, very slowly this time, looking around her. "I apologize," she muttered to the women behind the counter. "I will freshen up and come down later." She approached them more closely so they could hear, but stayed at a comfortable distance. "I may want to order a drink, will that be possible?"

"Of course, ma'am," said the one on the left. Her name tag said Lauren. Susan tore her gaze away and walked onward, towards the elevators.

Somehow the elevators still recognized her (the key must have something in it, she thought) and took her to her penthouse. Remarkable how silently it ran.

About thirty minutes later she wandered back down to the lobby, now wearing a robe and silk pajamas that probably cost more than most people's formal wear. She found the bar and ordered a fine whiskey and carried it out to the patio which had a view of the ocean and the beach. It was cool. She clutched her soft robe around her and sipped the warming liquor. Where am I? she thought. She could hear the ocean and had a strange feeling that it didn't belong here, either. The ocean, a thing of natural grandeur, uncompromising, yet somehow finding itself on the edge of this place. This beautiful beach had been redefined and assigned a wholly artificial status. The only thing that really, really mattered about it was that, maybe, one could fish out of it. Plus it was attached to a system of currents that regulated every aspect of life on Earth. And the



weather was mild. Those were real truths. Real value! There was nobody fishing now, but plenty of people eating.

And then there was this whiskey, being drunk by Susan. It was all too complicated. She felt like she'd learned nothing, only acquainted herself more closely with what she had already known was out there: chaos. She'd burned through some of her so-called fortune; it was hardly worth the effort of doing so. How would she integrate the knowledge that it still didn't matter, at least not to her, whether she lived in poverty or luxury, that she would always be out of sorts, always ugly and ill-behaved, would always carry this vaguely corrupted feeling. She'd found nothing to make her feel right. Only glimpses and possibilities: the kindness of a styrofoam cup of tea, the passion of a crazed youth with a knack for nanotechnology... Maybe that was enough to build a life around. A life, if it was to be a life, had to be based in the assumption that it was worth living. There had to be excitement, motivation, gratitude. Aside from some nice fabrics she'd found nothing like that here in Honorado... but she was surely being unfair. Honorado was just another place. It could only be her own fault; it was her making this place terrible. Even this fancy hotel couldn't be inherently bad, could it?

All these questions would be better off on SoapBoxDerby.com. Susan had all the answers at her fingertips, all the benefits of all the philosophy ever thought of in human history. She could resolve all these questions. That was why she had invented the site in the first place. People could collectively approach truth, by each putting in their part of the picture. All that was required, according to Susan's initial theory, was a computer system (in place of a manifestation of God) powerful enough to collate the data. And the data was there: on the internet. She had to admit she had seen some results that seemed ludicrous, but she chalked it up to chaos, assumed that the answer, even if mysterious, was part of something greater, something necessary. The system had checks and balances and endless review processes. Eventually it would produce something not only reliable, but certain. She would be the first to see it: truth. No matter how small.

Maybe that was something worth going home for, something worth working on, even after all this time and all the crappy books. But could her computer tell her where home was? What home was?

Peter. Donny.

When she thought of home, of home as being a place, she thought of people. There must be some truth in that. But what could she do with it? People hated her, mistrusted her, and for good reason, probably; look who she was, look what she did, all the time...

The whiskey was making the view more and more fuzzy, beautiful in its own indeterminate way. Susan could learn to appreciate vagueness, if this drink was any indicator.

Maybe Donny had never belonged at the office supply store in the first place. Who was she to expect him to serve her? To deliver her toilet paper just because she had the money to spend to ensure that she didn't have to get in a car or bus and get it herself? When, on this whole trip, had she ever been on her own, when in her adult life had she ever been anything but a giver of money? The place she was sitting now was no different than her office chair at home. She hadn't built this patio and she hadn't built that house (though she had assembled the desk from a box full of parts, and a good job she'd done, too. She'd even made little improvements over the years so that it would not fall apart as it was apparently designed to do). Her website was the one thing she'd given to the world. Maybe she should never have let those marketing guys get attached to it. Maybe. But in the grand scheme that was really a very small part of the problem. After all, there was no great harm in a few slicksters making a living. And who knows? Maybe the books were good.

Susan took her whiskey back upstairs and sat down on her massive bed with one of her stolen library books. What a contrast. Or was it? She was just acting according to her nature, a complex nature but everything was still reducible to rules. Probably just one or two, if you expressed them correctly.

The fact that Susan didn't want to read this book (Winning The Derby: SoapBox Demystified! by Susan Trumtree and, in smaller type, Ivan Collier, whoever that was) was just one small piece of data that related to one of those simple little rules. But Susan had to live these facts. That seemed to preclude her knowing them.

Susan was about to open the book and consider reading the introduction when she seized upon something. She dug the other books out of her suitcase. Winning The Derby. Who Wants To Be An etc. Deciding Truth. God, Crowdsourced? A Simple Set Of Facts. Soap For The Soul. The Golden Algorithm.

And finally a book simply entitled: TRUMPED.

That was her "autobiography."

It seemed odd they'd gone to so much trouble and managed to clap together eight books from absolutely nothing. And yet only one book bore the ghost writer's name. Ivan Collier. Judging by the copyright dates Winning The Derby: SoapBox Demystified! was the third in the series. Who had written the others? Why had this Ivan insisted on being credited?

Thank god. Something to do besides read the book.

She used her computer to dial the first number the search turned up that seemed plausible. She got voicemail. "Thank you for calling Swanson And Swanson Talent Agency. For information on employment, please visit our website, swansonandswanson dot biz, or call during normal business hours. Reach for the stars with Swanson And Swanson. Goodbye." The voice was not as interested in what it was saying as was

called for by the script. Well, it must be a very poor excuse for a talent agency. Could her ghost writer possibly be connected with such a place? She supposed sadly that Ivan Collier was just another alias.

How deep did this go? She should never have set out in search of truth with only her computer to aid her. How many years have we had the internet now and we still can't put it to good use? she thought, her fingers poised over the keys, unable to summon the will to enter the next command. She didn't even know where to look next to find this Ivan. Just another ghost, another goose to chase. Everyone was so fascinating and so secret, always changing, constantly amended and corrected. Nobody knew the truth about themselves, so how could she? She couldn't even verify a single identity, match a name with a face. IVAN!

She got up, put her robe back on and descended once again to earth. She got a fresh glass of whiskey and walked out the front door with it, causing not a little discomfort in the woman at the desk, who visibly choked back her objection to Susan's removing the hotel's glassware from the hotel. Susan ignored also the "no alcohol beyond this point" sign posted on the door, and went out into the cool night. She took a left and headed in the direction of what she hoped was the beach.

She walked barefoot along the side of a relatively quiet and surprisingly clean road. Up ahead there were fine houses, their back porches up on stilts sunk into the sand. There was moonlight shining on these rustic palaces and their properties. They were all set a discreet distance from each other. Susan cut through into a stretch of private beach, girded by tastefully weathered old fencing. Straight ahead of her was the deep blue-black water, whispering and moaning some deeply held assertion. It wasn't calling her. It was merely there.

She sat down just out of reach of the lapping surf. She took a sip of her drink. Then she moved forward. The water surged up gently and soaked the hem of her pajama pants, then retreated. It left little shining beads of itself on her ankles. Then it came back, slightly different, then away again. Next time it got her knee wet, as if it were getting used to her, getting a little more daring with her. But as the ocean came and went, touching and departing, she felt it getting further and further away from her. She had to continually scoot forward in the sand in order to stay close to it. There were perfectly natural explanations for this; even schoolchildren knew how tides worked. But right now it was just too poetic for Susan, with two glasses of whiskey in her sensitive body. She'd never seen the unknowable so perfectly embodied. It was all presenting itself to her, right there in front of her and it gave up nothing. She saw it, smelled it, heard it, felt it, tasted it, and knew very well that it tended to kill those who wanted to get to the bottom of it.

And yet, science! She could get to the bottom of it, if she wanted; she could ride its crests safely, she could play games with it! If she had Sharon's finished watercraft, for instance, or a submarine, that wouldn't necessarily mean that Susan would come to

know the ocean, but it wouldn't be able to just leave her this way, standing on its margin in awe, helpless. Anytime she wanted, she could show this ocean a thing or two...

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She woke up to the sight of agitated shadows standing between her and the sun.

"She's waking up, oh God."

"Should we run?"

"Just give her a chance."

Susan sat up. They were children, a teenage girl and a boy who appeared to be ten or eleven, roughly. "I'm terribly sorry," Susan said. "I must have fallen asleep on your beach."

She was no longer drunk but the kids looked at her with irritating knowingness. She didn't dignify their presumption with any more words. She struggled to her feet then bent to pick up her glass and walked off their insipid property, going along the beach toward the hotel. When she reached the patio she hoisted herself up onto the platform and climbed over the railing, surprising the woman who was cleaning there. "Excuse me," she said. She proceeded into the hotel, leaving the glass on the bar. She didn't care what happened next. She was going to get in her damned bed and sleep, maybe forever.

But she couldn't sleep. She lay in her bed, the wonderful sunshine bouncing off the ridiculous immensity of her white sheets. Someone had left a window open and a breeze was coming in, bringing along with it the scents and sounds of the ocean. It was like being teased by a chess opponent who had won a most humiliating victory. She was hung over, too.

She reached over to the phone by her bed. "Mister Jersey. I am ready to leave Honorado. Please cancel all my plans. There's just one more thing I'd like you to do for me. I realize it is technically out of your jurisdiction and well beneath your abilities, but I don't trust myself to deal with it. I want to take a train to Mako, Washington. I don't care about the route or how long it takes; the longer the better. I just want to leave tonight. You're authorized to make whatever payments are necessary, of course." She hung up. She could have apologized for the previous night; she might as well have. She didn't much care to maintain this persona any longer. But what would she replace it with? She couldn't bring herself to just be, not with these people. Not here. She was too ashamed.

CHAPTER TEN  
The train station

Rules. Rules rules rules. Where were the rules? She'd lived by rules and been wrecked by rules. Rules, or attachments? There was really nothing between her and Donny or her other deliverymen, Susan thought as she stood under the full moon with her suitcase, decked out in her new coat and what clothes she had decided to keep which were limited to what could fit on her body. She'd been warned of one thing by Mister Jersey, which fit in with her plans: the trains tended to be cold. So she wore layers, layers of fine fabrics. But her appearance remained deceptively disheveled. She was worth her weight in gold, and then some.

Soon the train would come. She'd be immobilized and unable to access even the barest luxuries. Everything would still be expensive, a kind of penance. She would read at least a little of one of those books. By the time she got to Mako (if she didn't jump ship by then, as it were) she'd know something. She hadn't seen her mother in years, but she didn't know what to tell her any more than she'd known what to tell Peter.

Maybe this "autobiography" would have some ideas. TRUMPED. Who was this Trumptree character? Someone's treasured creation? Did it have any cohesiveness at all? Susan still dreaded to find out. But she kept the book in her coat pocket next to her ticket, and waited.

The train was late. There was nothing Jersey could do about it. The fact had seemed to cause him significant pain when he reported it to her on the phone. She was mildly pleased. Still at least an hour to wait for this one, and she'd been lurking around the station and the surrounding neighborhood for about three hours already. She'd been happy enough to give up her room in the hotel and get away from the whole scene. No crimes had been committed. She'd even returned Anthony's coat, but she didn't let him drive her to the station. She walked and saw a little more of Honorado as she went.

It was a very small, very rich little settlement, just as one would expect. But there were a few renegades, a few middle class neighborhoods where the accountants and real estate agents lived, mere viziers to the sultans of Honorado. Even this was mild exaggeration. There were places even richer, this was just a picturesque spot where some people kept one of their houses and one or two jet skis. Improbably there were also several stables. These people must enjoy riding Arabian horses in the surf. Understandable.

Susan couldn't altogether hate Honorado. She'd walked along under the sunset and she had to admit that it was pretty, and quiet. Quiet. There weren't many places as quiet as this. She hadn't even taken that into consideration when she picked the town, as far as she knew. It was just an option among many prestigious options, one hotel among many hotels that clamored for her patronage, begged to give her its absolute obedience. But here it was: beauty, unconquered. They couldn't stop the sun from setting, and it was

visible from almost anywhere in the world. Almost. Maybe that was the key to everything. Could you see the sun rise and set? Could you breathe?

She could. This was not luck; this was a god given right. How much would it cost to return the sun to the dark places in the civilized world, where they'd finally succeeded in blocking out the sky for the sake of money? You can't use evil to fight evil, she told herself. But all she had was money. Money, and the abilities that brought it to her in the first place. The ability existed, regardless, like the sun. Beauty, unconquered. That's me, Susan thought.

Then she'd waited, in that station, for hours, with hardly another thought arising to trouble her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN  
Reading on a train, or, Meeting Eva



Unlike the train she'd shared with with Peter this was a passenger car, and she had a private room assigned to her. The Devil had tricked her again. She would try to figure out a way to switch to coach. Maybe that was foolish. She'd come out of her room once or twice and seen people attempting to sleep in those seats. She was comfortable where she was; was that so wrong? Susan still wore all her clothes, still carried one single suitcase. She still had a few crumbs left of her original rations. The past few days she'd resorted to dining in restaurants, had left Honorado early and not even used her arranged time in the hotel kitchen. Oh yes. It had been on the itinerary, a full hour all to herself. She'd been nice enough not to insist it be anywhere near the peak dining hours. Now she was almost out of food. She'd have to dine on the train, and then count on her mother. Assuming she could find her. Well, wasn't she Susan? She could find anyone. Once she got there of course it would turn out the other way: Susan was rich and her family was not. They'd all expect to be fed, just like Peter. Which wasn't wrong. But like Peter, her mother would probably tend to be a little gruff about it. Fine. Part of her was filling up to the brim with a new kind of joy. Could it be she had missed her mother and never thought of it in all these years?

She could see the land outside rushing by again. She didn't really care to watch it. When would she be done? How long had she been gone? She'd moved slowly enough. Days had passed with little event, or had they? Was she only gone a week? Was it one of those stories where she'd wake up to find it was all a dream, had only lasted thirty seconds? Maybe she'd wake up to find she was not even Susan, that these silly books didn't exist; maybe she would be married to Donny. No children, of course, but maybe they'd be happy. Maybe they'd adopt. Maybe they'd come to know each other, and was that not the greatest happiness two people can experience? Her mother would beg to differ. Susan wouldn't tell her much. Ilene was too similar to Peter. Too prone to fits of violence and dismissal. It was a family trait. Meanwhile, Susan had her autobiography to read. She'd find out all about herself that way. Maybe Ilene had read it, too. How strange that would be.

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Hi. I'm Susan Trumptree. But you knew that already. I'm the creator of the world's most popular website three years running: [SoapBoxDerby.com](http://SoapBoxDerby.com)

Tried it yet? No? Go ahead. I'll wait.

Yes, that's right. I created a website that uses the power of the internet and the human mind (same thing, right?) to establish eternal truths via a simple system of voting. Just post your truth and we'll fact-check it together! Anything from the best name for your

goldfish to the existence of God (we're still working on that one! But we'll get there. And yes, someone has already posted the question "will we ever finish voting the god question?" We sorted that one out within ten minutes. The answer, obviously, is yes).

You'd think it would be tough being such a controversial figure. But speaking of figures, have you seen my author photo? Go ahead. I'll wait.

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Susan slammed the book closed. It was worse than she'd expected. She'd have to take a little break before she soldiered on.

Rhythms were like very simple equations, usually, and the train rhythm was the simplest since the maternal heartbeat. It was still difficult to keep her footing as she made her way up the aisle past all the passengers in coach. Just looking at them gave her a headache.

The snack seller was an amiable, stocky man; Susan supposed that description could fit most anybody who got work on a train. It wouldn't do to be tall, for instance, or claustrophobic. And if you got tired of people easily, you'd be better off at a parking garage where people continually flow away from you instead of piling up like pebbles in a tin can that just turtles its way across the country, back and forth, slowing and hitching and crunching... Susan herself wasn't cut out for it, that much was clear.

"Gin and tonic?" she said to the man, as if she didn't know what she wanted, and in fact she was a little surprised she hadn't ordered whiskey. Must be her proximity to her mother. Ilene always drank gin.

The nice man got it for her right away. She paid him seven dollars plus a two dollar tip. His name was Stephen. She turned away. So many people were going to just pass her by on this trip. She had to allow it. She knew that now. She'd gotten too involved in the idea of Donny and that hadn't gotten her anywhere. She'd tried to involve herself in the schema of Wilson Jersey, all for naught. He'd forgotten all about her by now, back to his regular stable of less-outlandish cruelties. She thought she might write him a letter when this was all over and done with.

Back in her compartment all she wanted was to drink her gin and look at the scenery and think about nothing. Outside her door, she could hear two people talking who did not want to be talking to each other.

"We are going to have to ask you to leave at the next stop. This behavior is not allowed. For the safety and comfort of our passengers you will be ejected."

"I paid for my seat, dammit. No one ever told me you couldn't bring a flask on board."

"You can bring whatever you want on board provided it is not dangerous and you have proved that flask of yours dangerous and therefore you and it must leave. Return to your seat and prepare to exit the train at the next stop. Ten minutes."

Susan sat absolutely still while this painful tragedy went down outside her door. She'd noticed nothing amiss when she'd gone out for her own drink. Was this fair? Here she was drinking quietly in her room while others were being ejected for similar indulgences. She stared nervously at the door to her compartment. It was terribly flimsy. What if there should be a mutiny? She crept to the door and turned the lock to make sure it was solid.

She sat down again. It was getting dark already. What to do? She took another sip then began to wonder when dinner would be. She had signed up for the last dinner, as she was not yet very hungry and wanted to delay the moment of emerging from her room.

Suddenly there was a bang against her door. The plastic wall quivered and looked like it might cave in. Susan cowered far back in the corner.

"You can't throw me out!" It was the same voice again. Impulsively, Susan went to her door and opened it.

"What is all this?" she asked with her newly acquired authority. Standing there was only a person she supposed was called a porter, his lapels in the clutches of a tall, bedraggled woman in a fancy coat, apparently the one who was refusing to leave quietly. "This asshole," the woman said, releasing the man roughly, "thinks he's going to send me to the clink in Boise."

"Are you even on the right train, ma'am? We're nowhere near Boise."

"Would you like to wait in here?" Susan asked the woman, not believing what she was saying.

The porter and the woman didn't believe her either.

"You sure you want to ..." he began.

"I'll sit in there for a moment, yes please. Porter, bring us some tea!" the woman commanded, barging in to Susan's sanctuary. "Sweet Angela! What a fuckin asshole that guy is! He's supposed to wait on us or something, right?"

The porter still lingered outside the door, now joined by a compatriot; they shook their heads in concern and conferred as to their next move. For now the angry woman seemed subdued. "Would it be possible," Susan asked the porters, "to be brought some tea? I'll gladly cover the cost. We're comfortable now," she added.

"All right, but she's got ten minutes to drink it and then she will be disembarking."

"Like hell," the drunk said.

The porters were tired of retorting. One went away, presumably for the tea.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Eva." She held out her hand to Susan. Susan looked, then shook it. "I'm Susan."

"And where are you on your way to?"

"To see my mother in Mako."

"I'm meeting my boyfriend in Detroit. We're getting married." Eva nodded smugly.

Who cares? thought Susan, but she continued to evince warmth and interest as best she could. She did feel some sympathy for this woman, who was about the age Ilene had been last time Susan had seen her, and in about the same condition, at that. Was this a sign, a chance to practice for the moment when she and Ilene were reunited? What did she really want to say anyway? Looking at this Eva, Susan felt they, Susan and Eva, had nothing in common at all.

The tea arrived. Eva accepted it gracefully, took a sip with pinkie extended. "Well, isn't this nice," she said. "Sweet Angela, this hasn't been my day, has it?"

"I'm Susan."

"Hmm?"

"I'm not Sweet Angela."

"Oh, that's just a figure of speech in my family."

"I see." Susan sipped her tea, wondered if it had been spiked by the porters with some calming tonic. What if they'd doped Eva's tea and gotten hers and Susan's mixed up? That was something Ilene would be paranoid about and Susan took her turn to entertain it.

"I've been on this damn train for twenty hours," Eva was saying. "How do they expect a person not to go stir crazy? I could have driven faster than this, hell, I could've walked faster than this."

"First time on a train?"

"It wasn't always this bad. I used to ride all the time."

The next stop was coming up. Susan wondered what would happen then.

"Will you leave the train when we stop?"

"Gladly. Can't hardly stand the way it moves. Wait til you've been stuck in this little room for half a week, nowhere to walk but up and down that blue carpet. I should've known better. Last time I took an airplane I damn near had a claustrophobia attack. I figured I wouldn't ever get on one of those again, but this is worse. And the damn a/c going full blast even though it's practically freezing out to start with, blowing all night long..."

"It's easy to become overwhelmed by too much sensory input," Susan agreed.

Eva laughed. "Sweet Angela."

The porters were still lingering outside Susan's door. Others had gathered to assist. The next stop was announced.

"Don't let them manhandle me," Eva pleaded suddenly. "I couldn't bear it. My skin bruises so easily."

"I know how you feel. There's a history of fibromyalgia in my family. I'll help you." Susan rose and offered her hand.

"Thanks for the tea," Eva said softly, putting the cup in Susan's hand. Seeming embarrassed, Eva rose from the bench that served as seating underneath Susan's fold-out bed. Eva shifted her coat around herself. "I'd best go grab my stuff, I suppose."

"Should I come with you?"

"Don't trouble yourself. I do thank you for the tea. Oh Sweet Angela look at these fucks." Eva looked at the assembly of porters sadly. "Oh Sweet Angela." She proceeded out the door and past the men and women who'd come to make sure she was prepared to get off. Susan went to the door to watch. They didn't appear to have any intention of manhandling her. She stopped partway down the aisle and retrieved some bags, presumably her own. The stop was announced. The train slowed. Susan slid her door closed and went back to her seat by the window. She sipped her watery gin and tonic.

CHAPTER TWELVE  
Ilene always wore heels

Ilene always wore heels. She wasn't good at it. She used the shoes as a kind of excuse for her natural awkwardness. She was always in pain, always because of the shoes. Never would she hear of giving them up. Where would she be, then? Still in pain, but no longer glamorous. It made a kind of sense. Susan now stood on the corner near Ilene's last known address, having just gotten off a train and into a cab and now out of a cab. She wasn't sure when she would be able to take those last few steps, even if she'd been wearing the most sensible shoes in the world, which she probably was.

From this vantage point there was no knowing if Ilene still lived here, even. If she still lived anywhere. She'd be...*old*, now. All her problems would only have gotten worse. Susan started walking. Maybe it was the long trip, maybe it was the fear, but her body felt heavy, as if it were wrapped not only in the soft clothes and big coat, but all the junk she thought she'd dropped along the way, plus added blankets and mufflers and hats and coats, all their pockets stuffed with rocks. She hardly felt human, she was so tired and unwieldy in her body. She felt like she'd been stuffed into a space suit. She felt like she couldn't possibly make it to that little staircase leading up to the porch of that house she'd lived in from age 18-19, after the fragmentation of her family and before she'd gone off on her own. There she'd been with Ilene and Peter, the two of them roaring incomprehensibly at each other whenever they were both home, while Susan sat in her room alone with her sums, promising herself that someday there'd be a place where she wouldn't have to hear a single human noise.

Now she was voluntarily returning to that unpleasant place. She could even go in and see her old room if she wanted.

"Susan?" came a voice from behind her. She turned, numb.

"Hello, mother," she said.

Susan's age-enhanced mental projection of Ilene's likely physical state had been flawed. Susan had only extrapolated from Ilene's past habits, but the habits had changed. Ilene had apparently given up smoking, switched from heels to Birkenstocks and natural cotton fiber apparel and was now shining like a healthful flower at age seventy-two. Ilene had never been healthy in her life. But it was clearly her: Susan's age-computer worked backwards from the unexpected face and confirmed that it was her mother. She retained a few gaudy affectations, to be sure: her hair was dyed and she wore vast swathes of blue eyeshadow ("Mineral makeup," she assured Susan as they sat in her improbably tidy living room) and mascara (her old favorite brand. "You can still get it!").

"Right after you and Peter left, things started to turn around for me," Ilene said gaily, though she was apparently happy enough to have Susan there now. And it had been

impossible for the intervening years to embitter her. After a little initial loneliness things had, indeed, turned around rapidly for the empty-nester.

"Of course I was proud of you, sweetie. But I had my own life, too, and I didn't want to interfere with yours. You know how it looks when someone gets rich and all their relatives come looking for a piece of the pie." It was true. Ilene had never contacted Susan since she'd left home, not once. Susan had never thought of this as a kindness. "I got a new job at 3N, new friends, I met somebody--"

"And where is he?" Susan asked petulantly, then coughed, choking on her own infantile reversion.

"She," corrected Ilene.

Susan instantly felt like her mother had clapped together this whole alternative lifestyle just to upstage her.

"Will you be staying?" Ilene asked. "Did you want to have your old room? I redecorated it but it's still a bedroom. You're welcome to it."

The room could scarcely be said to have been decorated at all during Susan's one-year stay. It was most charitable of Ilene not to point this out. All Susan had had was a bed and a free-weight bench (she'd been into physical fitness at the time, but had never advanced far enough to defend herself from Peter). So this was basically a different house, with a different woman living in it. It was no better than staying with a stranger. Then again, one could get to know a stranger.

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The next morning Susan came down to find her mother sitting at the breakfast table with Eva, the drunk woman from the train. After a moment's pause, Susan decided to be discreet in case it was her own brain finally going. Eva looked entirely innocent. "Hello. You must be Susan?" she said.

"Yes," Susan said.

"I'm Michelle," said Eva, rising with the same self-contained grace she had exhibited, in her better moments, on the train.

"This is my partner," Ilene said.

Susan shook Michelle's hand. If I look wiggled out, they will just think I'm being homophobic, Susan thought. But how was she going to get the truth out of Michelle? Did it really matter if her mother was being...what...? conned? How had she gotten here



so fast? Michelle smiled awkwardly and returned to the table, stood with her hand on Ilene's shoulder.

"Do you want breakfast, Sue?" Ilene asked.

"Just some coffee, if there is any coffee."

Michelle went to pour Susan a cup, handed it to her graciously. Susan could bear it no longer. "What is this? I saw you on the train. We had tea for fuck's sake. You're Eva."

Michelle looked like she'd been punched; her eyes bulged and her mouth opened then closed and she swallowed. Ilene stood up, horrified, rushed to Michelle's side and clasped her around the shoulders. "Sweetie!" she murmured tenderly as Michelle continued to reel and gasp. "Oh, Susan, Eva's Michelle's twin sister!"

"Oh. Of course."

"From all I've heard of her she always reminded me of Peter. You know. Takes off and you don't hear from em for years. Kind of crazy."

Michelle sobbed.

"Well, sweetie, she is."

"I asked you not to use that language, Ilene!" Michelle shrugged off Ilene's embrace. "I'm sorry, I have to go sit down." She walked into the sitting room, her face in her hands. "I'm sorry, sweetie, I love you, but I can't stand that language. Sweet Angela."

"I'm sorry, Michelle." Ilene looked after her sadly, but remained with Susan. "She hasn't heard from her in a year!" she whispered.

Susan felt a little more on top of things, now that it turned out she'd been carrying intelligence of such a nature as to completely neutralize her mother's girlfriend for the remainder of the day. The sounds of sobbing made the place seem a little more familiar.

"I ran into Peter, too," Susan said.

"Well, aren't you the crazy-magnet? Where'd you find him?"

"He was hanging around the outskirts of the town where I was living. I don't know where he is now."

"You're lucky you saw him first."

"He seemed much better."

"Well, if you say so then it must be true. You never were an optimist where your brother was concerned." Ilene sipped her coffee thoughtfully. "Though god knows we've all changed so much. You could have scrambled eggs for brains for all I know. Wouldn't be a big surprise, knowing this family."

Things hadn't changed all that much. They were all just older. Older, and a little better. Still not quite right, but better. Susan had seen it and knew it to be true. She wanted to ask about her father, but something stopped her. Ilene didn't need the burden of any more family thoughts. This house had been cleansed long ago. Probably with sage and everything, now that Ilene was a hippie. Susan herself was an anachronism, somehow managing to attract all the things that were unwanted and troublesome and bring them along with her, back to the fore. She should just leave gracefully. If only she could somehow let everyone know that everything was all right.

That evening she unexpectedly got a call from Wilson Jersey.

"Susan, you seem to have forgotten something. A sizeable package arrived for you at the hotel. Shall I send it along?"

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Yes, Susan had forgotten something. In her flurry of demands as she had prepared to depart for Honorado, she had also dispatched a sizable financial contribution along with a detailed work order, to Sharon's garage of mysteries. Apparently Sharon had come through.

Susan instructed Jersey to send the package with all possible speed to her mother's house. This meant she'd be remaining at least another day while the package shipped, all possible speed aside. Very well. She wasn't too far from the Cascades, so she could test the device on water as well as land. Susan hoped instructions would be included. She could only assume that Sharon was as detail-oriented as she appeared to be, and would be able to account for Susan's ignorance when working out the designs. The little time they had spent together ought to have established these things firmly in their respective minds. Yes, Susan felt a definite respect for the girl, and an odd assurance that the machine, which was probably even now on its way to her, would not kill her.

Even if it did, of course it would be glorious to ride away from her mother's house, and life itself, in a technological fireball. Fitting, even. It was truly a win-win situation for Susan. Sitting now once again in her old room, which had indeed been converted into something resembling an actual living space (and no doubt that was the term the decorator had used: "living space") she thought that maybe this trip hadn't been such a bad idea after all. Maybe it wasn't all as pointless as it seemed. Or, if it was, learning that was in itself a valid point.

Michelle had finally stopped crying. Susan could hear her and Ilene cooing to each other in the next room. Susan rested, solitary and at peace. The ceiling was the only familiar part of the room. She'd spent the better part of that one grueling year looking at that ceiling, either from her modest twin bed or from her free weights bench. If she were honest, she rarely lifted much weight on that bench, mostly she just savored the secure feeling beneath her spine, and the pinned-down feeling of the bar pressed to her chest. That, combined with the lock on the door which meant no one was going to come in and disturb her meditation. Only now, it was so quiet in the house. Maybe she'd just stay here, for a year at least, replace that crummy year she'd spent. Be a teenager again.

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Naturally, Ilene didn't have wi fi. Didn't even have a modem. No internet at all, no Nutflux, no Pandamora, none of the main consumer services that everyone loved so much. Ilene hadn't jumped on board after all. It was a wonder Michelle put up with it, assuming she lived here. They must really be in love if they didn't need Nutflux. However, for Susan this all meant that she would have to find a library soon. Or a coffee shop. That would be novel. She really would feel like a teenager. Well, it was a thought. Avoiding the mirror's grim reminder, she took stock of her remaining clothes and selected a haute couture skirt to pair with her drug store tank top. She dressed up her greatcoat with a colorful scarf and put into her mind an image of herself as young, healthy, happy and well dressed. She packed up her computer gear into a convenient tote bag she found in the closet. She would stroll about town now, anonymous, carefree, light as air. Everything was shaking out at last. She was finally on vacation.

Sitting in the cafe on main street, she felt like the Susan Trumptree everyone wanted her to be. Dressed in fine clothes, drinking a latte, gloatingly looking over the world she'd created. Modern day developers of her calibre were gods on earth. Gods of their own domains. And how grand it was. Today, SoapBoxDerby.com had more hits than even the most powerful social networking site.

Susan rarely concerned herself with the content ceaselessly being added to the site by its visitors, each carrying with them cookies and caches they voluntarily allowed the site to raid in its quest for information. Susan had pioneered this "ethical snooping" technology, a powerful trojan horse type program that was utterly impotent until the user/victim activated it themselves. It had required a massive leap forward in terms of the users' faith and devotion to the site. Nowhere else on the internet could you find anything like it. When the ethical snooping program had first been rolled out, in full view of the public, with complete transparency and honesty, it had been adopted by a landslide 80% of registered users. They could even personalize the snooper to stay out of certain partitions and folders, but for the most part full access was given and therein lay the vast power of the site, which could now search for facts and data virtually inside the human heart and soul. All anonymous, all-access. A revolution in radical honesty.

Asking users to make so grand a sacrifice in the interests of eternal truth solidified the relationship between user and site into something truly religious. It was just as well that Susan Trumptree had been designed to look like an innocent capitalist; had she not been so relatable people would soon start to worry about the amount of power she ostensibly wielded. Susan Trumptree was unassailable. She had followers, real followers. Ask, and it shall be given. That was the key difference between SoapBox and all the other big sites; they all claimed to give you what you wanted, while secretly stealing your information in the guise of service. They didn't realize that the more you ask of the user, the more they would give, and the more profoundly and inextricably attached they would be. Sometimes the thought dizzied Susan. She used to lay awake nights wondering how she'd go about freeing all the people she'd enslaved. So far, now that everyone was used to the site and how it worked, how it evolved, now that it had been a good long time since there had been any radical new features or any major downtime, now that it was all just business as usual, Susan had lost very little sleep over it all. People seemed pleased with what she had given them.

And here she was, even now, surveying SoapBoxDerby.com, tweaking and changing, observing and marvelling. Probably everyone in this cafe had a tab in their browser pointed at her site, and none of them had the faintest idea it was being masterminded right here.

Susan made several unneeded trips to the restroom in order to surreptitiously look over people's shoulders and into their faces as they used her site. It was a greedy yet divine sensation, one she hadn't experienced in all the years since she'd taken to her house and stopped actually being in the physical presence of her shadow army. Seeing the people she was connected with via her site was the most surreal part of it all. To actually see them, their unwary faces rapt with concentration as they performed detailed analysis of questions ranging from the inane to the sublime. They lost all connection with their bodies and surroundings as they spent hours in deep mental and spiritual engagement with the site. She could watch them for hours, simultaneously watching her own monitor as their data streamed through her distant servers. Who could ever imagine the grandeur and magnitude of it, of Susan's place in this Universe? The hub of so much human work and thought, the still center around which her far-reaching digital empire revolved. Nowhere was it more grand in her sight than in this small cafe.

As a bit of mischief Susan slipped a brief self-terminating glitch into the code, waited a few minutes, and listened to the collective sigh of frustration as everyone in the cafe encountered it at once. They heard it, too, and looked up, actually glancing around at each other like people just awakened from a dream. After a few uncomfortable chuckles they turned their attention back to their screens.

Susan was suddenly depressed. She packed up her things and went back outside into the moderate cool of the Pacific Northwest. She suddenly wanted to buy something to listen to music on, but what music? She had none on her computer. None in the world? How could she get her hands on a fully loaded mp3 player, with sanitized earphones?

She paused and took a seat on a bench just long enough to post to the local Greggslit. It was a truism nowadays that between Greggslit and SoapBox there was nothing in the world you couldn't have or know. It must have been a particularly busy day on Greggslit because within two hours she was designing herself a walking tour of the city that would allow her to meet and audition eight different mp3 players at comparable asking prices. A pleasant way to spend the day and forget about what her site might be doing to people.

It was indeed a beautiful day. She felt what she had set out feeling, though the sense of power and efficacy had a darker tinge to it at that moment. It was impossible to feel truly guilty with the late-autumn sun shining on her skin, skin which she could almost imagine as taut and unblemished, rosy as that of Lily the actress. Her silken skirt made a pleasant swishing sound as she walked and she was warm in her great coat. Her whole being felt soft and authoritative in itself, like a mighty cat.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN  
A Million Little MP3's

Her first stop was at a tall apartment house. The seller, as instructed, was waiting out front. It was a man in a denim jacket and a sarong. Promising, thought Susan. "Dan?" she asked, extending her hand, all full of social graces and genuinely excited to meet the man.

"That's me!" he said.

"Can you provide me with a description of the sort of music that's on this device?"

"Well, I'm a big fan of early music," he said. "I think you'll like it. Lots of viols, harpsichords, very balanced stuff. Good for all occasions."

Susan found herself instantly convinced. "Twenty dollars, we said?"

"Yes indeed."

"That would hardly cover the market value of the files on that device, much less your skill in curating. I appreciate it very much and I've just decided to give you \$50 even though for such a gift as this there is no way to do justice."

Dan looked delighted as he accepted the cash and blundered forward with his speech. "Thank you! I hope you enjoy it! Feel free to keep in touch, here's my business card." He tentatively handed her the card, and with a few awkward gestures and attitudes he returned to his building. Lonely, Susan thought sadly. She examined his card side-by-side with the player. The card was clearly mass-produced by a website for free, and it showed his interests to be in the fields of beekeeping and web design. Well, maybe she could use him. Or maybe he could come live in her sanctuary for the socially useless that she was constantly dreaming up in her mind as she travelled about meeting good but out-of-place people. In the end, it wasn't her duty to solve the world's problems, no matter how much she had done to position herself that way.

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She listened to Dan's music as she journeyed to the local community college campus to meet her next prospect. The music had a similar effect on her brain as was produced by focused sums. Most satisfactory! The device itself was plain black plastic with a little red circle where its controls were. Easy to use, easy to love.

She came upon Amanda, the owner of the next mp3 player, sitting with a young man on a bench under a tree near an administrative building. It was a pleasant campus. The

young lady was not quite so pleasant, though she was well turned-out in what Susan considered "goth" attire but which was undoubtedly something else. The young man with her was subdued yet amiable. "Amanda?" Susan asked.

The woman nodded and handed over a pink bedazzled object. "It's mostly stuff I'm not into anymore. Nicki Minaj, MIA, Dirty Projectors, stuff like that."

Susan could hardly fail to be aware of such music, but it didn't suit her today.

"If you recall, I reserved the right not to buy."

"Yep, you sounded a little uncertain so I brought Bob along. He's got one too. Show her, Bob."

Bob, Amanda's companion, held out a sleek silver player. "It's got The Knife, electronic stuff, some glitch, some Skrillex."

"May I listen?"

"Sure. It's all charged up."

Susan decided she liked it, paid Bob and gave Amanda a handsome finder's fee. As she walked to the next stop she listened to Bob's music. She found it confusing but stimulating in a generalized way, like caffeine.

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Susan carried on this way til nightfall, just managing to visit all her contacts before it got too dark to walk comfortably. A gathering chill accompanied her home as she listened to an mp3 player loaded entirely with the original compositions of the seller's ex girlfriend. In all, she'd bought five players. This was her favorite.

When she got home to her room she labeled each one with sharpie and masking tape so she'd remember the names of each person she'd met on her quest that day. Dan, Bob, Jesus, Maxine and Albert. Each player was slightly different in appearance and each carried a sample of a stranger's taste, or former taste.

She went down to join Michelle and Ilene for dinner.

"Michelle," Susan said. "I apologize for the way I greeted you this morning. You must understand I was shocked and also weary from the road."



"I apologize for getting so hysterical," Michelle replied, laughing it off. "It's true, though, I haven't seen or heard from my sister in ages and to just hear her name so unexpectedly--" She started to get choked up again and broke off. Ilene looked vaguely annoyed with Susan for bringing it up and possibly initiating another round of weeping, but if Ilene was looking to Susan for appropriate dinner conversation she was to be sorely disappointed. Susan just stared across the table at Ilene and said nothing. You're my estranged mother, the least you can do is show some interest in where I've been the last twenty years. Go on. Show some interest.

"Did Michelle show you her doll collection?" Ilene asked brightly.

Susan frowned. "She did not."

"Oh, after dinner, maybe," Michelle said, blushing. "Speaking of which--" Cheered up and composed now, Michelle went to check on the roast in the oven. "It's done!"

For several minutes Ilene and Michelle stood by the oven, exclaiming and salivating over the roast with its accompaniment of carrots, potatoes and onions, congratulating each other on the quality of all. Susan waited in silence to be served or called over. Finally Michelle began cutting and plating the steaming roast, and Ilene brought the plates to the table one by one, seemingly unable at any point to take her eyes off the food. Clearly it was something the two women shared an interest in. Susan couldn't altogether resist the contagious excitement, even though she was not usually fond of roasts. Especially lamb. It seemed sacrilegious, and Susan was not even a believer. Somehow she felt sure that both Ilene and Michelle were Pagans or Unitarians or worse. She could envision Michelle recruiting her mother to the church of something or other, with promises of female empowerment and community and fellowship and whatever it was that drew people into groups. Oh well, whatever made her happy. Ilene clearly was rather happy, even if she was essentially the same old Ilene in regards to Susan herself.

No one said much for the next few minutes while they all tucked into their meat. Only vague animalistic sounds of approval were made. Susan ate in Puritan silence and hoped the dolls would be forgotten about.

Wine was brought out, to the further excitement of her companions. Michelle must have money. Or was this a special occasion? Maybe they were just comfortably middle class. Would the rich still get excited about a twenty dollar bottle of malbec? Susan, for all her research into the subject of being rich, couldn't say. Ilene read drolly from the label on the bottle. "Listen to this, girls! 'Notes of blackberry and cinnamon, over a deep base tone of oak.' Are we drinking wine or perfume?" She laughed, Michelle laughed. "Are we eating bark here or what?"

"Don't be stingy, babe, pour it already!" Michelle held out her glass. Wine was dispensed all round. Susan's delicate senses confirmed the truth of the label's claims but for some reason she didn't want to dignify it by saying so. All in all, she was a little

disappointed that no one prompted her to tell her story about the mp3 players she'd collected and the people she'd met that day. For that was what she planned to tell about, if asked. The time she'd spent in the coffee shop pulling puppet strings was best put aside. No one could be expected to understand that.

"It's nice having you back, Sue," Ilene said, finally, gazing wistfully into the deep red sea in her glass. In order for each of them to have a refill, a second (slightly cheaper) bottle had been brought out. Everyone was in a good mood, even Susan who was now sure she approved emphatically of the use of wine. Wine was definitely going to be incorporated into her life plan. "It's like starting over, isn't it? I mean I know you're not staying forever--"

The pause made Susan wonder whether she wanted Susan to stay forever or to leave immediately.

"--But it's nice, right? You, back in your old room, me and Michelle like the happy parents you never had as a kid. It's never too late, right?" She looked at Michelle for confirmation, Michelle was gazing back warmly but somewhat vacantly.

Here it is, Susan thought, another chance. Another possibility. Her mother was stable, they collectively had more than enough money, Susan could quit working and go back to school and live with her mother, in her old room. She could fix it up her own way. It could be a miniature prototype of her old house, but better. Cheerier. Free of obsessions with toilet paper and Donny. Would this, like every other apparent solution, prove ill-advised and unworkable, fallacious in its very moorings? For one thing, Michelle's current silence might indicate a doubt or two about becoming the mother to a middle-aged woman.

Well, things were already set in motion for her departure. There was that. And the inventor of her machine would surely be expecting field notes on the mystery craft when it arrived. However well paid she was, Susan was sure Sharon would not be content to know her invention was mouldering in Susan's mother's basement, after all.

Maybe this one night would have to do. Or however long it took for the package to arrive. It might as well be here now, except that Wilson Jersey was probably tired of impressing her. Now there was only prudence. Shipping costs and inconvenience fees. Susan never asked for receipts. It was only fair. Let them take advantage in their own little way, if they could. They could never have superior advantage over her, she who was built and designed to rule.

Susan was growing tired. The wine was working on her and the conversation was fading. Susan had accepted her mother's interpretation of their time together without even getting her say. No one had asked Susan a thing about her life or even what she'd done that day, they'd just sat around wishing they'd never screwed up her childhood and pretending they could still forgive themselves.

"So where is Dad, anyway?" Susan asked, right as Michelle and Irene were nearly on the point of falling asleep or forgetting entirely that she was there.

Irene had a slightly muted version of the same reaction Michelle had evinced when Susan had mentioned Eva. Susan took pride in the fact that she had no one in her life who could make her eyes bug out at the mere mention of their name. She would keep it that way, too.

"Well, Susan," Irene was saying, "I just... I kind of lost track of him, you know? We weren't speaking after the divorce. Once we weren't married anymore it started to feel like we had nothing in common except you kids, no reason to get together."

"Enough," Susan said. "I get the idea. You don't have to ramble on about how you got caught up in your own life and forgot your family."

"Susan!" Irene gasped. Michelle was standing now, glaring at Susan, her arms forming a protective posture around Irene's shoulders. "The phone line goes both ways, you know!"

"I was busy raising myself, literally and figuratively. And I was a success. I'm surprised you seem to be completely uninterested in all that, uninterested even in my money."

"Like I said when you first got here, I don't intend to ask you for anything or I'd have come begging long ago. I don't care about money; you're the one who can't stop flashing it around and talking about it, expecting everyone to be impressed. You came here, remember? I didn't ask for anything." She threw up her hands, half-laughing as she struggled in vain to convince herself. She looked down. "I thought the least I could do was leave you alone, you were doing so well."

Susan stood up from the table. No immediate rebuttal came to mind. She realized she wasn't particularly interested in what her mother was saying. "Well, I don't need your help to find Dad. It would shorten my search if you could provide a little information. Is he still a pilot?"

"Trucker."

"Never mind," she said, ignoring her own error. She'd been thinking of something else. "It's only a matter of keystrokes. My fingers are fast enough. Especially when I haven't been drinking. I think I'll go to bed and rest."

"Why've you got to be like this? Why've you always got to be like this?" Irene called after her as Susan left the room. "You know how long it took me to forget you dumb kids? I'm old! You're old! Look at yourself! You had plenty of time to sort yourselves out. I deserve to be happy too!"

Susan could hear Michelle trying to soothe Ilene. Maybe Susan had been unfair. She didn't think so. It didn't seem to be a matter of fairness anymore, though maybe it could be reduced to that if one was just careful enough in the tallying. It had been a long, convoluted road, Susan's life, and her family life was just one particularly tangled knot in the overall apparatus. No sense being unkind, though. She resolved to try to do something to make it up to Ilene, to leave on good terms. As much as she'd nearly infantilized herself here, it was clear she would be leaving. Just as soon as she had a mode of transportation. One that finally suited her needs and her station. Maybe her mother would forgive her the moment she saw her astride Sharon's machine. She'd think Susan was a witch, a homophobic witch, and all would be chalked up to that. Ilene might even be proud, in a strange way, to have produced a being of such formidable power and uniqueness. She should be proud.

Susan tried to imagine if she, Susan, would have been any different if she'd had kids. Probably she'd have been much worse at mothering than Ilene had been. Imagine trying to please a mother like Susan. No one could.

She lay in her bed now nonetheless and fantasized about Donny. She stared up at the frilly bunting hung around the bed that had once been so spartan. She tried to imagine Donny on this bed with her, Susan young again, the teenager in the A-line shirt, fierce hair cut with kitchen scissors, the beginnings of biceps-- or, no, she'd rather be herself now, but young. Calm, rational, eccentrically dressed, clean-living and with so much to give. Oh to be young in Donny's arms. But Susan couldn't quite make it real for herself. Every time she thought about sex her teenage self came back and it all got angry. She didn't want that for Donny. She didn't want babies conceived in anger, in adolescent wombs. Ilene was proof enough of where all that would lead.

Susan didn't want to think about finding her father either, not now. Today was over. It could only be redeemed by sleep and a brighter tomorrow. Susan reached for her favorite new mp3 player and plugged herself into it. The music was new and beautiful, made of long semi-tones produced by some instrument Susan couldn't identify. It seemed to Susan to be about nothing, absolute nothing. Absolute peace. More beautiful than the most elegant sums, for those had many moving parts and made sounds like machines, or body parts. This music suggested something beyond Earth, beyond the human. Something angelic.

The person who'd sold it to her didn't seem to feel any of that. Maybe he'd gotten too close, like Icarus, and suffered a terrible fall. Susan hoped he would heal some day. Meantime she'd keep the music. To him she'd given her informal business card, something that didn't tell much about her but would allow him to find her if he ever changed his mind about never hearing these beautiful sounds again. "Junk," he'd called it. "I should be paying you to take it off my hands." Sad. Once again the sadness of the world had been Susan's gain. Time to sleep.

Suddenly her eyes snapped open.

Was Donny on SoapBoxDerby.com? Had he ever been? Susan, breathless with the sudden realization, rushed to her computer and began typing furiously. She looked and looked for even a scrap of evidence, but no. He wasn't there.

Donny was the key to everything, after all! It was confirmed! Perhaps her attraction to him stemmed from some intuition that he possessed information she had not yet accessed. Key information. Who knows how many questions he could answer, even with the most minor input? He could solve the puzzles that the obsessed and devoted thinkers of the world could not, and never would. Their focus was too intense, it burned away the truth. Donny, sweet, vague Donny, had heart and instinct and life, his limpid eyes had seen things no one else had. It had once been estimated that 70% of the world's population accessed SoapBoxDerby.com at least once a day. What about the 30%? How could SoapBoxDerby.com ever succeed without them?

But they couldn't be compelled, so how would they come? How could their information be integrated? How could they give their testimony, their version of the truth? For each version was essential to the whole. At least, that was what Susan was coming to believe. Every perception seemed so subjective, maybe the truth was a thing that existed in six billion dimensions. If no human could know it, at least a computer could, right? And it could print out, at maximum, a three-dimensional answer for her alone to see and contemplate. It would be too much to expect it to come to her in words, on paper, dead concepts. She would have to come to terms with that, somehow.

For now she contented herself with preparing to send out a call to her site's followers encouraging them to begin recording sounds and conversations in public spaces, on the assumption that there would be members of the elusive 30% present. In this way a few of them could contribute anonymously. Yes, all would be transcribed and entered into the data banks. The computers would scramble all personally identifiable information but Susan knew this information was still relevant and would have to be retained, if only for her own use. She was definitely pushing the envelope now. How could she not? She'd gone too far long ago and to balk now would only waste all the immensity of effort that had already been put in. The effort. The sacrifice.

Fallacious reasoning, she knew. Such a question would be resolved within minutes on the site, its ethical and logical failings exposed instantly, laughed out of existence. What was she becoming? Even as she wondered this she began designing the code which would create the recording interface. Users could do it directly from the site. The sound data would be delivered straight to her servers. She might have to beef up their capacity if the program became popular. She'd only release it to a handful of users at this point, in the form of a voluntary download, a browser add-on. Simple. How to phrase it honestly?

"Question: is it ethical to record people without their knowledge and take their words and bodily noises down in evidence, in the pursuit of greater accuracy for this site's answers? Take part in a field experiment to make this a reality rather than a hypothesis."

She wasn't even sure how to express the concept of semi-anonymity, how to deal with the knowledge that she, Susan, had to have access to the private thoughts of unconsenting individuals? The concept that she, Susan, was above the law, all law, nature's, god's and man's? It simply wasn't the sort of thing one could be honest about and expect the result to go in one's favor. (In fact, the question "Is Susan Trumtree above the law?" already existed on the site, but had become stymied because of the fact that Susan Trumtree didn't exist.)

Okay, then... She left the recording question as a draft, left the new code isolated in its own file, waiting. Waiting. Nothing gave Susan an itchy trigger finger more than untested code. It wanted to do something. It existed to do something. Susan had had no children, but she'd created a lot of code and she cared for it deeply. And yet she resisted. She let the interface languish, and wait. Too many questions, questions she was afraid to ask. Where did that leave her? If she was afraid to ask questions then who was she anymore?

At some point while Susan had been working, a new day had dawned. Susan descended into her mother's living room, found the house emptied. She was disappointed. She wanted to give or receive some kind of greeting, some kind of fellow feeling. Mother. Mother's lover. Nobody around but Susan. How desolate. Susan sat down on the couch as if to wait. But she no longer had much hope for anything to come along and solve things for her. She'd tried to solve them herself, but always something essential eluded her. Now she was eluded by her own mother. She considered leaving right then but there was the package to consider. Susan looked at her watch. It was startlingly late in the day, 11am already. Susan sat and waited. Maybe the package would come.

The package did not come. Around 5pm the sky was already growing dark. Sooner or later, surely Michelle and Ilene would have to return from work or wherever they'd gone. They'd have to come home and eat. Nothing could prevent them from eating, and people in their social class didn't dine out with impunity. They'd be home.

Michelle and Ilene did not come home. While Susan waited the house got darker and darker, until she finally sat in almost complete darkness, only the irritating streetlights outside shining upon her. Susan lay down on the couch, on her side, her knees pulled towards her chest. She stopped marking time, didn't know how long she'd been lying there when finally she heard the sound of a key in the latch, followed by the sound of Michelle and Ilene trying to enter the house quietly. But Susan, lying wide awake on their couch, heard them, jumped up and, assailed by sudden tears, ran into their arms, sobbing pleas that they would never abandon her again.

Probably Michelle and Ilene found the scene as difficult to believe as Susan herself did, but nothing could seem to stop her from crying and cleaving to the women, who could seem to do nothing but hug her in return, patting her back and saying "shh" as if Susan were indeed a tiny child.

Afterwards they sat in the kitchen holding cups of tea, sobering up from the emotional debauch. "I'm sorry," Susan said, finally.

"Don't be sorry," Ilene said. "I'm sorry."

"I didn't do anything," Michelle said, as if to herself. "I'm not sorry. I've always been a good sister to Eva and a good daughter to my parents, and I've been good to you, Ilene, and I'm a good friend to all my friends. I don't know if I even deserve a place at this freak-out meeting. But somebody has to make you tea, I suppose. God knows you're not up to it."

"Oh, Michelle," Ilene murmured. She looked like she was about to say she was sorry again, but held her tongue. For a while they drank their tea in silence.

"Anyone want to watch a movie?" Michelle asked as she finished her tea. "I'll make popcorn."

So the three of them watched a movie, sharing a blanket, in the dark, with a gigantic bowl of popcorn, a bowl in proportion to the need, which Michelle seemed to think was a great need. A bowl to hold not only popcorn but the immensity of emotion. Susan felt sure this was her last night here, that tomorrow things would restart themselves and the expected would begin again. What had happened today? It had been real, the sun had moved over the house and showed Susan what loneliness looked like, shed its light on each passing moment. Then darkness, tears and blankets, it was all absolutely unstoppable. Tomorrow her package would arrive and with it would come her liberty. For now she remained in her mother's protection, in the strange out-of-time they had all constructed together somehow, for some reason. For reconciliation? Perhaps.

It didn't feel quite like reconciliation, but more like some sort of extra-dimensional time travel, creating a different universe where they were different people, different ages, different relationships, different times. The effect would be temporary, just like all the other selves she had inhabited or had forced upon her over the course of this trip, but right now it felt significant. Like she had come to rest. And yet she knew tomorrow she would be on the move again. It was like knowing the date of her own death, the time and means by which she would leave this realm. A whole life glimpsed, lived, and abandoned. It felt right. Complete. Who knew whole lives could rise and fall within one timeline, one continuous lifetime apparently consisting of phases, realities changing, disappearing entirely, only vaguely recorded in memory. And yet these selves, these realities, coming and going, irrevocably changed the course of truth, irrevocably changed the conditions of life, giving rise to new realities, new people. Perhaps it would all be recorded somewhere in the established facts, like vibrations of sound obscurely carved into ancient pots. Like volcanic ash in the rings of trees. The things that last bear us with them into the future.

She nestled herself against her mother's body, lay her head on her mother's shoulder, watched the images on the television set as if they were just part of her permeable reality, reflections of her inner struggles and revolutions. An excuse to be quiet, to be together without talking. Susan decided to create a diary space for herself on the site. It would be private but it would donate all its data. Maybe she'd make it public. Maybe she'd give her every thought to the users who wanted to know, in exchange for all they gave her. What would it be like if she started trying to write these things? Wouldn't that be hypocritical, considering how much she hated reading? After all, how could one ever find the relevant details all mixed up with incorrect symbols and bad language? Well, maybe those things were relevant details, too. Wouldn't that be something?

"Shhh," Irene murmured, as if she could hear Susan's mind racing, whirring and clicking like an old processor. Susan checked herself, quieted her thoughts, tried to reduce her perceptions to color and sound, to let her feelings flow symphonically, passing and interacting like tones. Only there was no composer. None she could see. She was the instrument. The wind was blowing over her strings.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN  
The Package Arrives

The next day she woke early. The house was quiet. She got dressed and went down to the front porch to wait for her package to arrive. It had to be the first delivery on the route, maybe it would even come on its own truck. Why was she so excited about this? Well, it would change the whole character of the trip, assuming the thing worked. The trip could end here and now without any further interdependence. Was that it? Was she just impatient to tip the delivery person and shrink her circle back down once and for all until it had room for only herself again? She'd have to watch that. Not that she was sure of the course she wanted to take, the philosophy she wanted to embrace, so really she'd have to watch everything.

On cue, a large white delivery truck pulled up right in front of the house. It was unbranded, but the mien of the driver made it clear that he had something of importance to unburden himself of. Then a second person got out of the passenger seat and the two went around to open up the back of the truck. They clambered in and there was much grinding of metal and wood and the truck bounced on its axles. A ramp was extended to the ground and a large crate appeared, mounted on a dolly. Together they pushed it onto the ramp; one guiding it from behind, the other from the front. They cautiously rolled it down the short ramp, full of physical tension. Clearly they'd been warned that the contents were volatile, dangerous, and expensive. Wilson Jersey knew who to go through for everything. The company was unassuming but thorough. Susan resolved to note and respect this fact and then put Jersey out of her mind forever. She couldn't wait to have this crate open. Her freedom would be all-encompassing. She'd break with the past and with gravity.

If it worked. If it didn't explode and kill her. Or maim her. Maybe she'd find herself disabled for life, paralyzed, for her own Icarus-like ambitions. She took a breath. She was ready for it.

"You're Susan?" asked the driver, consulting a photograph attached to an invoice, then answering his own question: "Yes. I was instructed to give this to you and only you."

"I am Susan. Would you please unpack it for me?"

She was sure the men had been promised a more-than-fair gratuity, and she intended to exceed their expectations. But she was not wielding her own crowbar.

The men set about opening the crate. They were quick, careful, efficient with levers and wedges. Susan watched with a stoic look on her face, as if she were observing the most solemn of ceremonies. This could well be an important moment in her life. The men behaved as if they understood this, too. Shortly they had cleared away the box and all the packing material and the object stood before them.

"You sure you want this out in the open?" the driver asked brusquely, his voice belying the inner turmoil the question implied. It was essentially a U.F.O. they were seeing, though grounded at the moment, inert. Nevertheless it was something no one in this area or any other had seen before and it was bound to attract curiosity.

"Don't worry," Susan said with confidence. "You've fulfilled your obligations. Here." She gave them each two hundred dollars and bid them depart. Without a backward glance they obeyed, gathering and stowing their tools and clambering back into the cab of their anonymous van. God knows what other sinister errands they'd been sent on in their careers. Susan had no idea how these deals were done, whether the secrets were dispersed amongst many or whether they would remain the burden of one or two reliable but overexperienced souls. It was well with Susan. She hoped for the best for them and regretted all the people who had been inconvenienced or worried for her sake. The money she'd given them was, as always, symbolic. No amount could ever really convey her feelings or excuse the ways of the world. Numbers were poor at that. Fortunately, money was also useful, in ways more visible than words, to be sure. Briefly she tried to imagine what they would do with the money they'd received, but people's lives were so conglomerated. It would probably go into the bank and disappear again when the rent came round. Maybe they would forget her.

Meanwhile, she did indeed have a shining silver rocket-like object sitting on prominent display in her mother's front yard. She thought for a moment, got her camera out of her coat pocket and set the timer. She took a picture of herself with the rocket, went inside and printed it out and left it on the kitchen table. She returned to the rocket with all her things packed and ready to go. She stowed her belongings in the rear compartments, which were precisely as specified and, as it turned out, resembled closely the storage compartments one would find on one of those large motorcycles. The whole thing was rather like a large motorcycle, except that the wheels were purely vestigial and not the primary means of propulsion. That, indeed, was the mystery. That much Susan had left to Sharon's imagination. Susan searched for a note or an instruction manual but it seemed none was included. She'd have to follow her instincts and trust that she'd been clear enough in her fantastical descriptions of how the machine would be, that Sharon had reproduced them to the letter in ways Susan could work with.

Susan straddled the shaft where the seat was located, took hold of the handles. As she did so the machine blinked to life, silently but knowingly. Susan had sent a skin sample along with the work order so that the device could be designed to respond only to her. It did not yet rev its engines or spring into the air; it merely clicked on, showing an array of green lights, like a greeting, like some mythical beast opening its eyes-- serenely, but with no indication of what it was about to do. Susan cranked the motorcycle-like handles. Truly, she herself had a very limited mechanical imagination. Sharon must have found it somewhat stultifying limiting herself to Susan's conceptualizations of how such a machine could be operated, but it was a necessary evil. Susan had no time to learn new motor skills. The device had to respond to her here and now. And it did. As she cranked, the machine revved up and then rose just a few inches into the air. Susan felt her feet leave the ground. She gasped but maintained her equilibrium. Goodbye,

Mother. And she grasped the steering handles with conviction and willed herself into the sky.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN  
On her flying machine

It was hard to believe what was happening, but not believing would interfere with Susan's ability to steer. Not too high, she cautioned herself. This thing runs on oxygen, just like me. Once she'd taken in the sensation of rocketing towards the upper atmosphere she gathered her wits and tried to strategize. She reduced her altitude til her ears were ringing less.

And she looked, finally, with something like her usual eyes. It wasn't quite as shocking as you'd think, shooting through the air several hundred feet above the houses of Mako, Washington. Thankfully it was a mild day or the cold would have been biting the flesh off her face. She hadn't thought of that. Sharon hadn't modified any part of Susan's design, she'd only made it work. Ridiculously conscientious, that one. Anyone else would have told the customer she was wrong. Oh well. Susan had a flying machine. Now where did she want to go?

In her heart Susan knew where to find her father. She could have set down, found a Village Den and discovered his routes easily enough, but as she was airborne anyway she may as well head for the hub. If nothing else, she'd wait, and he'd arrive eventually. It was the nature of being a truck driver. Back, then, to Crete.

By now he had probably given up any home but the road. He might be as rich as her, because he had no desire in this world but to keep moving. Still, she wondered how he dealt with all the hours of solitary reflection. How did any of them? Only Ilene seemed to have strayed from the family model and found happiness and companionship. The rest of them, Susan, Peter and their Dad, were on the road.

Susan's flying machine topped out at about 80 mph, but she could travel as the crow flies. It had always been her dream to never make a 90 degree turn again. She had a long way to go and quite a job ahead escaping notice. It might take a good deal of money and conspiracy theories to keep her out of the news. What did Sharon expect to happen to her invention? Not even a note accompanied it. She was a mercenary. Prepared to set it loose upon the world, not even caring if she got credit. Maybe she sensed that Susan would honor the gift, the unspoken agreement between geniuses. Anyway, it was Susan's property now and it couldn't be in safer hands. She'd never let it out of her sight. It was the only way to travel. Imagine having all the roads in the world to yourself, that's how it is to be the first person with a personal motor-jet. Susan wrapped a scarf more tightly around her head and raised the little windscreen as far as it would go, high enough to keep too much wind and particulates from damaging her eyes.

True to order, the dashboard had an energy meter and a compass, nothing more. Susan thought of her father and aimed roughly South-East, setting one of the movable markers to remember her chosen heading. She'd be straight there in no time. Eventually she'd want a bathroom break or some food and while she was there she'd find a place to buy

goggles. Sharon would have to design a face mask to be worn on this thing, perhaps with breathing apparatus so higher altitudes could be tried, or at the very least so one wouldn't be smothered by the wind. All in all, though, it was surprisingly comfortable. Sharon had worked fast fulfilling Susan's spare-no-expense specifications. After Susan had found her father she'd have to stop by and visit Sharon again, assuming Sharon would allow it. Maybe she'd be too busy. Maybe she'd be working for the Army by then.

Susan, feeling a bit daffy with flight and with the challenge of driving in an obstacle-free environment, allowed herself to think back on the last time she'd seen her father. It was right after the divorce was finalized and the details of their new lives began to get settled. They'd had a little meeting where Ilene announced she was moving away, and somehow both Peter and Susan felt it was a foregone conclusion that they would go with her. As if they somehow sensed that if the three of them-- Peter, Susan and Dad/Andrew-- had remained together, they'd all have gotten so self-involved and uncared-for that the house would go bad, they'd all stop washing and end up in a hospital. Shortly thereafter Andrew had acquired his new job, and the kids and Ilene had moved up to Mako to live in vibrant conflict with each other. Probably Andrew had enjoyed being left alone. His family and his past were no longer there to bother him. He didn't even have to have a home.

It had been some time since Susan had paused to recall her father, she remembered details and the expected outcomes. It was all out-of-date now. In a way she was just optimizing her records by going to see him. More information. Relevant information. The source of her genes had to be accounted for. It was a good means of predicting her own future. If Andrew was still driving trucks like he'd planned, it would seem both her parents were success stories.

For now she returned her consciousness to the present moment, flying free through the sky, the suburbs of Mako rapidly receding into her past. Nothing below her now but roads, channels, trees. The daylight was fading fast. She'd learn as she went how limited this form of transport might be. It seemed it was converting oxygen and water vapor to fuel at a pretty efficient rate. She might eventually have to top it off with a fresh AA battery, which functioned mostly just to initiate the charge, the chain reaction. Sharon was a master of chain reactions and unlikely conversions. The ride was smooth and quiet, smooth as the air currents would allow. There was a knack to that and Susan doubted she'd ever quite get it. That was the purview of birds. Only birds could be perfect.

The sky was remarkably beautiful the closer one got to it, the fewer distractions loomed and crowded its crystal face. How silent it was, and how remarkably quiet her vehicle was! That was why she'd never, ever have a car...

The past, present and future were all getting closer and closer to each other. Her father, for instance, was a past thing, and she was heading towards him, through the air. The present certainly wasn't real. His face, his voice (what she'd ever heard of it-- she might

more accurately have recalled his silence) swam up to fill the void in probability; that which she knew and remembered seemed more real than the air around her, the lightweight metal in her hands, the compass, the softly padded seat... She glanced back to look at her storage compartment, as if that would somehow remind her of how much of her experience was her own. The fact, for instance, that she'd packed that bag and dragged it all over the country, that she'd asked for all of this, that she'd virtually designed this thing that was bearing her through the air. Somehow, the immediacy of her father re-entering her life seemed to nullify possibility and time. All that remained was the vacuum of his loneliness, his silence, all asserting itself in her blood, and her blood ran through her brain and made her forget herself. She'd always known that she and her brother and her father were of a type; a bad type. Or maybe that was what he silently told them, and since he did it all without words and in ways that could scarcely even be witnessed, for Peter and Susan that made it impossible to disbelieve. Just thinking about him now made her unsure who she was, and it was a bad thing indeed to find one's will melting away while one is driving an air-cycle at high velocities and altitudes. She decided she'd better land soon. This sort of thinking was dangerous enough on the ground.

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"Okay, here it comes. The land. The earth. The trees. The god damned trees." Susan tried to will herself downwards as she'd willed herself up, but she was very conscious now of the air currents and their strange whimsies. She pressed the nose of her craft downwards and cooed encouragement. "That's it. Yes. You can feel this. You can do this. This is part of you. Down. Down. Down. Just a little at a time. No rush. Mind that--yes. Down. And down. And down." It was like exercising parts of her body she had never been conscious of before. She was managing to get down, but it soon became apparent that a collision with the trees below her would turn out to be inevitable. All right; the task now was to minimize the damage. No more planning, just doing.

She let her rational mind race on; she ignored it, allowing herself to float towards the outcome. Adjust. Left. Down. And lean a little, and brace for the impact. Going down among the trees. Limbs striking her. Her craft tumbling this way and that, still somewhat under its own power, its descent cushioned by its silent, cold-powered afterburners, Sharon's brilliant invention doing its best to save itself and Susan. Finally, clumsily, it found the earth and shut itself down.

Was she broken? Was her rocket broken? No. She'd have to give it a good look over, maybe in the morning when there was light. She couldn't drag this thing into town, either; she'd have to hide it and come back. She could sleep out in the open again... For now she just sat down and pushed all the decisions away. She couldn't believe how fast her brain could go from a brush with death back to issuing demands to know what was for supper. One thing for sure: no one who possessed a rocket would ever need to feel trapped. This had been a good buy.



Susan rummaged in her trunk for some printer paper, as that was all she had to write on. She found a fresh felt pen and began to note down her observations on the machine.

First Trip: Easy to manage, especially in initial lift-off. Landing much more difficult. Strange psychological effects, possibly due to harmonic vibrations. Are there emissions from the oxygen filter? Could entirely new and unexpected, possibly psychotropic gasses be produced? Was this craft tested before it came to me?

No sense blaming oxygen-engine for operator's flights of fancy.

Operator does not know how to land properly. Machine functions splendidly. Practice will improve things. Inadvisable to land in trees. Damage appears to be minor. No injury to persons. Or animals. Except perhaps local insects, flora and bacteria etc that may have been landed upon or sucked into vents and vaporized.

Noted: previously unconscious fears and desires come to the fore when one is airborne. An effect never quite as pronounced when, say, on board an air plane. Air planes appear to have a physical and mental numbing effect, while rocket travel heightens perceptions and clarity.

The writing had the desired calming effect. Perhaps it would be good to get herself into town and take some leisure, try to get a handle on everything. Clearly she was feeling a bit vulnerable, psychologically. Physically she felt sound enough, but there may be some mistaken logic at work in her decision to see her father.

She checked her instrument panel to get a look at the compass. She decided to head North; while she was up in the air she had spotted a likely-looking settlement off in that direction, not too far. She checked again-- behold! a detail she had not specified but which Sharon had guessed, correctly, would be useful: the compass could be released from the dashboard and carried along. On the reverse side of it, a digital display gave her GPS coordinates, with an option to store up to five locations. Susan could have wept with gratitude to Sharon for this bonus gift. Susan stored the location of her craft in the device's data bank then hauled her suitcase out of its trunk. She threw some of the broken boughs over the rocket as camouflage, and started walking.

The woods were reassuring. In spite of what she knew, she felt alone and sheltered, as if no one ever came here and as if there was nothing anywhere to worry about, only these loving woods, all in shades of dark. Purple evening air, greenish black tree trunks, branches of pine and leaf-bearing trees, silent close lives of trees. Animals, birds, spider webs gleaming in the brush as if it had recently rained. It was cool here, but not cold. It seemed perpetually lush and unchanging. She was still somewhere in the Pacific Northwest. She probably had barely left Mako before the nuance of flight overcame her.

Good thing she didn't have anywhere pressing to be. Maybe she'd lose her way and never find her father.

Soon, through the gathering dark she saw lights. A marina. A ferry. Okay... Well, if anyone was going to discover her craft out in the temperate forest at least they'd have a hard time finding its owner. The water didn't look too wide but it blended somewhat with the sky. The horizon, the shore were hard to hold in sight. But there were lights there, too. More lights. She got on the ferry, paid the toll and waited, sitting in an orange plastic seat. In about ten minutes they were under way. She held her compass tightly, checked it multiple times to reassure herself that it still knew where her rocket was, and where she was. Not that it would be hard, with her computer and her easy memory for numbers, to locate herself, but the compass was like a friend, a reassuring friend who promised to take care of everything.

Once she had disembarked and had a cab take her to yet another Super Six, Susan felt better. Before settling in for a serious think she went straight to the bath tub. It was once again the same style of bath tub that had greeted her at each of the other Super Six locations on her trip, and it made her feel at home. She filled it and got in; bits of vegetation floated up from her body and she felt she was in a soup made out of her day. Dead gnats she'd probably picked up in flight lifted out of her hair as she submerged herself. None of it bothered her now. There was no real cleansing here, especially if you understood the ways of the brain; everything she'd flown through was going to stay with her forever in one way or another. This reminded her she was hungry. She drained the bath and ordered from a nearby Chinese restaurant that delivered; it was the best way to get vegetables without going back outside. It tasted startlingly good. The zing of potential msg had a strangely reviving effect. She started to remember who she was and what she was doing. She got out her laptop and set about confirming her father's driving schedule to determine whether or not she would have to hurry if she wanted to catch him in Crete, or whether there might be a better spot. Preferably, she started to think, somewhere much less close to the home they had once shared. Neutral ground. Perhaps no ground could be neutral, with him. But she owned the air, so there.

Anyway, at least she knew where she wanted to catch her dad. Somewhere along Route 66, yes, she was now roughly in the area of Spokane, Washington and if she headed East she could catch him in Spokane, Missouri, in about a week. That was good. She wouldn't have to travel too many hours by rocket at a time, though she couldn't dawdle forever. In a car she supposed she could make it in a day or two, and maybe if she really got good at using the rocket she could even beat him there. Oh Peter, she thought. What would you think? Their one moment of near-unity as kids had been the time Peter shoved Andrew down the stairs, and in a strange primal surge of feeling Susan, just seven, had kicked her father in the face while wearing her best Sunday shoes. Hard, black little things. Their father had had a black eye for days. No one was punished for it. Ilene was afraid of the children, and Andrew was incapable of caring. Once, shortly before the divorce, Ilene had said "He wasn't always like this," but that was as far as it went. Susan figured maybe Ilene blamed her for being born, maybe Andrew's brain had been burnt out by the sudden rush of paternal anxiety. Suddenly

everything in the world mattered, and that was intolerable, so he had decided that it didn't. The kids couldn't matter because if they did everything mattered. And you couldn't control everything. So why control anything? In all his assumed helplessness and passivity, however, he'd wielded an even huger influence over his naturally disturbable offspring. And they'd all gone down that road together.

It was all as good as mythology now. After all (thought Susan, as she debated how to dispose of her polystyrene food container) things had changed. If Peter could change then surely Andrew could. And the kids were well out of his life so maybe he'd built up a whole new ethos. Up from nothing. But then, one couldn't allow oneself to feel guilty for anything. At least Ilene had the comfort of blaming Andrew. They all had that.

Susan wiped the detritus out of the tub and filled it again. She tried to pretend that maybe she was back at the start of her journey, tried to remember what she had felt like then. She had longed for Donny, for security, and maybe she had sensed an ending, a wiping away of all the things she had previously prided herself upon and considered defining in her life. But some things remained. Water in a bath tub, the way her body looked under those unkind lights, through the wavering bluish water. This local water would have different particles, different pollutants than any other tubfull would have had. It was always a different town, different bath. Even her body looked a little leaner, though it had the look of worry and hunger rather than health about it. She had been a skinny child, too. What would she do if she really did revert, irreversibly? What if her father was still a nihilist magician and finally overwhelmed her? Her spirit... did it glow brightly enough even now? Maybe that was the one thing finally worth knowing. One thing she could take home with her if she survived. As for home, maybe she'd live in a Super Six. By then, it wouldn't matter. She'd finally have some assurance she existed, which was as good as carrying her home with her. Home was just a place she'd built to keep out people who would take her life away, a place she could make things real for once without anyone coming by to kick them down. No Peter, no dad, no mom, so there was finally room for Susan.

So she knew where she was going and she knew how she would travel, assuming her craft survived the night. She typed up her notes and emailed them to Sharon then went to bed. She left the weather channel on to ensure that she wouldn't dream about the end of the world. That was a good trick Peter had taught her. Maybe he should have become a weather man. Always promising that tomorrow would come and not only that but it would be a certain way, all the time admitting that, well, maybe not. But don't worry too much. We've looked into it.

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She woke up to the weather channel predicting what was already happening: sunshine. How clever, she thought. I could have looked out the window and told you that. I could

have parted the curtains of the sky and seen the sun, virtually the same every day. I could tell you perhaps how much fuel it has left, exactly how much longer it'll keep going. Now that'd be something. That wouldn't be quite as comforting for Peter, she imagined. But maybe that would help people more than empty promises of eternal future with predictable climatic phases. You had to face it sometime.

She looked across the parking lot; the area surrounding the Super Six seemed empty to her, not worth exploring. Maybe she should just press on. She had the challenge of the air that called to her more than the dreary predictability of walking around yet another small town. But it was still early, and she had a little time before checkout which meant she may as well get her money's worth. She took her coat and her keys and left the rest in the room as she went out for a stroll. On the way she took a paper cup of coffee from the continental breakfast, such as it was, and hit the streets with her beverage steaming in the cool and damp of morning.

It was good to breathe a little before getting back into the sky. The air here felt nice, though she couldn't vouch for its purity. There were gas stations about, trucks disappearing around piney curves of road, issuing clouds of pollution and roars of power. Susan wondered if any of these drivers knew Andrew, had talked with him on a CB. Susan had confirmed that Andrew had visited every state in the country in the years since she'd last seen him. Before that, he'd barely ever left the house. Maybe he'd already been through his changes, the day he became a driver; maybe that was as far as he'd go. From shore to shore, getting nowhere. How poetic.

Being in amongst these trees made Susan feel very instinctive. It had been a long time since she'd resorted to comforting herself with sums. There was something else going on now. She was surviving. She didn't even feel dependent on money. It was more spiritual, more immediate than that. Having a roof over her head couldn't protect her from the past, or the future. Her fancy clothes bought in Honorado looked out of place already under these grey skies. The light was wrong. You could travel a few miles in this country and the stuff you brought with you could just cease to make sense. But you kept holding onto it. She was a moving museum now. This had to be the last stop. She had to make this end. Too much depended on her. She was going to realize something that would matter, and she had to keep that truth safe, had to carry it somewhere and deliver it. Of course wherever she was she had access to everywhere else in the world, through the people on her site. Her god damned site. Why had she traveled when she could have simply asked any one of them to turn on their webcam? Well here it was, here she was, Susan, on her feet, walking around in the middle of nowhere. This had better be worth something.

She stopped to pet a skinny, damp tabby that was lurking around the parking lot of a Biscuit Barrel Family Restaurant. "Let me go in and get you something," she said to the cat, and she went in, ordered steak and biscuits, ate some of the steak and a few bites of the biscuits, plus some sugary overcooked carrots that gave her irresistible pleasures. She had the rest boxed up, went out and left the box in a likely looking spot, somewhere particularly verminous back by the dumpsters since the cat was no longer in

sight. She returned to the hotel, checked out and went in search of a hardware store from which to buy some goggles and other sundries for the trip.

On the ferry, she went into a restroom and suddenly felt like she was in the deepest, darkest, most hidden spot in the world. She looked at her reflection in the mirror. Funny, she thought, I don't remember looking like that at all.

Soon she was walking through the woods again, her heading aligned with her compass's stored GPS reading. It was farther than she'd remembered, but it was also warmer, brighter, more pleasant. She hoped she hadn't done so good a job of hiding her rocket that she herself would miss it; but she couldn't miss it. She had GPS. Plus she was terrible at hiding things.

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Finally she came to the spot the compass had remembered for her, and which she also remembered, but the rocket wasn't immediately visible. The branches she had placed now lay about as if they'd fallen off while the device was in motion, and indeed there was a furrow in the ground, which Susan followed. After a few moments she began to hear a sound, a sort of woody, tinny grinding, wood-on-tin... She started to hurry and soon found the rocket wedged into some dense brush and trees, vibrating continuously in an apparent attempt to plunge forward. Well, this is a defect, thought Susan, and pulled out her slip of printer paper and her pen and wrote while the machine continued to struggle:

apparently activated itself during the night and moved several yards, getting stuck in a tree. didn't fly up, didn't move with much violence, no damage. perhaps the branches added too much weight. perhaps I bled and activated the recognition key. unfortunate. i feel next time i will have to lock it up somehow or risk losing it altogether.

Still, she was glad not to be stranded, not to have to start worrying about another means of transport. At the same time she realized a part of her had been very relieved at the prospect of not having to get on that thing again. She'd have to be careful; this machine was too valuable to dump in the trash, which is what it would mean to let it get away. She'd ordered it to come with a built in self-destruct capacity if anyone who wasn't Sharon or Susan tried to tamper significantly with it. No doubt Sharon had enthusiastically complied. It was only sensible. One didn't want another Roswell incident on one's hands.

No sense wasting any more time. But how to extricate it gently? Susan put her hand on its carapace and it squealed with recognition and jumped up slightly. The green lights came on and the quality of its vibration changed. Susan thought to guide it backwards

and out of its tangle, but the machine was confused, kept up its leaping and struggling and trying to strain forward. "Off!" she finally shouted in frustration, and it fell still. She put on mittens to avoid touching it with her skin, and dragged it out of the brush like a load of scrap. Fortunately it wasn't as heavy as it looked and she soon had it on even ground. She took off her mittens and donned newly-bought fingerless gloves, a ski mask, goggles. She zipped her coat up tight and tucked her scarf in securely. Today was not a good day to explode.

Just then her cell phone rang. The sound was so incongruous that at first she barely registered it, just stood gazing around in confusion and annoyance. Finally she answered it, vaguely amazed that her reception was so good.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN  
The Many Identities Of Ivan

"Susan, it's Manuel. Is this a good time?"

"Well, sure," she said, struggling to even remember who Manuel was and what business he had with her.

"I've got an update. I have people studying the books, and they've turned up something. One of the writers, Ivan--"

"Ivan!" Susan exclaimed. Then, seizing control of herself, she snapped "Yes, I already know about Ivan. Of course I know about Ivan. The question is, what do you know? What did you know when you hired him?"

"Susan, we had no idea he was a competitor. Ivan isn't really his name, and I blame myself for not realizing that. But as you've probably noticed he's very hard to track, he's right up there with you in terms of techy wiles."

"And his real name?"

"Susan, it's Brom. Brom Burnside."

Susan gasped, then coughed, trying to retain composure. Burnside. He was the man who had tried to buy her site, then had developed another, with even more devious methods than hers, and not half her transparency or good intentions. MindGrab.org, not as profitable but quite popular. Its forums were legendary, hotbeds of outrage and idleness. Massive ad revenue, money splashed everywhere. And here he was writing her book. What was that all about? What worse disaster could there be? The odd thing was that she was not that angry, or surprised, after all.

"Don't worry," Manuel said. "It's libelous but that's good. Falsehoods. Right? Anything but the truth, right? The truth is safe!" Manuel giggled; he was very nervous, very upset. He sounded like a man afraid for his very life. This made Susan feel sorry for whatever she had done to him to make him feel he had to be so pathetic. "We can take him to court," Manuel continued. "We can prove he committed fraud and damaged the company, violated contracts, falsified personal information, his identity... Corporate espionage! With our lawyers we could probably shut him down completely! It's what we've been trying to do for ages! He's practically given us a gift, here!"

"Don't do it," Susan said. "I'll deal with him some other way. Thank you, Manuel. You can consider this aspect of the case closed. Let your people finish reading, though I very much doubt you'll find anything else of significance. And I know I probably don't have to say this by now, but I don't want any more books, Manuel. Nothing. Susan



Trumptree is to be silent from now on, until I choose to use her again. Is that understood?"

"Of course. Please forgive me, Susan." He sounded like he was crying.

Susan hung up. Oh well, each thing in its time. She had an errand to run before she resumed control of her corporate interests. And she felt sure she would resume. There was no running away now. She'd seen what her site was capable of and who was interested in it. It was a grave responsibility, which Manuel and his like clearly weren't up to. Who would stand and face the truth if not her? Who would check the facts? Who would make sure that the new-hires weren't devious corporate competitors? History is written by winners, and this Brom Burnside was trying to cheat his way into the winner's circle. Well, let him try. Let them all try. What does it profit a man to gain the world and lose his soul? Susan mounted her silver rocket and, instead of blazing into the sky, slowly eased out of the denser trees til they came to a clearing.

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Even in the sky, the road is long. The patchwork beauty of the American landscape sprawled and tipped beneath her as she flew, stealthy and silent. She decided to call this little rocket The Broomstick. It imparted powers beyond flight. Her senses and perceptions were heightened, that much seemed true, but today she felt free, positive. Her mind functioned cleanly and effectively. Maybe it was the joy of having a new puzzle, something besides the vacuous despair of thinking about her father. Brom Burnside, now there was a worthy opponent. She'd get to him in due course. By now he'd probably forgotten he'd ever laid that minefield of a book. Who knows what his intentions were, perhaps just to prove that he could penetrate.

It was too easy, really, solving characters like that. It would be a pleasure to get to work on him. Flying through the air Susan plotted and planned, pictured herself and her laptop searching out his heart, his base of operations, and what she would do then-- just to prove a point, really. What, after all, was the danger at this point? He'd been unable to learn her secrets. There was no need for major retaliation, but a stand had to be made, that much was clear. A stand. A stand, by god. That's what she had come all this way to do: identify the glitch and isolate it. Free herself. She'd be better than ever once she faced her father and bested Burnside. What could matter after that? And did anything really matter now? She was flying! Down below her was, probably, Wyoming or something! She had a steady bearing, the winds were favorable, and she was mastering the navigation of the currents. The goggles were doing the trick, too, and her body felt protected and secure. She was truly flying. Up above her was the same old sky, its pretentious airplanes carving white swaths of nether cloud; their reign was over. If she really wanted she could fly up to them. All she lacked was the oxygen. The machine would have to be made a little more efficient, too, possibly modified to run on other compounds in thinner air? So many ideas. Such a bright future. Here she was

between the land and sky, in her own domain. The invisible domain she'd always preferred.

She sang out, the only thing she cared to sing at that moment: all she could remember of pi. It took thirty minutes for her to run out of numbers, and then she just laughed.

She got tired around dusk and had to set down. She figured she was somewhere in Western Nebraska judging by the drastic scenery but didn't care to go out of her way to confirm. The trip was going much faster than she'd planned, another day or two and she could easily be in Missouri.

She felt a little disappointed, like she was missing something, like she was hurrying. Well, wasn't she trying to get somewhere? Wasn't she riding a god damned Broomstick? Wasn't she all-powerful? Maybe this was all wrong.

She realized she wasn't far from where Sharon lived. She felt a sinking feeling, a strange urge to go and return the device, swear it off for good because it was too much. She didn't deserve it. And in a way, it took her out of herself, didn't it? Here she was outside of Scottsbluff, unable to feel even her customary sensation of worrying. Lifted out of disgust. Forgetful even of numbers. She used to know much more of pi.

Susan hurriedly donned mittens so she could lean in sorrow on her rocket. Don't cry, don't cry, don't disturb the rocket.

Just wait. Just be patient. Don't forbid yourself a thing you love just because you love it. You deserve to have some excessive possessions. This rocket was more or less her home now. She could easily stow her things, she could fly, this was her reward for coming so far. It could never have happened if she hadn't been who she was, clever Susan with money, searching Susan happening to run into Sharon on vacation. If anything was good, this had to be good.

She didn't want to see Sharon.

Susan stuffed the rocket into a haystack and went into town to find a good place to collate her notes.

Perfect functioning today. Still suspect some untoward effect on mentation. Maybe man was not meant to fly.

This was not something she could discuss on SoapBoxDerby.com. It was top secret. What could that mean? If this rocket's very existence had to be denied, should it exist at all? Hypothetical. It existed. It existed, and it belonged to her. She soon found her Village Den. She felt famished. She ordered a huge meal, and a chocolate shake, and

set to work with great relish. She felt honest feeling flowing out of her along with her official findings which she continued to type, and sent along with a personal confession.

Sharon, the truth is I have considered destroying your wonderful work. I can't tell you what it has meant to my life to know that I can more or less instantly have any impulse gratified, to the full extent of human capability. And when I found you that capability went beyond even my imagining. I still don't know what you can do, where you will ever stop. That terrifies me. I am near by but I will not come to see you, and I don't imagine that will be a problem. I will continue working with this wonderful rocket. I would like to hear from you sometime. Do you think we have gone too far? Do you believe I am who I say I am now?

Susan hesitated.

Would you consider partnering with me

Again she hesitated.

on my next venture? I don't yet know what that may be but if I do anything I know I would benefit from your guidance. You're young, Sharon. I'm old. I need you. I will always need you. But you're not obligated to me. I'm obligated to you. I helped make the world that you live in and I sense it gives you trouble sometimes. I often think I should never have created SoapBoxDerby.com.

She reflected. It was true. She sent the email. She knew it was dangerous to let this girl, to let anyone, into her confidence. And in writing, as if that mattered. "I really have to stop using the internet," she murmured to herself, taking a big bite of pancake.

When the bill came she scrawled BOYCOTT SOAPBOXDERBY on it, and felt a little better. She remained at her table til well after midnight, resolving to move her rocket somewhere safe tomorrow but not to attempt any great flights. She had to keep her feet on the ground for a while.

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In the morning she went in search of a storage facility, determined to lock up her rocket. She would have to fly her rocket to the location and hope nobody saw her land. Either

that, or rent a truck. She decided on the latter, though it was less daring. Soon the rocket was safely, secretly installed and Susan was satisfied with all the arrangements.

The day was still sunny, but cold. As it should be at this time of year. Susan bore it as heroically as she could. The truck was hers for the day so she used it to get around. Not knowing where in particular to go she found herself crisscrossing town, in and out and back and forth, as if she were looking for something.

She was always looking for something, but what of it? Where would the next blast of inspiration come from? She'd shelved her rocket and was driving around in a U-Haul for no apparent reason. And they were expecting her to fill up the tank when she was done. Dreary sort of thing. She stopped off at a convenience store to buy something, anything, to put in the cup holder. It all felt wrong.

Soon the day was coming to an end. She was sore from driving. She'd seen nothing. She looked forward to returning to her latest Super Six and stripping off all the day's pollutants. Having been away, having been up in the air, having walked through misty woods, and now being here in this place, she remembered why she'd moved into a house she'd refused to leave. Now she thought she'd go even further, and actually build a house, to her own specifications, and far away from any cities. And yet where was an appropriate place for the likes of her? She wasn't a being of the woods, nor of the cities, nor of the small towns. Something entirely new was required.

She closed the door of her motel room behind her and turned the lock lingeringly. It was a sweet feeling and she knew it would fade when she turned around and saw the room for what it was. A substitute. There was the crummy tub. There was television. There was wireless. There might even be people down in the lobby or at the desk. She could make up any fantasy and believe it here. She could believe she was safe, she could believe she was home, she could believe she was doing good work, but that wouldn't necessarily make it so. Maybe it was time to quit staying at Super Sixes.

She brushed her teeth lingeringly and with relief, while the tub filled, and the room filled with steam. She looked at herself in the mirror as she brushed and she still didn't recognize the person. On impulse, just as she started to undress for the tub, she stopped and hustled to her suitcase, opened it and rummaged for the set of stolen books. She selected Ivan's and took it with her into the bathroom. She lay it on the floor and stepped into the tub, then paused. The one thing about motel bathtubs, you had to plug those safety drains in order to get enough water in them for a legitimate bath. She usually used chewing gum but today she tore a page out of the acknowledgments section of the book, shredded and wadded it and stuffed it into the safety drain. It seemed to do the trick. Fuck acknowledgments, you fraud. She got into the bath, relaxed, then picked up the book to finally take a look at it.

There was more to this situation than Manuel had picked up on, clearly. As she read the text, slowly and painfully, every moment planning to stop and put it aside, she couldn't help picking up on a compelling emotionality about it, as if Ivan the pretender really

wanted to communicate something. To communicate with her? None of it made sense, none of it was even close to demystifying her creative process. It read like speculation. She couldn't put it down. Hour after hour she sat in the tub, learning about herself. At some point the water must have cooled to just the right degree to make her snap back to awareness, throwing the book aside in terror. Careful! Careful! You'll forget the truth!

God, was that what he was trying to do?

It was possible. It was worth thinking about. It was worth re-examining the boundaries of the self. She was surrounded, always surrounded by people who were trying to take it away from her! And her bath was cold and she was still in it. Another small victory for Brom. At any rate, whether or not he had power in himself it seemed Susan was willing enough to endow him with power. That would stop right now. She raised herself carefully out of the water. She exited the bathroom without another look in the mirror. She'd done fine without mirrors for years. She was old, and she was angelic, that's what being a hermit does. Alas. Was she to lose even that?

She went out into her room, went to the window, moved the curtain aside. There she was again, in reflection. Naked. She wanted to open the window but it wouldn't open. She was forbidden from looking outwards without seeing herself. She closed the curtain again, alone with the frustrating room.

In the morning she took a long walk across town from the motel to her storage unit, bundled up and dragging her luggage. This was how she behaved in Nebraska. Like a bum. Secretive. She'd never even been to this area before and yet she felt exposed, seen-through. Oh to get on her Broomstick and leave-- but she had nowhere to go, did she? Where was she headed? To encounter her father? She didn't feel strong enough anymore.

"Listen. You only have to do one thing at a time. And you are strong. You're doing this all by yourself, one step at a time. Get on the rocket. It's a fucking rocket. Why worry about what comes after the rocket?"

Good advice. And it felt rather good to mutter to herself in public. Still the same old Susan. Was she going anywhere of importance right now? No. She knew where she was going and it was just to pick up her rocket and fly away on it. Who'd believe that? And what did she have to fear, or doubt? No one and Nothing.

How wintry it was becoming. But she was almost done.

Dear Sharon, she would say, I am about to send you data on how this thing performs in the cold. I suppose if people can breathe then this machine can run. Well done...

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There was no rocket in the unit. The unit was empty. She knew it was the right unit because she had the key to it. She even tried the key in the neighboring unit. This couldn't be. And yet of course it was. Just when you start to believe, to depend on something...

She was red in the face as she entered the proprietor's office. She had no idea what was going to come out of her mouth if she opened it but she knew it would be bad. As she looked at the man's face, the man who had taken her money yesterday and agreed to protect her things, she was relieved to detect on his face a knowing look, a look that anticipated a negotiation. Fine. At least he was on top of it, and at least he wasn't planning on denying the truth. Now she was going to melt his face off with her righteous anger.

"My property!" she said as she burst through the door. The man sat in his office chair imperturbably. "What kind of business are you running here? A hostage bunker?"

"My neighbors complained."

"Complained? Neighbors?"

"It's not my fault if someone witnesses one of my customers loading something illegal into one of my storage units and feels it would behoove them to keep suspicious and dangerous elements away from their families."

"I was promised privacy and security."

"If you look at your contract--" Again with the contracts, thought Susan. She would really have to learn to read one day. "Wimpy-Doo Storage is not obliged to store potentially explosive or hazardous material. You as a customer are expressly forbidden from putting our facilities, staff and the property of other customers at risk."

"So what have you done with it?"

"It has been delivered to an associate of mine who is able to safely store such material until such time as Wimpy-Doo is able to contact the owners and resolve the issue."

"I was not contacted."

"Attempts were made to contact you. Perhaps you should have verified the information you provided us with--"

"This is bull shit! I'm being railroaded!" Calm. No. This is not how I planned it to go down. I'm surrendering ground. I'm complaining. This man won't respond to complaints,

nor to conventional threats. It's time to be creative. "Look. I understand your position. But my property is not dangerous. It is under my absolute control. I did not violate any part of that contract. I have lawyers who will respond very swiftly to any implication that it is I and not you, sir, who have violated any contract between us. I'm sure you have lawyers, too, so let me say this: I also have within my immediate power the ability to erase your business and your credit history and your identity, in full. It would be much easier to resolve this by returning my property, and my deposit, forthwith."

"Ma'am, this is a very severe situation."

"I'll be back in an hour, and we'll see how you feel by then."

Susan left the building feeling strangely elated. All she needed was a Village Den and her laptop and the poor man would find out what he was up against.

The mellow lights of the restaurant greeted her encouragingly. She greeted the host with a particular relish and slid into her booth. She pulled her laptop from its case-- her stomach fell. The battery was dead. She searched her bag for the power cord. It was missing.

No. Not now. NOT NOW. Panic wanted to set in but Susan made herself sit perfectly still, made herself breathe, made her shoulders relax. She heard Ilene's voice in her head whispering "shhh." She heard the vengeful imperative of her genes rising up, filling her mind with alternatives. She could do anything at this point, anything but let that man get away with what he was trying to do. It was beyond paying him off at this point. No. That money was now going to the purchase of a gun.

First, she had a meal. On her way out she asked the host where the nearest munitions outlet was, and fortunately the young man had the information at his mental fingertips. It wasn't far, either.

"All right," she said, re-entering the offices of Wimpy-Doo Storage, brandishing the gun the dealer had recommended for this occasion, one that would be absolutely impossible to argue with if money was no object, and legality was no object. Once again, it was good to be Susan. "I'm sure you've been in this situation before, albeit perhaps not with a SWAT Mini K as the dealer assured me he hadn't sold one in ten years and your so-called business has only been in operation for two. However, if you're not scared of this gun understand that it's only a temporary measure until I can get my real weapon charged up. Maybe it won't be necessary for me to compromise your website, your credit rating and your FBI file-- don't laugh, please; it's most frustrating. I realize the ridiculousness of my position and it makes me so angry I may actually shoot you."

The man looked a little anxious after all. Susan took a breath.

"My money, and my property. Send for my property from this associate of yours. At once."

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Back in the air at last, Susan knew it was now necessary to complete the remainder of her journey to Spokane in one go. Not that she was afraid of the manager of Wimpy-Doo Storage. She had him right where she wanted him. All in all, the journey had involved relatively little crime. Maybe she wasn't so ill-suited to the social contract as she'd thought. Her family only became dodgy when they were in a corner, which was often. It was mere clumsiness and oddness, compensated for. It was good that she had been reminded of all this. She felt less fear now of her father, their mutual ways. She felt he'd be proud of her somehow if he knew what she'd just done.

Suddenly it came to her in a flash. Brom Burnside's attempted purchase of SoapBoxDerby.com had occurred just two years after she'd developed it, and before then she'd never heard of the man. No one had. Something was not right about that. Something had always felt not right about Brom Burnside, besides the fact that he was evil. All the research she'd done had turned up much that was spurious, much that reminded her of her own Susan Trumptree persona. Shallow. A shallow existence. At the time she'd written it off, assuming Burnside was simply a shallow person. But what if it was in fact another alias?

The thought made her want to stop her rocket and idle in the air a while to think, as if she were on a bike, but there was no such capability with this rocket. It was all up, straight, or down with this rocket. She had to press on, anyway. But she had a sinking feeling now. She really wished she could resolve it. There was too much going on, too many looming figures.

On the horizon somewhere lay Spokane, Missouri. The hub of Fundamental Thinking, LLC, a trucking company. She had confirmed her father Andrew's routes and employment history. He was being well paid, with full medical, dental and 401K, plus stock options and more. He'd been there virtually since the day his family split up, working relentlessly, taking no holidays and no sick days, hardly any weekends except as required by law, and even there they'd been a little sneaky. It had taken him a while to gain access to all these paid hours once he'd graduated to full-time with benefits. She wondered how he'd done it. He must be a true boon to the company. The best they had. Not that she knew much about trucking. She'd learn, she supposed, if she found him.

He kept an efficiency apartment in Spokane, and a few others across the country, but rarely appeared to actually stay in them. Rent, utilities and all bills were paid like clockwork. He had a system, that was for sure. His retreat from the world was the world. He had no home but the space inside his head. That, and the sleeping compartment in his truck. The man had impeccable taste in careers.



She figured she'd find him at his address, where he wasn't due for another two days. She had arranged to rent the apartment next to his. She'd paid a full month. No lease. It wasn't unthinkable, she realized, that she might not actually leave as soon as she thought she would. Once she got there, what if she saw in that apartment the same thing Andrew saw, and wanted to make it her home? Well, then she'd sell the old house and have the servers sent over, maybe rent them their own room, turn one of those apartments into the headquarters of...

Doubt. Doubt and wonder. What would become of her? Her site? Her quest-- her many quests? Nothing seemed important now that she was up here on this rocket blazing a trail back into her father's life, after all she'd seen and done, after all her random errands and encounters. What had she really learned? She felt cleansed, like a hard drive. She felt she had less information than before.

She made good time, arriving in Spokane about when she'd planned, just before dusk. The speed had taken a toll on her and the rocket. She was concerned that it wasn't converting oxygen to fuel as efficiently as when it had been brand new. She'd put a lot of miles on it in a short time. Maybe it wasn't built to last, and maybe when this trip was over she should just dismantle it, return it to Sharon for her research. What could be more valuable than that? Who was Susan, anyway, to wield such power? It was good to know, however, that she'd never have to do without as long as she had Sharon and the money to pay her. And as long as the strange and rare materials were in good supply, whatever they might be. Susan hadn't troubled herself with knowing that.

The next one would definitely have to be more compact, or easier to disguise. Today she decided to simply hide it back by the train tracks under the rusted husk of an abandoned Folkbeetle. Surely nobody would be coming back for that too soon. And if they did, hopefully they'd do nothing to trigger the self-destruct mechanism on her rocket. Susan believed she had probably lied to the staff at Winky-Doo when she'd insisted it wasn't explosive. She hadn't asked questions about the nature of the device's self-destruct protocols; perhaps it would simply disintegrate into nano-sized particles and fly home. That would be the way to go about it.

She walked into town, dragging her suitcase, still all wrapped up for warmth. She looked no different than the day she'd left, or the day she'd thrown a trash can through the window of a chiropractor's office. She was a bum with a space ship. There were so many hidden surprises. It almost made her smile, but the day had been long and there was so much ahead.

Numbers once again filled her mind as she headed for the apartment complex. The quiet of numbers. New and ever more elegant interrelationships were asserting themselves as she calculated the balance of her life, back and forth and up and down and round and round in an endless golden spiral. It was fractal. The deeper you went the more it looked the same.

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"Hello. I'm Susan Fullmann. I'm moving in today," she said to the woman in the apartment office.

The clerk gave Susan her key. Apartment 205. It was all hers. She didn't even have to see her father if she didn't want to, she realized, ever. In effect her journey was over. She'd come home. This wasn't a Super Six.

She began to get the lay of the land as she looked out her bedroom window. What was nearby? What was her neighborhood all about? Of what would she avail herself in the days to come? Two days to pass, two days at least. That was certain. Two days until her father came back to town and their meeting would either happen or it wouldn't. And then...

The apartment was furnished with a bed and a dresser. It was clean. She'd need a desk. Fortunately there was an office supply store just down the road, already within view of her windows. She decided to go shopping.

Entering the store, she gasped. It was identical to the one in her old town, the one where she'd first met Donny. She felt sure he would be here! She looked around in a tizzy, fully expecting to see him. Indeed there were the usual physical specimens, hardly distinguishable from the ones she was accustomed to cold-shouldering back home...

"Donny? Donny!" she heard herself crying out, her heart pounding, the room fairly spinning about her. "Donny!" She fell to the floor.

When she opened her eyes there was a concerned face hovering over her. "You asked for me?"

It wasn't Donny; it wasn't even a man. It was a woman just a little younger than Susan herself, wearing a uniform shirt and a halo of curly reddish-blond hair. "Who are you?" Susan asked.

"Donna. Are you all right?" Donna glanced up and waved off one of her coworkers, who stood poised by a stand of pens with a phone in his hand, no doubt eager to call the paramedics and/or the police and have Susan removed from the floor.

"I'm sorry," Susan said. "I made a mistake. I'm fine. Donna." Susan got to her feet. "I'm very weary from the road. I'm very dehydrated. I think I'd like to buy some water, and a desk. In fact I'm going to have to ask you to sell me one of your floor models as I don't have any tools. Don't worry. I have money."

The desk she chose had wheels so she didn't need to bribe anyone into delivering it for her. She simply pushed it back along the road to her building and into the elevator to the second floor, and along the walkway to room 205. Already she found herself loving this place. This desk would fit perfectly, right by the window. The neighborhood was quiet, industrial, run down and abandoned. Her luck in being so near to an office supply store could not be ignored; she was within walking distance so if ever she needed another desk, or a set of pens, or a cooler-sized jug of water she would simply walk. And already she had a connection. Donna.

It was as if the whole thing had been a dream.

In her tiny kitchen she threw together another batch of her simple rations. The recipe called for nothing that couldn't be found at the rudimentary grocery store across the street from the office supplies. Her low-cost high-energy snack recipe would keep her going while she explored her new surroundings, seeking out better food, better friends...

Suddenly there was a pounding at her door. Susan startled, dropping the egg she was preparing to crack. It smashed on the floor. She felt terrified. Who was there? Trembling, she moved towards the door. The knocking came again. One thing she'd overlooked when she approved of this apartment, and which would normally not matter since nobody ever came to visit her and if they did she'd probably have already installed a computerized camera system or code-activated lock: there was no peephole in her door.

She could only open it.

Before her stood Andrew himself, hulking in her doorway, wearing a coat similar to Susan's, the one she had worn this whole trip and hadn't even taken off yet since she'd returned with her groceries and desk. They stood looking at each other and looking like each other. "I didn't expect you so soon," Susan said.

"I could have said the same about you. What did you do, shoot somebody? Are you on the run?"

Those were more words than Andrew had spoken to her the entire last year she'd lived with him. And they made no sense. How could he know?

"I'm not," she said, baffled.

"Well, surprise," said Andrew. "You think you're the only one that can track a family member? I knew you were coming. I traded shifts and jacked a car to get back in time. It was most inconvenient."

"You're Brom Burnside, aren't you?" Susan said, suddenly, the very moment it had hit her, and she knew it was true. Truth had a particular physical sensation for Susan. It

was unmistakable. Her father had been secretly tracking her, secretly a step ahead the whole time. Not just this past month, but for years! "You've been trying to destroy me!" she said.

He seemed surprised now that she'd guessed. Good. She wasn't that predictable. Quietly in her mind she decided that this would count and that she'd bested him after all.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN  
The Talk

"Tell me why," she said.

"Oh, Susan. Don't be dense. Aren't you going to ask your old man in?"

"Fine. Come in."

He came in, immediately looked like he was scoffing at her decor and her food as he proceeded into the apartment. He hesitated, looking around in mild irritation then leaned himself against her new desk. "I saw this one over at the Office Buster. You took the floor model?" She didn't respond but he looked satisfied as he examined the surface. "Yep, I recognize that scratch."

"Well, why did you come here?" she asked stiffly, all drawn up with indignation over the desk, the crowning insult, which showed that he was still prepared to ruin her future no matter how humble it was shaping up to be.

"You came here," he said. "You rented the apartment next to mine. My home for the past twenty two years, since you lot flew the coop. You came to me. Remember?"

She did remember, now.

"What happened, Susan? Did you get tired of searching? Finally decided to follow in your old man's footsteps?"

"Quit talking like that. Are you really Andrew Fullman?"

"You know. You've never forgotten a face in your life. You've changed plenty, too. How old are you now? Forty? And you've grown a mouth, too. Quite a frowner, at that."

"What happened to you? You're different. You used to just sit and stare and think horrible things about everyone."

"I started saying them out loud. Funnily enough people seem to love it. They can't get enough of me at work."

"How'd you become Brom Burnside? Why did you start that horrible web site?"

"I had to balance you out or you'd destroy the world, Susan, with your gimcrack idealism. Somebody has to slow you down, the outlandish things you get up to. I couldn't stop you from getting rich, though. Bad ideas have a way of doing that for a person. God only knows what that's done to the balance of things."

Susan was reeling. She went into the kitchen and resumed cooking so that she'd have something to eat soon. She watched him over her cutting board. She suspected he was completely mad, talking about the balance of things. He might have a point, though, about the danger of her being rich. She'd gotten away with too much, brought so many questionable things into the world. She started to formulate a promise to herself, to god, whatever. If I get through this...

"You don't trust me, do you, Susan?"

"How can I trust you? You're my father. You're also my main competitor and you've even lied about that."

"So you can trust me to lie."

She shook her head, formed a wry smile as she cracked an egg. This was so like him.

"Well, all right," he said then. "Now that we're here, what do we do?"

"I don't know anymore, Andrew. I think my journey is over. I think my questions are answered."

"Oh yeah?"

"Have you been watching me this whole time, as I've traveled?"

"You hadn't done one thing different in over five years Susan. I'd quit watching you. You did catch me off guard when I happened to spot you on a security camera I left in Lawrence at my old chiropractor's. You know she cured my neuralgia? And that miracle water of hers got me wanting to talk for the first time in years. Naturally I bugged her when I left, so I could keep making progress. I wasn't sure it was you on that camera at first, and try how I might I couldn't find out. I watched the cops, listened for you to get arrested somewhere. Nothing. You're too good, Susan, in every way." He winked. "But finally you just happened to use that old credit card you stole from me, the Blue one, the one I never cancelled or reported. You know why? Because you're my daughter, Susan..."

God. The Blue One. She'd used it to buy that gun. The Blue One was the one she had promised herself never to use. She'd been too overwrought at the time. She'd used it. And he'd found her. She'd let him find her; she'd as good as called him on the phone and begged him to meet her here.

"So I knew you were heading my way," he said. "Just like watching the weather. And I knew that gun wasn't for me. I figured you'd get yourself in trouble, it always happens when the Fullmanns go there. Don't ask how many scrapes I've gotten into in Western Nebraska."

"Good thing I had that card; no one could have tracked it but you."

"An early experiment in making things invisible. You should see what I've managed since then. You'd be impressed."

"You never cancelled or reported it because nobody knew about it. Not because you cared about me."

"Consider yourself lucky you had me to learn from. Consider yourself lucky you take after me instead of your poor mother."

"Have you looked in on her lately? She's not so poor."

He had nothing to say to that. He was visibly disappointed, in fact, but declined either to delve or to change the subject. Susan wasn't really surprised that he hadn't wanted to know about Ilene's life. It was all too obvious that she was destined to thrive once he was out of the picture. Well, once he and his offspring were out of the picture, Susan thought sadly.

"I'm sure you've got lots to brag about, Dad," she said, ready to change the subject herself, "but I don't have time to look at your criminal portfolio. Now that this is sorted out I've got some decisions to make."

"I can help you," he said. His voice was hollow now, ringing with that old void.

"No, thanks."

"You think you've got things sorted out, but what are you going to do about your loneliness?"

She shot him a blazing glare; that shut him up. She added another point to her win as he turned and walked back out the way he had come.

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The next morning, she rose early, left her room and headed towards the train tracks. She went slowly, pulling her case along with her. She found the old car where her rocket was hidden. She looked at the beautiful rocket one last time. She'd received an email the previous night, after Andrew had left. The email contained the instructions she'd requested, on how to activate the rocket's self-destruct protocol herself. She was going to do it now.

By the intake valve on the front there was a small panel which she flipped open. There sat a simple little red button, underneath a flip-up trigger guard. She flipped up the clear



plastic guard and pressed the button, then ran towards a cluster of trees to take shelter. The one thing the email hadn't detailed was what exactly was going to happen once the button was pressed. All Sharon had said was "You have twenty seconds."

Susan waited, praying it wouldn't be too loud or attract too much attention. Twenty one seconds (a mistake!) after the pressing of the button the rocket blinked on-- grief choked her as she saw its little green lights that used to welcome her aboard-- rose up a foot or so again as if to accept its rider. Then, suddenly, silently and in a pale flash of green light the same color as its dashboard display, the machine disintegrated into a shimmering cloud of dust. In moments even the dust had disappeared. Sharon's email had given no clue as to what the dust was composed of, where it might go, what it might do to the local ecology. Susan accepted it. That was Sharon's business.

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Susan returned once again now to the open road, just her and her case. She'd send for the desk; she liked it. For now it could stay in the apartment that she owned for the month anyway. It still wasn't wholly impossible that she might return, but for now she was going home. Back to her silly old house. It was still the best place for the things she had to do.

She had told Andrew very little; she'd spent most of their brief encounter trying to gauge how much he already knew. She didn't mention, for instance, having met Peter within the first few hours of leaving her house for the first time in years. She didn't mention Donny, or Donna, or any of the people she'd met along the way. She didn't divulge anything about Ilene's life. She didn't even mention her rocket though she felt sure he knew something about that. But it was good to know that he wasn't her match, no matter how much he'd managed to surprise her and no matter how much he'd managed to do to hinder and undermine her. It put a whole new perspective on the Ivan debacle. Maybe he'd done it just to prove he knew what a phony she was, just to prove he could be as much of a phony if not more. Or maybe he really wanted to write the story of her life. He'd never possessed a moment of it since she'd been born. All his conclusions about her true self had been wrong. And no doubt he'd written them all in full bitter knowledge that they were wrong.

She decided to buy a bus ticket at the first opportunity, but for now it was good to be walking again. The early winter landscape was barren, familiar. This was the kind of place she'd grown up in. She felt she'd grown up a second time, grown into a whole other phase somewhere beyond adulthood. If there's a time of your life, however fleeting, where you actually do know what you're doing, for Susan it was now. For all his wiles, Andrew had never gotten to this phase. When she'd told him to leave, when she'd told him that she was leaving the next day and wouldn't be back any time soon, it was clear from looking at his face that he'd been counting on her for something. The ability to fantasize hopeless things was strong in the family. Hopeless things about people who

couldn't possibly be less interested in complying. Susan could only imagine what he'd built up in his mind about her and about what she could do for him, what they could do together. Probably he wanted her in some kind of subordinate position, coming up with all the new ideas, and they'd spend their lives shifting their assets around, staying ahead of tax collectors and paparazzi and media marketers, building ever greater empires without anyone ever knowing they were there, the two of them, in that unremarkable apartment complex. It wasn't about money, not with Andrew and not with Susan. For Andrew it was the thrill of pulling something over on people, as if he could never quite convince himself, never quite prove that he really was that much smarter than the rest of the world. Would any scheme, any secret ever be big enough? Susan had proved her superior intelligence, no problem; she owned half the world's knowledge and wisdom. But what she was really after was just as elusive, just as crazy. It was time to let it fall away.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN  
It all falls away, and rises up

"I've got to finish my coffee so I can start drinking wine," Susan said, laughing, to the young man across the table.

"I know the feeling! Ever get, like, mad that you can only drink one beverage at a time?" said Donny.

In the month since Susan had returned, she'd shut down SoapBoxDerby.com and opened a school for technologically gifted youth. The school had started out a little unethically; she'd recruited most of her students for the purpose of using them to help her close down the site, which was a very complicated thing that required delicacy. On her long bus ride home she'd figured it all out, and it would be as grand as the site had ever been. It was the only fitting way to commemorate the countless hours so many people had contributed to what was, ultimately, nothing. So many questions left unanswered. So many devious possibilities left unexplored. Susan had announced the end of the site instead of installing her latest snoop code. The response had been surprisingly resigned, a testament to the power she had over the hearts and minds of her users. Clearly, if she thought it best, they were prepared to be convinced. Or maybe they were all truly tired of it. The shockwaves in the tech media were greater, if only in the sense that no one was prepared to believe that the users would let this happen. Bloggers and reporters expected economic disaster, mass riots, loss and confusion, but the transition was going off most gracefully, with a minimum of violence and damage to property. It was no small thing ending the greatest media empire the world had ever known, no small thing dividing up the stocks and properties and all that. Susan's agents would be busy for years, and they could hire as many people as they wanted. But the real delicate work was placed in the hands of people she trusted. People like Donny.

Donny had been on the site after all. Susan never figured out how he'd eluded her but he had turned out to be one of the most famous and dedicated users on the site, logging over ten thousand hours and over a billion memes. Susan was pleased to know that her interest in him had not been ill-founded. He had been a genius all along. But she would not pursue her romantic interest in him; that had all dried up and she saw it now for the foolishness it had always been. She didn't share with him that truth, nor how much of a role he had ultimately had in ending the site that had been his passion and that of so many others. He had been the start of this whole revelation. The day he'd failed to make the delivery had been one of many days in a veritable epidemic of young people forgetting their basic human needs and responsibilities in order to use SoapBoxDerby.com for just one more hour... He had to admit that it was good to see it all go.

The process of dismantling the site would have been easy enough if Susan had been willing to just let all the data evaporate into space like Sharon's rocket, but she couldn't do that. Anyway she felt pretty sure that Sharon had a few secrets about the fate of that

rocket. Probably it had indeed flown home and possibly reassembled itself for all Susan knew. And in Susan's own relatively (compared to Sharon) limited way she was doing much the same thing. Sending it home.

All the data in the site's servers was to be redistributed to the people who originated it. Each user's file (for all the information was organized and stored and permanently associated with the user who originally entered it, for verification purposes. More than once a saboteur had had their contributions quarantined) would be transferred to a hardcover book, plastic bible-thin neo-paper with a golden nameplate on the cover bearing the author's username. No expense would be spared and it would all be given freely, as was only right. All these books would be distributed to holding centers throughout the world based on who wanted to claim them and where they professed to live (the site's collection of detailed location data had never been revealed so Susan thought it best to keep that secret). Each user would receive the answers to their questions, as well as the information they had provided, a permanent memento to how much they had helped and been helped by SoapBoxDerby-- and it wasn't about SoapBoxDerby any more. It had to be a testament to people working together, to people's willingness to pursue truth once someone gave them a chance... All Susan had done (as she said in her parting message) was ask.

The site had closed down over a year ago but the data was still being sorted. Brom Burnside's ever-wonderful MindGrab.org had seen a slight rise in its numbers but otherwise soldiered on unchanged. Life wasn't really destroyed. And Susan was enjoying the process of working with her first lieutenant Donny and all the others. Some were working on their own projects, of course. Sharon had been hesitant to get involved at first but Susan had convinced her by asking her to design a new campus, one which would occupy space between the land and the air. A floating university. Who could resist? And only Sharon could do it.

"Well, maybe that's enough for today," Donny was saying. "And look at that, it's happy hour!"

"Shall we take everyone out to Bozo's for a drink?" Susan asked, smiling as she shut down her terminal.

"Sure," Donny said. "Make sure you bring your I.D., Susan. They card."

THE END

When I got done reading this I thought just saying "The End" was like when you play through a really difficult video/board game and then you win and it just says "Game Over" and there's no closure, no cut scene, nothing to really acknowledge the achievement. You just read my book. I am overwhelmed.

Since this is my PDF and I can do what I want I encourage you to try things like National Novel Writing Month, or whatever is the equivalent in your field. Especially if you enjoyed this book in some way. Take it as evidence that it's worth the trouble to screw around with ideas and not worry too much if it's good enough or if NPR will interview you afterwards. If you really didn't like it, I hope you'll be able to imagine that at least my life will not be severely marred by my failure, and then you can still feel emboldened to take similar risks with a light heart.

Regardless, I wish you love, good health, and lots of free time.

Thanks again to my family, my parents, my roommates, and my partner/paramour/live-in boyfriend. It is impossible to honor you as much as you deserve.